

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Educational Studies Dissertations

Graduate School of Education (GSOE)

2011

The Quest for a Meaningful “Special Education”: The Educational Journeys of Nine Students with Learning Disabilities from an Inaccessible Learning Environment to One that Enabled Them to Learn

Amy E. Ballin
Lesley University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/education_dissertations



Part of the [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Elementary Education Commons](#), and the [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ballin, Amy E., "The Quest for a Meaningful “Special Education”: The Educational Journeys of Nine Students with Learning Disabilities from an Inaccessible Learning Environment to One that Enabled Them to Learn" (2011). *Educational Studies Dissertations*. 40.

https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/education_dissertations/40

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Education (GSOE) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Studies Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

THE QUEST FOR A MEANINGFUL “SPECIAL EDUCATION:”
The Educational Journeys of Nine Students with Learning Disabilities from an
Inaccessible Learning Environment to One that Enabled them to Learn.

Submitted By

Amy E. Ballin

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

LESLEY UNIVERSITY
November 2011

Abstract

This ethnographic case study follows the educational journeys of nine students with learning disabilities who with luck and parental advocacy attend a school designed to address their disability. The researcher explores the role of cultures, both within and outside the school, and examines some of the effects of the social construction of special education on student learning.

This study draws no conclusions regarding the connections between the cultures at the school and the student's success. However it does highlight the perspective of students, parents, and teachers, noting the ways in which they describe how and why this school environment allowed the student access to an education.

The nine student's educational journey calls attention to the inequities caused by the social construction of special education. In this study, students were under-diagnosed, misdiagnosed, and at times over-diagnosed with a variety of labels that indicated a disability or lack of a disability. This labeling, required in order to receive specialized instruction, determined a path and represents one of the many problems associated with special education. In addition, these students and their families endured financial and emotional hardships in the fight to obtain an accessible education.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the numerous people who supported, taught, guided and encouraged me throughout this journey. Without them, I would not have achieved my goal.

My childhood friend, Dr. Reverend Traci C. West, provided the inspiration for me to pursue a doctorate. She supported me through every step of the process from the admissions application to the defense.

Dr. Dan Newman, at the Lesley Writing Center, worked tirelessly with me on every draft of every paper. His comments and feedback helped me become a more confident writer.

Committee members Dr. Bill Ayers and Dr. Paul Jablon challenged my thinking and broadened my perspectives.

Four special people, who are not only great friends but also excellent writers, Kiki Zeldes, Martha Morgan, Pat Baker, and Tara Gallagher provided editorial advice throughout this process, often when deadlines were within one day.

My children, Casey, Aaron, and Michael asked probing questions about my work, understood when I was not home for dinner, and most importantly provided technical computer support whenever needed.

My parents, Alice Ballin and Dr. Bert Ballin, encouraged me from the start of my educational career. They provided many opportunities for me to learn and supported me both financially and emotionally.

I owe tremendous gratitude to my husband, Tim Greiner, who gave me the space (he shared his office with me), the time (I worked part time through the years of my study) and the support to guide me through this process. He is my best friend, my partner, and my cheerleader in my pursuits of my professional career.

Dr. Caroline Heller, my committee chair and faculty advisor, not only held me to high standards but she also helped me find my direction. I began with an idea to study school culture, but it was Caroline who suggested following the educational journey of individual students. It was with this new focus that I fell in love with my topic and tuned into my own dyslexia. Caroline's guidance along the way kept me going. Her encouragement, with even the most simplistic phrases such as "I think you are on the right track," inspired me to keep at it.

Finally, this dissertation would not have been possible without the many participants from the Kelsey School who shared with me their stories and expertise. I especially want to thank Raya, James, Mike, Evette, and Frank, the five children who endured me following them to classes and along with Nancy, relived their painful educational journeys. I also appreciate all the parents who gave up time to interview with me, shared

their personal records, and gave me permission to work with their child. They, like their children, relived many painful memories in the telling of their child's story.

I am thankful to have the privilege to pursue my doctorate and to have the support of all the people who helped in various ways along my own educational journey.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Chapter 1 Introduction | 10 |
| 1.1 My Personal Educational Journey | 10 |
| 1.2 My Path to this Research Topic | 11 |
| 1.3 Choosing My Research Site | 13 |
| 1.4 Rationale for the Study | 14 |
| a. Misguided school reform and cultural influences..... | 17 |
| 1.5 Framework | 20 |
| Chapter 2 Research Method | 22 |
| 2.1 Study Design | 22 |
| 2.2 Research Site: The Kelsey School | 25 |
| 2.3 Backyard Research | 30 |
| 2.4 The Participants | 33 |
| 2.5 Validity | 36 |
| 2.6 Data Collection | 40 |
| a. Observations..... | 40 |
| b. Interviews..... | 43 |
| c. Artifacts..... | 45 |
| 2.7 Data Analysis | 45 |
| 2.8 Limitations of this Study | 47 |
| 2.9 Conclusion to Research Methods | 48 |
| Chapter 3 Literature Review: Cultural Influences and Students Learning | 50 |
| 3.1 Cultural Influences and Student Learning | 50 |
| a. School Culture | 50 |
| b. The meaning of culture | 52 |
| c. Analysis of school culture..... | 54 |
| 1. Three levels of culture | 54 |
| 2. Definition of culture | 57 |
| 3.2 School Culture as a Barrier to Student Learning | 59 |
| a. Tenacity in resisting change..... | 59 |
| b. Schools' culture as the transmitter of inequality inhibiting student learning. | 64 |
| 1. Assimilation to the dominant culture. | 64 |
| 2. The hidden curriculum. | 66 |
| 3. Cultural misunderstandings..... | 67 |
| 4. Cultural advantages. | 69 |
| d. School culture designed for performance..... | 72 |
| 3.3 School Culture as an Avenue for Learning | 73 |
| a. School culture that promote self-efficacy: An avenue to increase student learning .. | 73 |
| 1. Creating sustained change | 75 |
| b. A leveling culture..... | 76 |
| 1. Avenues to creating a leveling culture. | 77 |
| i. Curriculum and teaching changes..... | 77 |
| ii. Boundaries between home and school. | 78 |
| iii. Teacher education programs to facilitate a leveling culture..... | 80 |
| 2. Changing the cultural perspective..... | 81 |
| 3.4 Summary of School Culture | 83 |
| 3.5 No Teacher Left Alone: A teacher culture that promotes student learning | 83 |
| a. What is teacher culture? | 85 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| b. Teacher cultures that limit student growth..... | 86 |
| c. Teacher cultures that enhance student growth..... | 91 |
| 1. Advantages of a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture..... | 95 |
| d. Barriers to Collaborative Teacher Culture..... | 99 |
| 1. Historical level: School structure..... | 99 |
| 2. Political level: School reform..... | 104 |
| 3. Personal level: Trust, teacher’s career cycle, beliefs about collaborative culture..... | 107 |
| i. Trust..... | 107 |
| ii. Teacher career cycle..... | 110 |
| iii. Beliefs about collaborative teacher culture..... | 112 |
| e. The Role of the Principal in Promoting a Collaborative Culture with a Professional Learning Environment..... | 113 |
| 3.6 Role of the Dominant Culture in the Creation of Special Education..... | 116 |
| a. How the Culture of Special Education Limits Student Potential..... | 116 |
| b. The evolution of special education..... | 117 |
| c. Consequences of the deficit model..... | 121 |
| d. Social Construction of Dyslexia and Equality of Treatment..... | 127 |
| 1. History of dyslexia..... | 128 |
| 2. Definition and diagnosis..... | 130 |
| 3. Inequity in diagnosis and treatment..... | 135 |
| 3.7 Conclusion to Literature Review..... | 136 |
| 3.8 My Research..... | 137 |
| Chapter 4 Equal Access..... | 139 |
| 4.1 Introduction..... | 139 |
| 4.2 Barriers to an Accessible Education..... | 140 |
| a. Pullout and Mainstreaming..... | 141 |
| b. Children Blamed..... | 146 |
| c. Parents Blamed..... | 160 |
| d. Student Coping Strategies..... | 164 |
| e. Parent Coping Strategies..... | 170 |
| 4.3 Emotional and Financial Sacrifices..... | 175 |
| 4.4 Catalysts that Promote an Accessible Education..... | 185 |
| a. Parental Instinct..... | 186 |
| b. Notice of Behavioral and Emotional Changes..... | 197 |
| c. Experienced Helper..... | 203 |
| d. Self-Education..... | 215 |
| e. Loss of Trust in the Public School System..... | 223 |
| 4.5 Conclusion to Equal Access..... | 231 |
| Chapter 5 Inner Workings of the Kelsey School..... | 234 |
| 5.1 Introduction..... | 234 |
| 5.2 Theme I: Dedication to the Mission..... | 235 |
| 5.3 Theme II: Structure of the Program..... | 245 |
| a. The people method..... | 245 |
| 1. Tutorial..... | 246 |
| 2. The case manager..... | 250 |
| i. Designing and supervising the tutorial..... | 251 |
| ii. Managing the IEP..... | 252 |
| iii. Acting as liaison between the school and the parents..... | 253 |
| iv. Overseeing the student’s school experience..... | 254 |
| v. The case manager’s unique role..... | 257 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| 3. Small class size..... | 258 |
| 4. Administrative support structure..... | 263 |
| b. Teacher learning opportunities..... | 265 |
| 1. Formal training program..... | 266 |
| 2. Informal training..... | 270 |
| 3. Learning opportunities for veteran teachers..... | 274 |
| 4. Summary of teacher learning opportunities..... | 278 |
| c. Selected population..... | 280 |
| 1. Development of expertise..... | 282 |
| d. Academic structure..... | 286 |
| 1. Structure in curriculum design..... | 286 |
| 2. Structure across the curriculum..... | 290 |
| 3. Classroom structure..... | 294 |
| i. Classroom order..... | 294 |
| ii. Classroom process..... | 296 |
| iii. Classroom routine..... | 298 |
| e. Communication..... | 301 |
| 1. Milkbreak..... | 302 |
| 2. Boards and morning meeting..... | 308 |
| 3. Case manager..... | 310 |
| 4. Report cards..... | 314 |
| 5.4 Theme III: Supportive and Safe Learning Environment..... | 316 |
| a. Administration supported the teachers and promoted collaboration..... | 317 |
| b. Teachers worked in collaboration encouraging and supporting one another in their practice..... | 320 |
| c. Students felt supported by teachers..... | 326 |
| 1. Teachers adapted to children’s learning issues..... | 331 |
| d. Safety at Kelsey..... | 334 |
| 1. Forgiving classroom environment..... | 335 |
| 2. Commonality with other students..... | 339 |
| 3. Connections with teachers..... | 346 |
| 4. Trust of teachers..... | 349 |
| 5. Encouragement of teachers..... | 352 |
| e. A close community..... | 358 |
| 5.5 Measures of Success..... | 361 |
| a. Self-efficacy..... | 361 |
| 1. Frank..... | 361 |
| 2. Evette..... | 363 |
| 3. Nancy..... | 366 |
| 4. Cally and Tim..... | 366 |
| 5. James..... | 367 |
| 6. Mike..... | 367 |
| 7. Raya..... | 368 |
| 8. Beth..... | 369 |
| b. Self-advocacy..... | 369 |
| c. Academic independence and abilities..... | 371 |
| d. Social growth..... | 377 |
| e. Participation in outside activities..... | 378 |
| f. Improved behavior..... | 379 |
| g. A culture that sustains a professional learning environment..... | 381 |
| h. Summary of Measures of Success..... | 388 |
| 5.6 Drawbacks..... | 388 |
| a. Drawbacks regarding teachers..... | 389 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| b. Drawbacks regarding students..... | 393 |
| 5.7 Conclusion of inner workings of Kelsey School..... | 396 |
| Chapter 6: Discussion of the Findings | 399 |
| 6.1. Redefining Access to Education..... | 400 |
| a. Access to an education. | 405 |
| b.. Conclusion: Redefining access to education. | 407 |
| 6.2. Overcoming Deficit Thinking: Creating a “Special Education” for all Students | 407 |
| 6.3 Shifting Traditional Thinking about the Ways in which Schools Operate | 411 |
| 6.4 Recommendations for Further Research..... | 414 |
| 6.5. My Surprise..... | 415 |
| References..... | 416 |
| Appendices..... | 434 |
| Appendix A: Letter to Parents..... | 434 |
| Appendix B: Student Information Form | 435 |
| Appendix C: Participant Consent Form..... | 436 |

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 My Personal Educational Journey

In fourth grade, I got a “D” in spelling. In sixth grade, I realized I was the only student in my grade without a publication in the school newspaper, despite my earnest effort to produce quality writing. In seventh grade, the entire class broke out into laughter as I mispronounced the word “deny” while reading out loud. In eighth grade, I was placed in the “spelling for dummies” class with four other students. In ninth grade, my parents hired a reading tutor after school. I have no memory of how, or if, this tutoring helped. I just remember I was labeled as having a reading problem and needed extra help.

Clear messages in my schooling showed me that reading and writing were subjects to avoid at all costs as I appeared unable to progress in these areas. In high school, I requested the lower track English and history classes but took the highest-level math and science. I went to an agricultural college to avoid any English or foreign language requirements. Most of the requirements complemented my strengths in math and science. After undergraduate school, I pursued my interests in science and education, choosing carefully a graduate school without a thesis requirement.

Despite my strengths in math and science, my straight “A’s” in high school, and my admittance to an Ivy League university, the messages and labels in elementary and middle school that defined me as a slow reader and poor writer, scarred me into adulthood, dictating choices I made and things I avoided. My coping strategies included: scribbling my writing when I did not know how to spell a word, asking a participant to

write on the easel when giving a workshop for teachers, and developing a debilitating cough when asked to read out loud. My educational journey steered me away from ever working on my areas of weakness, and instead, channeled me toward my strengths in science and math. Yet, since I had a keen interest in education and in working with teachers, I had fantasies of earning my doctorate, but feared my level of ability to write and my slow reading would render this endeavor impossible. It took me twenty years to gain the confidence to enter a doctoral program.

1.2 My Path to this Research Topic

I came to my dissertation topic largely from my experiences working in schools. In the process, I came to understand my own educational path, which crystallized my passion for pursuing this topic -- the role of school culture in student learning.

Through my years working in school systems as both a science teacher and later, a guidance counselor, I found myself most interested in the struggling students be they the class clown who couldn't read well, the homework avoider, or the furniture thrower. As a science teacher, I did my best to engage these students with interesting curricula and active learning. However, there were those I could not reach. I wanted to understand their emotional life and their personal connections to learning. This interest brought me to graduate school to earn my Masters in Social Work.

I interned in four different schools during my graduate studies. Each school had its own distinct culture. My experience at the Edwards school (a pseudonym) stood out. The Edwards' student body and staff reflected the diversity of the larger community: African Americans, Africans, Latinos, and Whites. At the time of my internship, the Edwards maintained a two-way bilingual Spanish/English program. The membership in

this diverse school community felt inclusive. As one of the few white people, and possibly the only Jew, I felt comfortable and accepted in the school. In December, menorahs and Christmas symbols stood side-by-side, lacing the hallways with their multitude of colors. The symbols expressed equal representation and equal importance. The students and parents I met talked about feeling, in the school, a sense of community, trust, and caring.

I wondered about the students' achievement in this school compared to students in the other elementary schools in this community. At the Edwards, students appeared more interested and excited by school than I had observed of students in the other schools where I interned within the same city and with similar populations. I saw what appeared to be fewer behavior problems and more commitment to learning in this school. I came to view the Edwards school as having a strong culture, which I felt consisted of shared values and beliefs. This culture, along with student interest in learning, piqued my curiosity about the school environment and its relationship to achievement.

In my job as school social worker, I began to see the school more from the students' perspectives. As students talked about teachers and school life, I understood how their relationships with teachers, their sense of personal value in the school community, and their commitment to the school could affect their drive and interest in their own learning. As a teacher, I also understood how the child's interpretation of a situation could be different from the teacher's interpretation, as well as the teacher's intent.

At one faculty professional day, during my work as a guidance counselor, Harvard University psychologist, Dr. Robert Brooks (personal communication,

September 2000), addressed the faculty about his work on child resiliency. According to Brooks, students from dysfunctional backgrounds found success in schools because of a relationship with a teacher or teachers, an effort by a principal, or a special incident that kept the student engaged in learning. His research further inspired me to think about the atmosphere in a school as it relates to student motivation and achievement. I began to wonder how these cultural aspects of schools might enhance or hinder student growth. This interest brought me to the doctoral program at Lesley University to begin my research into school culture.

My passion for this research developed as I narrowed my research topic while uncovering my own “school wounds” (Olson, 2009, p.5). Like the students I studied, I discovered my own dyslexia through a serendipitous pathway. Similar to the students in my study, I went through school attributing my struggles with reading and writing to my lack of intelligence, despite my obvious strengths in math and science.

1.3 Choosing My Research Site

I entered the doctoral program without an idea of where I would conduct my research. I knew I wanted to find a school that appeared to have a strong culture and students who were identified by the school personnel as successful. I began collecting names from professors and started to interview some principals. At the same time, I started a new job as a counselor at the Kelsey School, a school for students with learning disabilities. As I learned about the students, the teachers, and the culture at this school, I realized that it might be the perfect research site.

Kelsey serves students identified as having language-based learning disabilities. Common among these students are tumultuous schooling experiences that led to low self-

esteem and poor motivation. True, until they started at the Kelsey School where the student experienced dramatic changes. One student noted, “We are all the same here and do not have to feel stupid.” Another student described her feeling of being at home once she started at Kelsey.

1.4 Rationale for the Study

I remember my own fourth grade in-class reading assignment on the *Iliad*. The teacher instructed our class to read a passage to ourselves and then individually tell her how we understood the reading. Once finished, we could go out for recess. I never made it to recess. I read the passage over and over again watching every other child from the corner of my eye head out to recess. I could make no meaning of what I read. That incident, and many similar ones, shaped my low self-confidence in reading and writing.

My grade school report cards suggest a student who today might be diagnosed with dyslexia. As early as first grade, my teacher reported, “Phonics sometimes holds her back from analyzing and spelling new words.” My second grade teacher described, my “Hesitancy in verbal subjects” and that I was reading below grade average. My teacher suggested that reading would improve as I gained confidence in skills such as phonics and spelling. By third grade my teacher noted, “Amy is plagued by persistent reversals of letters and letter combinations. This makes it especially difficult for her to develop a sight feeling for words.” In fourth grade, letter grades appeared on my report card along with comments. I earned a C- in spelling and the teacher commented that the word reversals were disappearing. In fifth grade, my teacher questioned a problem with my eyes as he noted, “a mixing of the order of letters and uncertainty of final syllables of words” and commented on my difficulties in reading and writing. Comments continued

along the same lines as I progressed through school with difficulties in spelling and then writing. No one identified a reading disability until ninth grade when limited help was implemented.

My story dates back forty years to the early stages of research on reading and the understanding of dyslexia. Yet, today, even as researchers have made tremendous gains in the field, stories similar to mine continue. Both Shaywitz (2003) and Wolf (2007) describe their frustrations with the school personnel's lack of knowledge and understanding of reading disabilities that leaves many children suffering today. Many now successful adults, identified as poor readers in school, tell of their humiliation during school age years. Olson (2009) notes numerous examples of learning disabled students wounded by school. Wolf (2007) describes Grand Prix race car driver Jackie Stewart's feelings of lifelong damage from his childhood embarrassments of being a poor reader. He indicated that he would have ended up in jail had he not found success in racecar driving. In fact, many struggling readers do end up in jail.

The United States Department of Education report on literacy in prison suggests that "Learning disabled people are disproportionately represented in the prison population" (Haigler, Harlow, O'Connor, & Campbell, 1994, p. 24). In a study of fifty inmates in a Texas prison, Moody et al. (2000) discovered that the prisoners had "nearly twice the difficulty with single word decoding than the general population has" (p.73). They define single word decoding as the "core component of dyslexia" (p.69). In a study of Swedish juvenile prisons, Svensson, Lundberg, and Jacobson (2001) claim a well-documented association between reading disabilities and juvenile delinquency.

They found that more than two-thirds of young offenders had difficulties with written language.

Snowling, Adams, Bowyer-Crane, and Tobin (2000) in contrast, found that the prison population rate of dyslexia mirrored the non-incarcerated population based on their own testing of dyslexia for non-incarcerated and incarcerated youth. They concurred, that there are high levels of literacy problems among young offenders. The cause, they suggest, as major factors to low literacy rates, is poor school attendance, inadequate educational opportunities, and disinterest in school. Perhaps the label of dyslexic is less important than the fact that the prison population appears to have a higher proportion of struggling readers than the non-incarcerated population. Moody et al. (2000) suggest, “poor performance in school or at work too often leads to a life of crime and eventual imprisonment” (p.69), yet they clarify that dyslexia does not cause criminal behavior. Instead, the lack of attention to the struggling reader likely leads to emotional despair. They explain that unremediated dyslexia becomes an, “emotionally degrading life for the dyslexic child who is often being told how lazy he is when he knows how hard he has been trying” (p.74). Kirk and Reid (2001) note that without remediation, students are more likely to develop low self-worth which “predisposes young people to offend” (p.83).

Moody et al. (2000) project the cost to house prisoners at \$30,000 per year per prisoner. Perhaps this money could be better spent helping children learn to read with less emphasis on affixing a label and more emphasis on providing support. Moody et al. state: “Teaching every one to read is not a utopian dream but a realistic goal for which

no shortcuts exist. As for cost, the more relevant question is whether we can afford not to do it” (p.74).

The consequences for struggling readers range from low-self confidence, as in my case that than influenced later choices, to more severe consequences such as a life of crime that can result in imprisonment. Regardless of the type of consequence, the various consequences for struggling readers may affect decisions made in life.

a. Misguided school reform and cultural influences.

Improving education for all students is not a new concept. New educational reforms continually emerge, usually as the result of some perceived educational crisis that then imposes new regulations and legislative actions designed to improve schools. Yet, school reform efforts have largely missed the mark in improving education for all students (Sarason, 1996). The achievement gap persists (Lee, 2002) and not all students are learning to read. Many note that reform efforts have largely ignored the influences of school culture, as well as cultural influences from outside the school, on student learning and that understanding these influences can affect how students learn in school (Deal & Peterson, 1999; T. E. Deal & Peterson, 1990; Renchler, 1992). I agree.

A perceived crisis has brought reforms of many different natures --improving teacher training, changing curricula, raising standards, increasing testing, and relocating personnel. Often these new reforms are developed at universities and handed down to school systems (Eisner, 1991; Sarason, 1996). For example, the Russian launching of Sputnik created a perceived crisis regarding the teaching of math and science in the public schools. This perception brought new math programs developed at universities and implemented in classrooms, but these programs were ineffective in creating the

desired change of students' increased interest in math (Sarason, 1996). Teachers and students were never consulted on the problems with the current math programs, but instead, universities were enlisted to decipher the problem and create the solution. According to Sarason (1996), reform efforts initiated from the outside and imposed on schools, with little understanding of the inner workings of schools, are doomed for failure.

Many of these reform efforts predict changes necessary to produce desired outcomes without fully understanding the cultural system that often works to maintain consistency (Sizer, 1996). In the last 75 years, academics and researchers have defined and studied school culture. Waller (1932/1961) wrote about school culture in 1932. Waller described schools as having a unique culture and suggested that ceremonies centered on the school are part of its culture. He suggests that it is the "specialized culture" that is the most effective in "binding personalities together to form a school" (p.13). While the idea of studying school culture may not be new, examining culture and how it relates to success, although prominent in the business world, is as a more recent subject of educational research (Evans, 1996).

For the purposes of this study, I developed an operational definition of school culture. A description of how I came to this definition is explored in detail in the literature review. I define *school culture* as an implicit force that governs the school's infrastructure of operation embodied in or evidenced by the interrelationships of behaviors, values, traditions, ceremonies, rituals, climate, and patterned systems of doing things.

Saphier and King (1985) believe creating strong school cultures provides the foundation for improving schools and instruction. Research in the business community provides examples of improving success by changing the culture (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Studying the cultures of schools requires examining non-curricular aspects of school life. Questions that I explore in this research relate to the role of culture in student learning. When I examine the influence of culture I am looking not only at the culture within the bounds of the school but also the influences of the larger cultures outside the school that inform and determine the ways in which schools operate. The area I explore in depth is the role of the social construction of special education and how this construction from the dominant culture can deter many students from gaining access to the kind of education that will facilitate their learning to read.

For this study, I will use the legal definition of special education as found in the Federal Registry.

(a). *General.* (1) *Special education* means specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including- (i) Instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and (ii) Instruction in physical education. (2) *Special education* includes each of the following, if the services otherwise meet the requirements of paragraph (a) (1) of this section- (i) Speech-language pathology services, or any other related service, if the service is considered special education rather than a related service under State standards; (ii) Travel training; and (iii) Vocational education. (b) *Individual special education terms defined.* The terms in this definition are defined as follows: (1) At no cost means

that all specially-designed instruction is provided without charge, but does not preclude incidental fees that are normally charged to nondisabled students or their parents as part of the regular education program...(3) *Specially designed instruction* means adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction- (i) To address the unique needs of the child that result from the child's disability; and (ii) To ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children ("Assistance to States for the Education of Children with Disabilities," 2011).

1.5 Framework

This ethnographic case study follows the educational journeys of nine students with learning disabilities who attend a school designed to address their disability. All the names of people and locations are pseudonyms. The journeys before arriving to Kelsey unfold through the stories of the parents and the children. I did not seek to corroborate their stories with personnel from the student's old school, as my interest was in the student's and parent's perspective of this journey. The journey at Kelsey is explored through the parent's and child's telling of their story along with interviews of teachers, case managers, and administrators who illuminate the inner workings of Kelsey. Additional artifacts such as student report cards and other educational documents added data and perspective to the story. Finally, my own observations of students living in this school environment added a third layer to understanding these journeys and their culmination at the Kelsey school.

This study seeks to unravel the complex educational stories of a nine students at a small specialized school in the hopes that they will illuminate the ways in which culture can both hinder and help students achieve their potential.

Chapter 2 Research Method

“Culture is akin to a black hole that allows no light to escape. The observer knows of culture’s presence not by looking, but only by conjecture, inference, and a great deal of faith” (Van Maanen, 1988, p.3).

2.1 Study Design

In this research, I examine the educational journey of nine students with learning disabilities who attended the Kelsey School, in Northeastern Massachusetts. I hoped, through this research, to understand the experiences of these nine students by examining the factors that combined to create the students’ school life. This qualitative study does not attempt to infer a cause-and-effect relationship about student success and school models but, instead, looks at the interactions of various factors that helped me better understand the educational journey of these nine students.

In this study, I followed individual students, using a “collective case study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 74) method and examined the culture of the school using an ethnographic approach. In a collective case study multiple cases are used to study one issue. In my case, the issue was the student’s educational journey. The use of multiple cases is not meant to imply generalizability between cases but only to illustrate the topic of study which, in the case of this research, is the educational journey of nine students (Berg, 2004; Creswell, 2007) but, this study is also ethnographic in nature. Ethnographic studies, often associated with the field of anthropology, have become commonplace in school settings (Creswell, 2007; Spindler, 1982; Wilcox, 1982). This approach encourages the researcher’s immersion in the fieldwork setting so she can understand cultural patterns (Glesne, 1999; Spindler, 1982). In ethnography, the researcher tries to maintain a presence at the field site because this provides the best vantage point for

understanding, representing, and reporting the participants' views about the research topic. The researcher's observations are then translated into a written account that interprets and describes the culture (Berg, 2004; Van Maanen, 1988).

An ethnographic case study at one site, though limited in scope, allows for a complex understanding of a particular situation that may shed light on larger phenomena (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Understanding the educational journey of a few students with learning disabilities may help educators assign meaning to the challenges that some students must overcome to attain success in their learning. The ethnographic approach sheds light on the school culture in ways that may help educators change the structure and the intricacies of the school day knowing how some students, parents, and teachers perceive the areas of schooling that best support the student's learning.

In ethnographic case studies, researchers seek to understand the meaning people assign to various aspects of their lives by trying to uncover the voice and perspective of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Etic issues are the researchers' or the larger research community's issues (Stake, 1995). In this ethnographic case study, each student's lens, along with those of the parents and teachers, becomes the view from which to interpret and understand the meaning assigned to various events. It is this emic lens that I hope to construct. Stake (1995) defines emic issues as "The issues of the actors, the people who belong to the case. These are issues from the inside" (p.20). Case studies are explored within a bounded system, such as the setting (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the school serves as the bounded system. However, case studies, like many qualitative research studies, are not necessarily limited to a single system or approach. Rather, the data dictate the direction of the study. As the data unfold, processes and

procedures established at the beginning of the research may change, along with the research question, the forms of data collection, and the individuals studied (Creswell, 2003). As Dyson and Genishi (2005) note, “Initiating a qualitative case study is akin to starting a journey without a clearly marked route” (p. 39). However, that does not imply that case studies are without goals. A case study illuminates a specific phenomenon, which, in this study, is the educational journey. The study focuses on the perspective of the participants and then presents this information in narrative form, incorporating themes of the individual cases. Dyson and Genishi (2005) describe this goal: “Weaving together contextual threads so that a quilt of persuasive images—a coherent narrative—emerges is the goal of case study researchers” (p. 112).

I chose a qualitative approach to my research instead of a quantitative method because my interests lie in uncovering the meaning, processes, and concepts that defined these students’ educational experiences. I was less interested in the specific measurement and analysis of causal relationships that would be more suited for a quantitative study. In addition, I believe a multi-method approach, common in qualitative research, (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) enhances this study. If I had not pursued an ethnographic method, I might have misunderstood the role of the school culture in the students’ experiences along with noting the emic view of the students, parents, and staff. If I had not utilized the collective case study method, but only ethnography, I might have missed the nuances of the personal stories that provided a deeper understanding of the Kelsey school and its role in these students’ lives. The combination of the two methods allowed for a more thorough understanding of the educational journeys of these nine students.

2.2 Research Site: The Kelsey School

The institution I will refer to as the Kelsey School is a private school, located in New England, enrolling students in grades 2 through 12. It is housed on two campuses, one serving grades 2 through 8 and the other grades 9 through 12. My study focused on the elementary/middle-school campus (grades 2 through 8). The Kelsey Elementary/Middle School (EMS) sits atop a hill on eighteen acres of land overlooking an estuary. One building houses the elementary school, lunch and meeting rooms, and administrative offices and classrooms. Three smaller buildings that dot the campus contain additional classrooms, a gym, a wood shop, and a small-engine repair shop. The physical plant is well landscaped and includes a small playground and field. Although Kelsey is considered a private school, approximately 50 percent of its students are publicly funded through the referring district school; the other 50 percent pay the \$43,900 annual tuition privately.

The Kelsey School is distinctive both in the population it serves and its approach to learning. The school enrolls only students with language-based learning disabilities. The admissions director, Lynn Kamer, explained that Kelsey's population is defined as having "diagnosed language-based learning disabilities (LBLD), such as dyslexia." She noted that the school also accepts students with difficulties in written and oral expression. She further explained that Kelsey defines the term *language-based learning disability* broadly, to encompass both oral and written language difficulties, which include writing/speaking (formulation, organization, word retrieval), reading/spelling, and listening/comprehending. The school website additionally states that Kelsey accepts students who have average to above-average intellectual ability, as measured on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) or the Wechsler Adult Intelligence

Scale (WAIS), and well-developed reasoning and comprehension skills, but have difficulty decoding, spelling, writing, and processing language. Kelsey accepts students who are struggling in traditional classrooms because their reading, writing, computing, and organizing skills do not match their cognitive potential (*Who should apply*, 2008). The school does not accept students with emotional, social, or behavioral issues.

Kelsey provides a highly structured learning environment, a commitment to small class sizes (four to eight students per class), and a student-to-teacher ratio of 3:1, allowing each student a one-to-one student teacher tutorial every school day (*Curriculum*, 2008).

The Kelsey School was founded in 1971 by Dr. Raymond Black. He viewed children who were labeled “learning-disabled” as bright and capable and believed that given the right learning environment these students could find success. Dr. Black first became aware of dyslexia while working as a missionary in Appalachia where he observed with his co-workers a discrepancy between their intelligence and their literacy level. To investigate this discrepancy further, he enrolled in graduate school to study dyslexia and suitable ways to teach students with this disability. After graduate school, he started a diagnostic clinic to help students but he was unable to locate a school where his students could receive the support they needed on a daily basis. To address the need for services, Dr. Black founded the Learning Disabilities Foundation, which opened the Kelsey School in September 1971 with 42 boys and 3 girls in residence and 22 day students (Harris, 2008).

In May 2008, long-time board member Harris embarked on a mission to record the history of the Kelsey School. This history portrays a school that struggled to maintain

its financial stability while also growing and expanding its services. In its early years, Kelsey grew rapidly, balancing the purchase of new properties with the school's budget. The school started as a high school on the south campus and, in 1973, added a middle school on the north campus. This coincided with the passage of the Chapter 766 Special Education Law in Massachusetts, which directs public funds to private institutions when public schools are unable to meet the needs of special-education students. In 1973, 35 publicly funded students entered Kelsey; by 1974, the school population had grown to 206 (Harris, 2008). In 1982, the school opened a West Coast branch while also planning for the opening of a college for learning-disabled students in Vermont (Harris, 2008). Finally, in 1994, the elementary school opened, serving grades 2 through 5 and housed on the north campus (*Elementary and middle school programs*, 2008).

Today the school serves 144 elementary/middle school students and 315 high school students, of whom 170 are residential and 145 are day students. There are 320 faculty members among both campuses, some of whom have been at the school since its inception. Ninety-two percent of Kelsey graduates go on to college (*At a glance*, 2008). According to Bert Stack, head of school for the elementary and middle school (EMS), EMS employs 46 full-time teachers, 8 case managers, 9 department heads, and 15 support staff (administrators, technology office personnel, driver, counselors, speech and language teacher, librarian, and custodian). The school maintains a consistent 3:1 student-to-teacher ratio. Teachers' salaries range from \$23,500 to \$59,000 per year based on years of experience outside of Kelsey, years at Kelsey, and extra responsibilities such as coaching or department head.

Board member Charley Harris's 2008 account of the history of the school elaborates on some topics relating to the school's finances and operational issues that consistently emerged at board meetings. First, in the early years, the school's commitment to a specific style and structure of learning allowed Kelsey to access public funding sources. Specifically, Kelsey's founders believed in creating a highly structured learning environment. In the 1970s, Dr. Black allowed the admission of students from the Massachusetts Division of Youth Services, in the belief that these students would benefit from the highly structured environment. When admission numbers were low, this provided additional income. However, this practice was ended, as the staff was unprepared to deal with the behavioral issues of the DYS students (Harris, 2008).

A second topic that emerged in Harris's 2008 account concerned the school's commitment to enrolling a socioeconomically diverse student population. Reimbursement from the local school district for publicly funded students does not cover the full cost of tuition. With the school's finances in constant flux, debate arose during more than one board meeting over whether to terminate the publicly funded students. However, despite the deficit caused by accepting publicly funded students, the board consistently voted to maintain the public school students so that a family's inability to pay would not entirely limit access for students in need of a Kelsey education (Harris, 2008).

The board consistently expressed commitment to a 3-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio. This provides enough staff to maintain the one-to-one student-teacher tutorial, which has become a trademark of the school. In general, an easy way for a school to balance its budget is to increase class size. Although the Kelsey board wrestled with financial

concerns, the student-to-teacher ratio has remained sacrosanct at the Kelsey School (Harris, 2008).

The balance between staff compensation and the work required has been a consistent theme throughout the school's history. The Kelsey staff has historically received lower pay than other schools in the region, while teachers frequently had long workdays, sometimes more than 10 hours. Kelsey started as a residential program, which is still maintained at the high school level. In the early years, staff members were required to fulfill residential duties as well as teaching responsibilities despite salaries that were consistently below comparable private schools. The founders wanted the same staff living with and teaching the students so that they could address both social and academic issues in an integrated fashion. In this way, Kelsey provided "a total environment for its students based on structure, trust of people and situations, reinforcement of skills learned, and consistently supportive faculty/student relationships through each day, day after day" (Harris, 2008, p. 16). Residential duties continue today, although the frequency and hours required have been reduced from the early years. However, salaries remain low. In 1992, in an effort to acknowledge the issue of low salaries, the headmaster and the board president raised \$12,000 for "modest" (p.45) Christmas bonuses for staff members by asking board members to make personal donations for this purpose (Harris, 2008).

Kelsey's low salaries have been maintained through a tradition of hiring young teachers and providing them with free training and certification programs. The certification program, which became necessary as public school students entered the school, was not consistent until 1995, when the school established a relationship with a

local college to provide a Master's Degree program with certification in special education. Kelsey teachers' enrollment in this program is completely subsidized by the school (Harris, 2008). Teachers must be accepted in this program in order to be employed at Kelsey.

2.3 Backyard Research

“Backyard research” refers to studies conducted at locations that are convenient for the researcher, such as the researcher's place of employment (Glesne, 1999, p. 26). While methodologist, such as Reinharz (1992) suggest that certain research topics and field sites may benefit from the higher levels of trust and rapport with participants that is characteristic of this approach, Glesne (1999), while acknowledging the advantages of backyard research, such as ease of access and rapport, warns that there are possible liabilities, including potential confusion over roles, ethical and political dilemmas, and problems exiting the research site.

I have worked at the Kelsey School two days a week as a guidance counselor since December 2007 and three days as a researcher since January 2008. Because my role at the school varies depending on the day of the week, this can create confusion for teachers, students, and administrators. Adding to the confusion, I offered to jump into my counselor role as needed, to deal with any crisis that came up on my researcher days, as a way to give back to the community. This meant that on any given day, teachers, students, and administrators might not know which role I was playing. Initially, administrators expressed concern about how teachers would react to my dual role. To allay their concerns and because the ethics of research made this a clear need, I presented my

research proposal to the staff in order to obtain their consent. In a staff meeting, I outlined my reasons for doing the research, my research topic, and what my research process might look like in the school. I let them know the days of the week on which I would assume each role, but I also explained that I had offered to fulfill my counselor role, if a crisis arose, on my research days. I asked teachers to express any concerns to me or to the head of the school about my conducting this research. Although I did not ask for feedback beyond concerns, three staff members approached me with enthusiasm about participating in my study. None of the faculty expressed apprehensions to me or as far as I know the other administrators.

Overall, I did not find my two roles in conflict in terms of either branches of my work. I offered counseling consultation as needed on my research days, but providing assistance in this area did not interfere with my research. At times, however, I did find that my role as a counselor overlapped with my researcher role. Many of the interviews I conducted were emotional bringing parents and one student to tears. In some of these interviews, when the participant started to cry, I found myself sliding into my counselor role, trying to help the participants come to grips with their feelings either by helping them identify the feeling or by expressing empathy. As a researcher, I felt that I should not intervene, but in this environment, I naturally slipped into a small measure of the counselor role.

Another area of concern cited by Glesne (1999) is based in ethical and political dilemmas. Glesne notes that the role of the “covert observer” (p. 27) may be confusing and ethically challenging. My presence in the school in two distinct roles meant that I might be seen as a covert observer. On my counseling days, teachers, students, and

administrators might wonder if I was acting as a researcher in a covert role or just as a counselor. Politically, there might be concern about how I would report the data. The administration, having given permission for the study, might not appreciate a negative analysis of their school. This kind of dilemma can create complications for the researcher in reporting the data accurately, whether positive or negative (Eisner, 1991; Glesne, 1999). To avoid any conflict in the covert observer role, I refrained from any counselor discussions around students who participated in the study. I also avoided classroom observations when students I counseled were in the same classroom as students in my study.

Finally, Glesne (1999) explains that the backyard researcher typically cannot leave the site at the end of the study and that this may be problematic if the researcher possesses “dangerous knowledge” (p. 27) which she defines as “information that is politically risky to hold, particularly for an insider” (p.27). For example, dangerous knowledge at this placement might be information about students or knowledge of the ways in which the school functions. In addition, the conclusion of the researcher–student relationship may lead to awkwardness between the researcher and the student. In fact, however, because many of the students I interviewed were near the end of their time at the elementary/middle school, this did not seem to become a major issue.

While she gives these warnings, Glesne (1999) concedes, “Backyard research can be extremely valuable, but it needs to be entered with heightened consciousness of potential difficulties” (p. 28). Creswell (2003) expresses similar concerns as Glesne (1999), suggesting that multiple strategies for ensuring validity can help with the potential liabilities for backyard research. I address these strategies in a later section.

Although I had to pay attention to the pitfalls of using a “backyard” site and used various measures of validity, I believe that in this case, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. As a struggling language learner myself, I have a passion, and deep commitment to telling the stories of students at the Kelsey School. It is this passion that often drives a researcher to a successful project (Delamont, 2002). In addition, I believe the trust I have already built with the teachers, students, parents, and administration at the Kelsey School enhanced my study, allowing me deeper access into the students’ educational journeys. It is for these reasons that I chose to engage in backyard research, despite the potential liabilities. Although I have remained open to hearing feedback and concerns and to dealing with any ethical or political fallout, no such concerns have surfaced two years after completing the research, as I still remain at the school in my counselor role.

2.4 The Participants

The original group of participants included five students (called Raya, Mike, Frank, James, and Evette in the study) and the teachers, case managers, administrators, and parents who are connected to these students and interact with them. After five months at the research site, I expanded my study, adding four additional students because, while interviewing my original five, I found both the parents and the students stories so compelling that I knew I would benefit from hearing a few more stories.

I identified participating students through recommendations from parents, teachers, case managers, and administrators. I started my recruitment by announcing my research topic to teachers at a faculty meeting. In explaining my topic and asking for

student recommendations, I also fielded questions about requirements for participating in the study. All teachers were assured that participation was voluntary and that a participant could leave the study at any time. In this meeting and also in an e-mail I sent to parents, I asked for referrals of students who had had difficult schooling experiences before coming to Kelsey but were now finding success at Kelsey. I defined “difficult school experience,” as students developing negative images of themselves as learners (as noted by themselves, their parents, or teachers), students who were more conscious of their limitations than their strengths, and students who articulated negative experiences in school. In contrast to a difficult school experience, I defined a “successful school experience” as one that improved on the student’s positive feelings about themselves as learners, and self-confidence about their ability to learn.

In response to my initial e-mail, six parents contacted me, expressing interest in the study and relaying anecdotes illustrating their child’s match with my research interest. I took the list of students to the staff to gain their perspective. In the end, I included five of the six students in my study, following the advice of two staff members that one student would not be an appropriate participant because her language processing might make it difficult for her to recall information from previous years. Three boys and two girls from this initial sort remained in the study. They were all middle school students and, at the start of the research, had been at Kelsey between six months and three years. I considered these five students my primary participants and followed their journey in depth. I observed them at Kelsey in classes and during informal times in their school day. I interviewed the five students, their parents, their case manager, and at least one teacher of each student. I also examined their academic files, which contains educational records

both before and since their arrivals to Kelsey. The mothers of three students, Mike, Evette, and Frank, also shared their personal files, regarding the paper work generated to enroll their child at Kelsey.

Five months into the research, I recruited four more students in a similar fashion—sending an e-mail to parents and consulting with staff. From this request, I received four responses, all of which I used. For three of these students, I interviewed only the parents; I interviewed the fourth student (Nancy) and her mother. From my previous interviews, I had discovered that students who had come to Kelsey at a younger age had difficulty recalling their previous schooling experiences. Nancy, an eighth grader, was in her first year at Kelsey, and I thought that her memory of her earlier years in school would be strong. I did not follow any of these students in classes or comb through their records, as I felt I had sufficient data in this area from my primary participants. These additional four students were also in middle school.

I identified all of the participating students as Caucasian, and I asked the parents to identify their family's socioeconomic status leaving them to assign their own criteria. One family identified as working class, one as lower middle class, one as upper class, one as upper middle class, and four as middle class.

I performed formal interviews with case managers of the five primary participants (two of the students had the same case manager), two department heads who also taught one or more of the five primary participants, four teachers—one novice, one midyear (with four years' teaching experience) and two veteran (over thirty-five years' teaching experience)—and three administrators. I classified my interviews with two administrators and the janitor as “informal interviews,” as these were conducted spontaneously during

lunchtime or through e-mail for clarity on specific issues. Formal interviews were held in my office at the staff's convenience. I also interviewed the five students in my primary group and one student in the secondary group. In most cases, I interviewed only one parent, the mother. For one student, James, both parents came to the interview.

All participants signed consent forms. Given the age of the students, parental consent preceded students' signing of the consent form. Although I explained "consent" to the students, I also asked parents to confirm that the child understood what it meant to participate in this study—that it was voluntary and it meant that I would attend classes, talk with their teachers, and conduct interviews with the child and other school staff.

2.5 Validity

Validity refers to the trustworthiness of the inferences made from data (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Glesne, 1999). I used multiple avenues of validation to authenticate the data. To check for validity, I used respondent validation, member checking, triangulation, extensive time in the field, and reflexivity (Delamont, 2002; Glesne, 1999). For respondent validation, all interviewees had the opportunity to review the transcripts of the interviews, checking the researcher's accuracy in recording the interview. Participants also had the chance to check my analyses by commenting during and after a presentation of the data made during an all school meeting. Participants unable to attend the meeting were sent a digital video recording of the presentation. Member checking allows participants to correct the researcher's inaccuracies, thereby creating another avenue for validating the data (Stake, 1995).

Triangulation is another method used to validate data (Berg, 2004; Glesne, 1999; Stake, 1995). Triangulation describes the use of multiple data collection techniques on the same research topic, allowing for additional confirmation of the data (Berg, 2004). I collected data from three sources: observations of students in the classroom and at unstructured times; interviews with students, parents, and staff; and examination of artifacts in the school such as school publications, bulletin boards, and student records and in parents' personal files. This diversity of data collection methods provided a variety of sources to authenticate the data.

Time at the research site is another method of validation. I spent six months in the field to obtain the best possible picture of each student's educational journey. This time allowed me ample opportunity for interviewing, observations, and exploration of artifacts from the school.

Finally, I was reflexive in my work, confronting my biases and preconceived ideas, and fighting familiarity as best I could. Reflexivity Berg (2004) suggests, "is to have an ongoing conversation with yourself" (p. 154). In this light, I do not question *if* I influence my research but, instead, ask *how* I influence it. It is the job of the qualitative researcher to acknowledge, understand, and identify biases and preconceived ideas; doing so increases the quality of the study (Jansen & Peshkin, 1992). Preconceptions, notes Delamont (2002), are not problematic unless they are left unidentified. Preconceived ideas can alter research and interfere with the researcher's attempts to understand the emic viewpoint. But when preconceived ideas are acknowledged and recognized, the researcher can be more open to what emerges or unfolds from the setting (Wilcox, 1982).

To be reflexive, I kept a daily journal of my thoughts, reactions, and feelings about my observations, interviews, and the artifacts I examined. Through my journaling, I noted ways in which my biases might influence or alter my data collection and analysis. For example, I noted that every time I interviewed parents, I found myself choking back my own tears at some point while listening to the story of their child's educational journey. These stories brought me back to my own experiences working as a counselor in a public school, where my lack of understanding of LBLD prevented me from knowing how to address children's needs and act as an effective advocate for them. It was painful to be brought back to those times and to feel that I might have played a role in preventing some children from getting the education they deserved. The influence of these stories, combined with my own experiences working in the public schools, meant that I needed to be very careful in how I presented public schools in my data analysis. It would be easy to generalize from the information I had, but I needed to remind myself that my own experiences and those of my students were limited and perhaps unique to a particular school or even their particular experience. I needed to acknowledge my bias against special education programs in public schools and to represent only the perspective of my students' experience.

Another challenge I faced was fighting familiarity. Working in a familiar environment can interfere with the researcher's ability to see clearly the nuances that are needed to fully appreciate the emic view (Delamont, 2002; Spindler, 1982). Historically, anthropologists used the ethnographic method to study cultures vastly different from the researcher's own. Researchers immersed themselves into the foreign culture in order to understand it (Van Maanen, 1988). In writing an ethnography, the researcher tried to

make the strange familiar in order to make meaning of the culture studied. Today, ethnographies are commonly used in environments such as schools that are already familiar to the researcher (Delamont, 2002; Spindler, 1982). Spindler (1982) describes his own account of writing volumes of observations in a foreign culture and then entering a school in the United States and having a blank paper. When information looks familiar, there appears to be less to write about than in an unfamiliar situation. Given my familiarity with the school setting, the students, the teachers, and my own struggles as a language learner, I needed to be aware of the distinctions that describe each student's journey and help define it. I needed to look with a descriptive eye to see beyond what I am used to seeing (Spindler, 1982). I was particularly challenged in making the familiar unfamiliar at my research site because it is also my place of employment and because I have worked in school settings for more than twenty-five years. Spindler noted that when he was able to see the teachers and students as "natives," he began to decipher some cultural meaning (p. 24). Before entering any classrooms, I was familiar with most of the teachers in the school. I had preconceived ideas about some of the teachers based on what I had heard from the students I counsel, on other teachers' comments, or on my own observations as a Kelsey counselor. I soon discovered that my preconceived ideas did not necessarily match what I observed in my research. Fighting the familiar was a challenge in this very familiar environment.

Finally, I noted that I had to be aware of my own biases about the teachers and practices at the Kelsey School. As a member of the faculty, I am intimately involved in the day-to-day functioning of the school. I was and am consistently impressed with the Kelsey staff and with many aspects of the school that I have never encountered in other

schools. In my representation of the school, I needed to make sure that I did not simply focus on the positive aspects and ignore the negative.

2.6 Data Collection

My data collection methods included making observations, conducting interviews, and obtaining documents—all typical methods in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). These multiple research tools provided various pathways for understanding the participants' educational experience and the school culture.

Observations are often seen as the main tool of the ethnographic researcher (Delamont, 2002; Spindler, 1982). Observations involve noting the environment, including both people and the surroundings, and paying attention to details such as facial expressions, movement, and conversations. It is this kind of “thick description,” as described by Geertz (1973, p.6), that allows the researcher to uncover the nuances of the participant's perspective, so that the culture unfolds before the researcher (Geertz, 1973; Wilcox, 1982). In addition to my observations, I performed one-to two-hour interviews with parents, teachers, case managers, students, and administrators. I used student report cards and the parents' personal files as the primary source of documents (artifacts) along with Kelsey publications.

a. Observations

I began my research by observing students in their classrooms, during recess, in the lunchroom, and in the hallways. I observed teachers in meetings, in the teachers' room, in classrooms, and during informal interactions. Although observation may seem to

be a simple data-gathering technique, I ran into many obstacles typical of this method. One great challenge to observation is to become an “invisible researcher” (Berg, 2004, p.163). When the researcher remains visible, the subjects, knowing they are being watched, may alter their behavior (Berg, 2004). As a current counselor in the school, I thought I would have an advantage in maintaining my invisible status. Both students and teachers are accustomed to my presence in classrooms, hallways, the teachers’ room, and lunchrooms. Although my observations as a counselor differ from those I made as a researcher, teachers and students are familiar with seeing me at the back of the room observing. In addition, because the school is a common research site, the teachers and students are used to researchers as part of their normal routine. However, even when I felt I was maintaining my invisible status, the students often reminded me of my visibility. For example, as I entered a classroom one day, a student told me, “Mike is not here today.” If I had imagined that the students had no idea whom I was watching, they quickly corrected my erroneous view. On other occasions, students asked me directly whom I was watching and then guessed correctly. So, despite many good reasons to believe I could maintain my invisible status, the students consistently showed me to be wrong. To address the students’ curiosity, I began to explain at the beginning of a class that I was observing the classroom. This was enough to satisfy most students, and they became less focused on whom I was observing.

Another barrier involved separating my role as a counselor from my researcher role. Because I needed to avoid classrooms containing both my study participants and the students I counsel, I lost many classroom observation opportunities. On top of this, some teachers declined my request to observe. Originally, I had planned to follow one student

for a whole day to get a feel of the day. However, I quickly realized this approach would not work. I could not observe in some classrooms because of the overlap with my counseling job or because the teacher declined permission. Although some teachers gave a blanket permission to come anytime, most preferred that I contact them in advance, and they reserved the right to say no. So, for example, a teacher who had allowed me to observe on Monday might say no on Tuesday. On each research day, I requested permission to observe in a classroom and then worked out my schedule based on the teachers' response. Most of my decisions about which classes to visit on any given day were based on accessibility and on balancing the number of classes I observed for each of the five primary participants.

In addition to classroom observation, I attended teacher meetings and student academic meetings, and I observed my participants at recess. Teacher meetings occur every day at Kelsey. Because I regularly attend teacher meetings during my workday and because many teachers work on computers during these meetings, I felt that I maintained my invisibility during this time. When the opportunity arose, I attended academic meetings such as individual education plan (IEP) meetings and meetings with parents, case managers, and students. Before these meetings, I obtained permission to attend from all participants, and my role as researcher was defined.

Recess observations proved difficult. During recess, students are allowed to roam to a variety of locations. I spent many recess times just trying to locate my participants. But even when I could find the participant, I was unable to get close enough to hear the conversation. As a result, I quickly abandoned this form of observation.

During my observations, I tried to let instinct guide me. I quickly realized there was too much to record. I could watch the students' every move, I could observe the teacher, or I could record conversations between teacher and student or between two students. As I went along, I continually questioned myself. For example, in one daily journal I wrote: "I am concerned that I am not collecting anything that can be used for data. While I follow these students in class, in class I noticed that more recently I tend to focus more on the teachers. I am recording conversation more than I am paying attention to what else is going on in the classroom." As a result, I found myself changing my focus. I had started by focusing only on the student, trying to observe the student's every move. Later, I spent more time noting teacher–student interactions, student–student interactions, and teaching strategies.

b. Interviews

After many months of visiting classrooms, when I felt I had a true understanding of the classroom environment and how my participant negotiated it, I started my interviews.

I conducted both formal and informal interviews. Formal interviews took place in my office at Kelsey or in the participants' home or office. I interviewed parents, students, some of each student's teachers, case managers of five of the students, two administrators, and the director of admissions. The teachers ranged in their experience at Kelsey from first year, mid-year to veteran teachers. I tried to accommodate my participants' schedules by holding interviews at the time of day and location that were most convenient for them. For one family who lived forty-five minutes away, I held the

interview in their home. In most cases, I interviewed the student separately from his or her parents. In Evette's case, because I conducted the interviews at her home, both Evette and her mother, Barbara, were in the same room and at times participated in each other's scheduled time.

I designed open-ended interview questions but allowed flexibility in the structure and context of these questions so that each interview could take its own shape. Interviews provide an opportunity to clarify situations and illuminate the participant's perspective on his or her own actions (Wilcox, 1982). My goal for the interviews was to understand how participants perceive each child's educational journey and how teachers, parents, and administrators view the student. All of the interviews flowed smoothly, with a combination of listening and asking questions, which Eisner (1991) describes as a good interview. In many cases, especially with the parents, I set up the tape recorder and listened as they spoke passionately, sometimes in tears, about their child's educational experience. I found myself often choking back my own tears as I was overcome with emotion while listening to these stories. Many parents thanked me for giving them the opportunity to tell their story and often talked past the scheduled one-hour limit. With one student, James, I encounter what Glesne (1999, p. 91) describes as the "nonstop talker." James often went off topic on long tangents, and I found that I had to summarize what I heard and try to redirect him back to the topic.

In total, I interviewed six students, nine parents, ten teachers and case managers, and four administrators. I interviewed all of the case managers of the five primary participants and at least one teacher for each primary participant. Some teachers refused to be interviewed, so my list came from those who were willing and could make the time.

Delamont (2002) suggests that informal interviews provide an opportunity to test hypotheses. For example, notes taken in an observation of a formal interview can be clarified and validated through informal interviewing. I used an informal interview process of e-mail and lunchtime conversations to follow up on formal interviews.

c. Artifacts

My third data collection method involved obtaining artifacts generated by Kelsey teachers, students, administrators, and parents. My goal was to find a broad range of documents as another method of making meaning of the context of the setting (Wilcox, 1982). Artifacts included school newsletters, bulletin board displays, memos, historical documents, school records files, parents' documentation of students' records, and school symbols and traditions. Some of the artifacts were public, but others, such as parent communications and student records, were more personal. I reviewed the student records only for the five primary participants. Three of the parents had extensive files, some more organized than others, which contained every e-mail exchange between teachers, student report cards, student testing, student work, and medical records. Artifacts can reveal what is not said, providing both operational definitions and a perspective that differs from the one gained through interviews and observations (Eisner, 1991). By examining both personal and school wide artifacts, I added another layer of data.

2.7 Data Analysis

For my data analyses, I used a coding system along with a reflective journal. The reflective journal contains my reactions and thoughts during data collection (Delamont, 2002; Glesne, 1999) and helped me identify bias in my work. Coding, as defined by

Glesne (1999), is “a progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data “ (p.135). I coded the data according to the overarching categories that emerged.

My goal was to analyze my data as I collected it in order to help direct my data collection, to let me know when I had enough data, and to avoid being overwhelmed at the end of data collection. Journaling every day helped me stay abreast of my data. It was through this process that I determined that I had completed my classroom observations and should move on to interviews. I felt I had a good understanding of the classroom and my participants’ role in this learning environment. The interviewing phase came to a natural end after I had completed all of the planned interviews. Artifact collection also had a natural ending as I had reviewed all the student records and other materials available. I also felt I had read enough of the Kelsey literature to augment my understanding of the school philosophy.

I started by reading through my observation notes, the transcripts of the interviews, and my notes on the student records and other school artifacts multiple times, trying to tease out what the data was telling me (Berg, 2004). Following the suggestion of Delamont (2002) to “code whatever you are interested in” (p. 176), I noted words, phrases, vignettes, and conversations that related to school culture, the emotional aspects of the child’s journey, the student’s self-efficacy, and aspects of the Kelsey experience that participants regarded as helpful to the student’s progress. As I read through my data, I began pulling out emerging themes, both those that related to my research interests and those that appeared to emerge serendipitously. Stake (1995) notes that the researcher

needs to pay attention to these unexpected themes as well as those that the researcher is looking for on the basis of the research question.

The data broke down into two natural areas—each student’s journey to get to Kelsey and, subsequently, each student’s experience at Kelsey. The major themes of the journey to Kelsey included: a break in trust, a fight, emotional consequences, blame, copying strategies, not learning to read, an outsider guiding the way, instinct that something is wrong, and self-education. Themes of the Kelsey experience included: safety, a belief in the Kelsey approach, commonality with others with dyslexia, supportive environment, confidence as a learner, and accessible curriculum. After establishing these broad categories, I then began narrowing and redefining the data into subcategories. Next, I began the process of transforming the data from categories and themes into patterns in a sequence that told a story (Glesne, 1999).

2.8 Limitations of this Study

Since this study involved following the journeys of only nine students as they entered one school, the findings are not generalizable to a larger population. The experiences of these students do not represent those of all students with learning disabilities or of any other larger group of students. Another limitation is that this study only examined the students’ and parents’ perspective on each child’s school experience before coming to Kelsey. I did not go back to each child’s elementary school to see whether the families’ stories could be corroborated or added to by school personnel. Finally, given my own language learning issues, which I learned more about through my research process, it is possible that the ways in which I identified with these families and children may have led to bias, influencing the ways in which I listened, heard, and

interpreted what families were telling me. I hope and believe that the limitations of this potential bias were more than offset by the intersubjective understanding that I brought into the study.

2.9 Conclusion to Research Methods

By following the educational journey of nine students at the Kelsey School, I hope to unearth the school experience of these few students with learning disabilities. As an ethnographic case study, the students' experiences do not represent all students of learning disabilities but simply show a snapshot of nine students, at one point in time, at one school. This study does not aim to examine all the factors that may contribute to a child's success or failure at a school—for example, the impact of parental divorce, of other types of mediation, or any of the other issues that may arise during a child's school year. However, I hope the information retrieved from this research will give educators a deeper understanding of how some students experience their schooling. Eisner (1991) explains how a case study can add powerful knowledge: "One of the most useful of human abilities is the ability to learn from the experience of others" (p. 202). Illuminating the stories of these students with learning disabilities allows others to learn from these students' experiences, deepening the discourse around students' educational experiences.

As a struggling language learner myself, I faced many challenges in conducting this research. The familiarity of the topic drives my passion for the research, but it also means that I must take special care to acknowledge and separate my own childhood experiences from those of the students I observe. These struggles are not uncommon in qualitative research, where it is often a sense of commonality with the research topic that

influences the researcher to choose the topic. Delamont (2002) observes that students who choose topics suggested by advisors or other well-meaning professors often do not finish the work, whereas those with the passion that comes from a feeling commonality with the topic are more likely to see the work through to the end. I feel a personal commitment to expose these students' stories on behalf of all the other students who have not had such an opportunity. Students are often left out of the dialogue on school improvement. Yet I believe they are the experts in their own learning, and their parents are often their only advocates. I hope this ethnographic case study amplifies the voices of these students, enabling educators to understand learning struggles from the student's perspective in a way that will promote educational reforms.

Chapter 3 Literature Review: Cultural Influences and Students Learning

“It is the quality of group life that shapes a ‘centripetal force’ holding local soil and local memory in place, building in this manner a group’s own meaning and memory of itself—a shared soil” (Heller, 1997, p.161).

“Just as potters cannot teach others to craft in clay without setting their own hands to work at the wheel, so teachers cannot fully teach others the excitement, the difficulty, the patience, and the satisfaction that accompany learning without themselves engaging in the messy, frustrating, and rewarding ‘clay’ of learning” (Barth, 1990, p.49).

3.1 Cultural Influences and Student Learning

Schools, like all institutions, develop and sustain their own cultures and subcultures that form and shape the ways in which the school operates, teachers perform, and students learn. The larger cultural influences of society also influence and shape the internal workings of the school. This literature review looks at the role of school culture, teacher culture, and the dominant societal culture that surrounds schooling in the United States in promoting and inhibiting student learning, as well as the influential role culture can play in perpetuating inequalities in education. Because my research site is a school for learning-disabled students, I highlight the special education program as a specific example of the role of the dominant culture in influencing and, at times, inhibiting student academic growth and self-concept while at the same time perpetuating inequality in education.

a. School Culture

The idea of school culture is bandied about as having an effect on all who participate in a school building. School culture can have a powerful influence on student performance in school both in academic achievement and in self-efficacy (Deal &

Peterson, 1999). Given the complexity of the meaning of school culture, this constructed term will be discussed in detail later in this literature review. Bandura (1997) defines *self-efficacy* as, “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p.31). This influence may propel students forward by reinforcing and supporting the student as a lifelong learner. However, the school culture can also interrupt, discourage, or negate the learning process (Maehr & Midgley, 1996; McLaren, 2003; Kohn, 2004).

As a negative influence, school culture may act as the gatekeeper preventing reform efforts, whether local or federal, from infiltrating its unique system, thereby supporting the status quo (Maehr & Midgley, 1996). It can become a strong transmitter of the larger dominant culture that surrounds schooling in the United States and perpetuates inequalities, creating unequal opportunities for students (McLaren, 2003; Ready, Edley, Snow, & National Academy of Sciences - National Research Council, 2002). The school culture may also act to discourage student learning by creating an environment focused on performance and ability rather than on effort, thereby potentially decreasing student motivation.

As a positive influence, school culture may stimulate student motivation creating a task-oriented environment that increases student learning often leading to academic success (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Renchler, 1992). This environment attempts to counter the inequalities present in the dominant societal culture by including the community of parents, creating equal opportunities for all students, and promoting an environment in which all students are expected to succeed.

b. The meaning of culture.

According to Deal and Peterson (1999), anthropologists developed the concept of culture “to explain life-patterns of tribes, societies, and national or ethnic groups” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p.3). Boas influenced the field of anthropology by introducing the theory of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism refers to “understanding the ways of other cultures and not judging these practices according to one's own cultural ways” (*Definitions of Anthropological Terms*, 2006). Boas argued that societies should be studied by analyzing their histories (*Franz Boas*, 2005) . Margaret Mead, a student of Boas, built on his work and is credited with popularizing the word *culture*. She relied on qualitative data rather than quantitative data in her work and promoted a belief in cultural determinism (*Margaret Mead*, 2005). *Cultural determinism* is defined as “any perspective which treats culture itself as determining the differences between people e.g. in personality type” (Barnard & Spencer, 1996, p.600). Mead wrote extensively about areas in American culture that she found disturbing. She based her analysis on her wide-ranging experiences studying other cultures. She was particularly vocal on issues regarding racism and gender stereotypes often comparing differences in the homogeneous environments of groups she studied with the heterogeneous environment in the United States (Mead, 1963). With her prolific writing and accessibility of her ideas to the public, the word “culture” became popularized (McDermott, 2001).

Recently, research in culture has gained prominence in the business world, as organizations look to their corporate culture for explanations of successes and failures (Schein, 2004). Schein (2004) suggests that many organizational managers believe that strong organizational cultures lead to improved economic performance. Schein argues that culture alone cannot be defined as strong or weak. Culture, according to Schein,

exists within a specific environment. The relationship of culture to its environment defines the strength of the culture. Goffee and Jones (1998) concur, stating that there is no “right” culture, only an appropriate culture for the specific business environment. Evans (1996) suggests that “strong” cultures are most resistant to change, and are not necessarily the most effective. However, Cheng (1993), who studied both effective and ineffective organizational cultures, uses the term “strong culture” to include effective cultures as well. Cheng discovered that schools with stronger cultures had more highly motivated teachers. To Cheng, characteristics of strong cultures included shared participation, charismatic leadership, shared ideology, and a sense of intimacy. Deal and Peterson (1999) along with Deal and Kennedy (1983), use the term “healthy culture,” suggesting that in the business world a healthy culture indicates financial success. In healthy cultures, employees’ contentment with their work environment motivates them to give their best to their job.

The impact of culture can be powerful, though often invisible. Schein (2004) explains: “Culture is to a group what personality or character is to an individual” (p. 8). Culture guides behavior in a group through shared norms just as character and personality can guide personal behavior. Schein describes culture as “an abstraction with resulting behaviors that are concrete” (p. 8). Cultural patterns affect the way people think, act, and feel, which influences their satisfaction which affects their performance (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Goffee & Jones, 1998).

c. Analysis of school culture.

The concept of school culture first became known through the work of Willard Waller (1932/1961), who suggested that different schools had their own unique cultures. Waller described schools as social organisms with interacting parts. More recently, the study of school culture has been modeled on the study of business culture. Schein (2004) analyzes organizational culture on three levels explaining both the concrete and abstract nature of culture.

1. Three levels of culture.

Examining school culture requires an analysis of three levels, as described by Schein (2004). At the first level, culture consists of concrete, observable artifacts—behaviors, routines, rituals, and literature, as well as such items as bulletin boards and decorations. Examples of some of these artifacts might be the types of banners hung in the school, displays of student work, the school logo, mandated hall passes, graffiti (or the fact of no graffiti) on the walls, missing bathroom stall doors, and cracked windows. At this level, Bjerke (1999) notes, people understand and are aware of their actions. The second level encompasses the espoused beliefs and values of the organization. These are also observable and are often found in mission statements and other publications of core values. Although these values may be visible, they may not always reflect the values presented in actions. Eisner (1991) describes the “intentional dimension” (p. 73), which suggests that intentions of schools do not always match reality.

The final, most abstract level relates to the underlying assumptions on which a culture is based. These assumptions define the way things are done (Deal & Kennedy, 1983). They are the prescribed way of doing things that are not questioned, but are taken for granted (Schein, 2004). Bjerke (1999) explains that at this level, actions are

unconscious. According to Schein (2004), a deep level of understanding culture occurs when people in the organization can detect the underlying assumptions.

Studying the artifacts of the school, such as its traditions, behaviors, celebrations, and climate, helps a researcher understand the culture. Many schools create traditions around birthdays of students, teachers, and staff. For example, principals might give out small gifts, such as pencils, as birthday presents for students, announce birthdays during regular morning announcements, or have other customary ways of acknowledging both staff and student birthdays. Similarly, some schools have traditions about maintaining food in the teacher's room. And many schools have traditional annual activities. Celebrations are an integral ingredient of school culture (Deal, 1993; Saphier & King, 1985; Stolp, 1994).

The shared values and beliefs of a school can define its culture. These shared values also often reflect actions and rituals in the school or they may mirror an ideology the school embraces. For example, the Responsive Classroom serves as a model for developing shared values in many school systems. The Responsive Classroom program aims to help teachers make connections between social and academic learning. It provides a framework that includes a morning meeting, a discipline approach that emphasizes using natural and logical consequences, and academic choice giving students some control of their learning time (Charney, 1997). Some schools adopted this methodology to establish consistent shared values of respectful behavior toward all members of the school community.

The third level of culture, as articulated by Schein (2004), involves the underlying assumptions or the ingrained way of doing things. This includes the behaviors and actions

that create meaning for the school. In one school where I worked, a principal modeled listening as a way to encourage this quality within the entire school. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) provides an example of a principal who set a tone by connecting with staff and students by touching them on the shoulder. This created an atmosphere in which touching was comfortable, acceptable, and a way to show caring. For example, it was not uncommon to see students with their arms around each other. Other examples of underlying assumptions might include ways in which teachers teach, how students are viewed, or types of curricula that are used (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Behaviors in a school reflect the culture the school supports by representing shared values and supporting the traditions and rituals.

By examining all three levels of culture, Schein (2004) suggests one can begin to understand the complexity of culture and how it operates on multiple levels. Schein's description of his experiences with Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) exemplifies the third level of culture and the difficulty in changing an organization's culture. At DEC, Schein's role was to improve communication. After observing several meetings, he noticed communication problems—interrupting at meetings, emotional confrontations and debate over courses of action, and intolerance of different perspectives. Although Schein's suggestions for change were viewed as helpful by the staff, they did not lead to any permanent changes. Instead, communication within the group remained virtually unchanged. Schein realized that he had proposed changes before he had deciphered the entrenched communication system that was already in place. He believes it is necessary for the people interested in organizational change to understand underlying assumptions in order to create change in the organization's culture. Therefore, educators who

implement reform efforts that operate at the third level of culture will likely reach a higher degree of sustainability.

2. Definition of culture.

As the concept of culture became more popular, multiple meanings of culture emerged, which depended on the context in which they were used (Evans, 1996). There are many differing definitions of culture and no common agreement on one definition (Schein, 2004). *Culture*, when used by anthropologists, often refers to customs and rituals of society developed over time (Evans, 1996); yet even among anthropologists, more than 100 definitions of culture exist (Angelides & Ainscow, 2000). Geertz (1973) notes the complications in defining culture as he cites Clyde Kluckhohn's eleven definitions, which occupy twenty-seven pages of the first chapter in his book, *Mirror of Man*. Geertz's attempts to simplify these definitions by explaining that, "the man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs...." (p. 5). Schein maintains a widely accepted definition of culture (Evans, 1996; Deal & Peterson, 1999). Schein (2004), defines culture as follows:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (p. 17).

Schein's (2004) definition describes the third level of culture related to underlying assumptions. Others, such as anthropologist Clifford Geertz (as cited in Stolp, 1994),

incorporate a definition of culture that, includes Schein's (2004) three levels. Geertz (1973) defines culture as "Representing historically transmitted patterns of meaning" (p. 67). The patterns are expressed through symbols and beliefs. According to Stolp (1994), much of the literature on school culture draws from the Geertz (1973) definition.

Deal and Peterson (1999) also use a definition of school culture that includes all three levels as described by Schein (2004). Deal and Peterson (1999) use the term *culture* to describe the school's unwritten rules, traditions, norms, and expectations that influence the way people act, think, and function within the school. Deal and Peterson (1990) state that culture consists of "deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have formed over the course of the school's history" (p. 7). Deal and Kennedy (1983) offer a simplified definition of culture: "The way we do things around here" (p. 14). This somewhat simplistic definition also can be applied to the business world, as Goffee and Jones (1998) report that culture consists of "The way things get done around here" (p. 9). Deal and Kennedy (1983) further explain the elements of culture as shared values, beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies. Like Geertz (1973), they anticipate many elements of the Schein (2004) definition, using all three layers of culture rather than just the third layer as used by Schein (2004). Angelides and Ainscow (2000) see the concepts of culture as "The basic assumptions and beliefs that have been shaped through earlier problem solutions and have a 'reality-defining' function" (p. 148). In addition, the word *culture* is sometimes used synonymously with other terms such as *climate* and *ethos* (Stolp, 1994). Schein (2004), however, considers climate and ethos to be artifacts and therefore includes them in his first level of culture but not in his overall definition of culture.

For the purposes of my study, I developed an operational definition of *school culture* that is adapted from those of Schein (2004), Deal and Kennedy (1983), and Deal and Peterson (1994). I have made my definition broad, starting with Schein's (2004) underlying assumptions but also including climate and atmosphere as aspects of school culture. In this way, my definition includes all three levels of culture described by Schein (2004). Although Schein, as a business consultant, included only level three underlying assumptions, in his actual definition of culture, earlier educational researchers such as Deal and Kennedy (1983) and Deal and Peterson (1994), include all three levels, as I have done.

For use in this study, I define *school culture* as an implicit force that governs the school's infrastructure of operation embodied in or evidenced by the interrelationships of behaviors, values, traditions, ceremonies, rituals, climate, and patterned systems of doing things.

3.2 School Culture as a Barrier to Student Learning

a. Tenacity in resisting change.

The business community boasts accomplishment in creating healthy cultures to increase financial success (Deal & Peterson, 1999). But reform efforts in school have been slow to adapt cultural analysis as a way to bring sustained changes to school systems. Schools, however, are not businesses and accomplishing sustained changes in schools has been historically difficult. Ironically, schools, unlike business, are more bureaucratic, less entrepreneurial, and more culturally entrenched, making it more difficult for them to change the culture as compared to a corporation (Evans, 1996). Compared to other institutions, Sarason (1996) suggests, "Schools have cornered the market on how to defeat the efforts at change" (p.89).

Distribution of power, structure, and traditions are all aspects of culture that contribute to the tendency of culture to remain unchanged. Originally writing in the 1930s, Waller (1932/1961) offers a historical perspective on the structure of schools as bound by a hierarchical system of power. He paints a picture of schools bound by autocratic rule to maintain order. He describes schools as “Organized on the authority principle and that that authority is constantly threatened” (p. 10). He comments on the uniformity of this power structure: “The generalization that the schools have a despotic political structure seems to hold true for nearly all types of schools ...” (p. 9). This kind of structure is designed to prevent change. In Waller’s view, the natural tensions between student and teachers and the constant shift in the equilibrium of the school necessitate a despotic system of maintaining order. He even suggests that schools that attempted changes from this system ultimately needed to return to it in order to meet student achievement requirements. He states:

The experimental school that wishes to do away with authority continually finds that in order to maintain requisite standards of achievement in imparting certain basic skills it has to introduce some variant of the authority principle, or it finds that it must select and employ teachers who can be in fact despotic without seeming to be so. (p. 9)

For Waller, the authoritarian structure was designed to prevent change.

In a more modern example of how a hierarchical system of power prevents cultural change, Schlechty (2008) notes that No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB)

empowered bureaucrats to determine what students need to learn, without including local citizens, parents, or teachers in the discussion. In the process, communities became further removed from schools, limiting opportunities for change and growth. Schlechty further notes that reform efforts based in the assumption that standards imposed by outside experts would lead to improved quality have, in fact, had the opposite effect. In the same vein, according to Sarason (1996), at the local level, when administrators hand down directives for change to professional teachers, resistance is inevitable and failure guaranteed. This hierarchical system challenges our notion of human motivation for change (Schlechty, 2008). Sarason (1996) provides an example: A principal introduced a new program within the school. Because all the teachers agreed to try it, the principal felt confident the change would occur. But within the confines of their own classrooms, teachers quietly ignored the changes. Although the principal asked the teachers to implement the program, they were not consulted at its inception and, therefore, felt that their professionalism was devalued. The ways in which power is distributed and utilized within the school culture may prevent successful change efforts. Schlechty (2008) notes, “The fundamental problem with our schools is that they are bureaucratic in form. So long as they retain this form they cannot accomplish what we want them to accomplish” (p. 556).

Another aspect of culture that can prevent change is the structural design that separates and isolates teachers. Lortie (1975/2002) describes a “single cell structure” (p.15) in many schools, which creates a system that resists change because of teachers’ isolation and lack of interdependence. Teachers remain confined to their own classrooms, with no opportunity to connect with other teachers. Lortie (1975/2002) explains, “It is

likely that the persistence of separation and low task interdependence among teachers is related to the circumstances affecting the growth of schools”(p.15). Beyond the isolation created by the “single cell structure,” Lortie notes that this structure also helps to institutionalize a high turnover rate for teachers. It is easier to replace teachers when they function as separate units or cells than it is when they are interdependent. With a high turnover rate, there is less cohesion for creating and sustaining change. In comparing teaching to other occupations that promote interdependence, Lortie suggests that the single cell structure guarantees stagnation.

The complexity of a school’s structure ensures its stability (Sizer, 1996). Sizer notes that whereas simpler structures can change as needed, more complex structures are harder to move. He explains: “Trying to change one piece affects every other, causing all sorts of political flak. Accordingly, things remain the same because it is very difficult to change very much without changing most of everything. The result is sustained paralysis” (p. 211). I saw the effects of such structural complexity in one community where I worked. In trying to create a new music program at a middle school, the superintendent informed the parent group that, although money was available to hire a teacher, it was not possible to incorporate a new program into the existing structure. Trying to figure out how to implement this program within the existing schedule, he explained, would be almost impossible.

Along with school structure and power differentials, schools’ long-standing traditions are a third aspect of school culture that can be an impediment to change. I frequently hear from adults in my community that since they did well in school, the current student population will also thrive within the same school environment. Tradition

can be a powerful force explaining why schools remain resistance to change. Sizer (1996) explains, “Most people dislike change. Predictability eases minds, and in times of turmoil one especially values the familiar. The status quo thus has special momentum” (Sizer, p. 210).

Sizer (1996) suggests that schools continue unchanged because people tend to be inherently happy with continuity and familiarity. For example, parents enjoy seeing their children attend schools similar to their own and, therefore, do not recognize a need to change. Students accept the system as well. “School is a rite of passage and they accept it, even though they may be bored by much of it” (p. 211). Lortie (2002) expresses a similar sentiment regarding the power of tradition from the teachers’ perspective: “Ways of teachers are deeply rooted in traditional patterns of thought and practice” (p. 24). The traditions create a feeling of familiarity that is the glue that binds the structure, making it resistant to change. Waller (1932/1961) explains the role of tradition:

Tradition governs what is taught and it holds a firm control upon the manner in which it is taught. Tradition determines who shall teach.... It is this same sort of tradition also which largely determines how students and teachers shall think of each other. (p. 108)

Power differentials, structural rigidity, and the force of tradition within school culture are likely to create obstacles to any reform efforts. Sarason (1996) states: “The more things change, the more they stay the same” (p. 339) suggesting a natural resistance

to change. School culture may maintain and reinforce structures and traditions that create obstacles to change.

b. Schools' culture as the transmitter of inequality inhibiting student learning.

Public schools in the United States are often thought of as the great equalizers, creating opportunities for all children to receive an education despite their different backgrounds and societal inequalities. In their role as equalizer, schools have at times deliberately mimicked the dominant culture in order to prepare students for the culture of adulthood (Dreeben, 1968; Waller, 1932/1961). Yet, by maintaining and orchestrating a dominant cultural perspective, many school cultures reinforce the inequities of society, creating an unequal playing field for some students and a cultural advantage for others (McLaren, 2003).

1. Assimilation to the dominant culture.

Waller (1932/1961), writing in the 1930s—a time of increased immigration to the United States—perceived the role of schools as maintaining and teaching the culture of the larger society. He writes: “The school serves as a point from which the cultural standards of the larger group are mediated to the local community” (p. 103). Waller perceives this as an important role of the school: “The major portion of the work of the school is that of imposing these preexistent community standards upon children” (p. 104). Dreeben (1968), like Waller (1932/1961), sees the role of schools as teaching students to adapt to and absorb the dominant culture. Dreeben (1968) acknowledges that the school and home environments are different and suggests that schools must help their students

adapt to the norms of the school culture, which represents the culture of the larger society, in order to prepare them for adulthood. Dreeben explains: “The school presents new demands not previously confronted at home and children must learn new ways and new principles of conduct for dealing with them” (p. 4). Both Waller (1932/1961) and Dreeban (1968) perceive the important role of school in assimilation, helping children adapt to the adult world they will enter. Yet, there are consequences to this perspective when trying to provide an equal education for all students.

When schools reflect and reinforce the cultural norms of the larger society, they may also reinforce the inequalities characteristic of the dominant group culture. Cultural dominance creates an oppressive environment in which less dominant groups are forced to absorb the cultural values of the dominant group (Mead, 1963). Mead (1963) explains:

Thus, we see that the presence of one element within our culture—a spurious sense of superiority of one group of human beings over another, which gave the group in power the impetus to force their language, their beliefs, and their culture down the throats of the group which was numerically, or economically, or geographically handicapped—has corrupted and distorted the emphases of our free schools. (p. 317)

Mead (1963) notes that schools are used politically to infiltrate systems and language into the immigrant community, thereby creating a forced assimilation. She compares this notion with other cultures in which different cultural norms are learned without force and with a sense of respect for differences. It should be no surprise that the way cultural dominance plays out in United States public schools affects students, particularly those of the less dominant group (Ready, et al., 2002).

Although many students are able to assimilate into the dominant culture, this assimilation has consequences. Students are often forced to leave their culture behind and may find themselves caught between two cultures. Rodriguez (1982) describes his educational experience, in which he had to consciously leave his home culture behind when he entered the confines of the school culture. He describes his assimilation as preparation for the adult culture but also describes how his path through school differed from that of students from the dominant culture. He explains: “Unlike many middle-class children, he goes home and sees in his parents a way of life not only different but starkly opposed to that of the classroom. (He enters the house and hears this parents talking in ways his teachers discourage)” (p. 50). Rodriguez writes about how he succeeded in bridging the cultural gap between home and school by assimilating to the school culture. He managed to propel his education forward despite having to adjust to the rules and norms of the dominant culture presented in school. However, other students who come from minority cultures may be less successful in bridging these cultural gaps to find academic success. There are dangers in schools promoting and reflecting the dominant culture when trying to provide an equal education for all students.

2. The hidden curriculum.

Today, some public school systems continue to function as cultural transmitters of the larger society by maintaining a dominant cultural perspective that reinforces social inequities in ways that affect student learning (Arons, 1983; McLaren, 2003; Spindler, 1982; Varenne & McDermott, 1999). Schools often reflect the dominant culture in their treatment and representation of members of marginalized groups and in their intention to keep the less privileged from progressing (Freire, 1998; Kohn, 2004; Oakes,

1985). As the dominant culture maintains a hierarchy based on social class and race, these hierarchies can get reinforced in the school environment that is meant to erase these precise inequalities (McLaren, 2003).

Spindler (1982) describes a hidden curriculum in schools, in which the cultural context of the community and society, rather than the school itself, determines the educational process. The hidden curriculum reinforces the social hierarchies of the White male middle- and upper-class dominant culture (McLaren, 2003). Spindler (1982) observed a classroom teacher reinforcing cultural values around classism, although the teacher was unaware of doing so. For example, the teacher paid more attention to students who were culturally like himself—the upper- and middle-class students. Spindler suggests that the teacher’s unconscious lack of attention to lower-class students instilled a sense of incapability in these students. The hidden curriculum also allows teachers to blame academic failure on the individual student rather than challenging the teacher to scrutinize societal influences such as racism and classism and to understand how these influences are perpetuated in the school environment (McLaren, 2003). Spindler (1982), while acknowledging that teachers should not be blamed for this type of cultural transmission, does expect that the cultural transmissions should be recognized and addressed.

3. Cultural misunderstandings.

Cultural misunderstandings can set some children up for failure, thwarting efforts designed to permit all children to be academically successful. These cultural misunderstandings can also contribute to the perpetuation of social inequities. Cultural differences can explain different behavioral outcomes—for example, why some children

are perceived as problems when, in fact, the problem is not with the student but represents a cultural misunderstanding. Delpit (1996) describes cultural differences in student responses to discipline. She explains that middle- and upper-class teachers tend to use indirect forms of discipline, whereas “Black teachers” (p.34) tend to be more direct. A middle- or upper-class adult might ask a child, “Is this where the scissors belong?,” (p. 34) a Black teacher might say, “Put those scissors on that shelf” (p. 34). Upon entering school, Black children may not understand the teacher’s indirect demands, resulting in situations that can lead to conflict or punishment for the student. Hooks and Mesa-Bains (2006) describe a Black student who expresses his enthusiasm about a learning project by saying to another student: “Yes, um hmm, that’s okay, yeah you go on” (p. 47). The White teacher perceives this form of communication as “acting out” (p. 47), and the student who was actually showing enthusiasm and engagement with the material ends up being punished. When students are left to interpret the cultural differences on their own, the teacher may view them as creating a disciplinary issue, negating any enthusiasm these students may have previously felt for learning (hooks & Mesa-Bains, 2006).

In another example of cultural misunderstanding, Ballenger (1992) uncovers a cultural difference in disciplining Haitian children. Ballenger, a non-Haitian, notes that she had difficulty in managing her classroom of Haitian children, while noticing that Haitian teachers did not appear to have any difficulty. Ballenger studied the cultural differences that might explain her difficulty in getting the students to listen to her. Bellenger identifies with a North American culture, which she defines as “mainstream culture” (p. 203). She notes that North American teachers (like herself) tend to respond to the individual child, whereas Haitian teachers emphasize the group’s responsibility to

behave. Thus, North American teachers talk in terms of a specific consequence for a specific behavior. “If you do not listen to me, you won’t know what to do” (p. 204). In contrast, a Haitian teacher may respond more globally, implying that all negative behavior is bad but without naming a consequence. For the Haitian teacher, consequences are more general, such as shame for the family, rather than specific. For the child whose culture disciplines in a certain way, coming to school can create a challenge if the student must adapt to the dominant culture in order to progress in school. A child who is slow to make this adjustment may be perceived as having behavioral issues, which ultimately may interfere with the child’s learning. When cultural misperceptions of children result in disciplinary actions, students may be left confused and often unmotivated to learn.

4. Cultural advantages.

When the school culture embodies a particular culture in society, as it does in the United States, students who come from that culture typically enter school with an advantage. For them, the school culture is a familiar one, in which the rules and ways of being are the norm. For other children, they enter school without this advantage. Delpit (1996) describes this advantage as “cultural capital” (p. 28). She explains that cultural capital is the knowledge with which students come to school regarding the “culture of power.” Delpit (1996) explains: “There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is ‘a culture of power’” (p.25). The culture of power is “based on the culture of the upper and middle classes—of those in power” (p. 25). Children who do not come from the dominant culture—in this case, those who do not come from middle- or upper-class families—enter school without this advantage. As a result, the middle- and upper-class students are likely to do well, while students from families of lower socioeconomic

status suffer (Delpit, 1996). Students who know the rules when they enter school have an advantage over those who have not learned the rules.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) describes a similar concept, using the term “the currency of the classroom” (p. 139). She explains that children of the dominant culture arrive in school with a currency bestowed upon them simply because they represent the dominant culture. Students who are not from the dominant culture must learn to operate within this system. She notes that children are “able to read both the home and classroom scene like a complicated cultural text” (p. 60). However, for children not of the dominant culture, this cultural divide can create discord between the home and school environment (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Deal and Peterson (1999) note that school personnel’s perceptions of parents as lazy and unmotivated may result from a cultural misunderstanding, which can push parents away from the school community. Ultimately, students may be at a disadvantage when their parents remain uninvolved in the school, as parent involvement is seen as instrumental in student success (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) highlights cultural differences in the parent–teacher relationship that can create a divide between home and school. She explains that privileged parents tend to have high expectations, demand more, and act entitled. They often view the teachers as the hired help. These parents can be aggressive, determined, and strong advocates for their children. In contrast, poor parents, defined as “often parents of color or newly arrived immigrants” (p. 109), are uncomfortable in school settings. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot, poor parents do not know how to advocate for their child or how to negotiate the school system. They see the teacher as the authority and therefore do not question her judgment. Lawrence-Lightfoot describes poor parents

as “withdrawn, uncomfortable and passive” (p. 109). The parent’s interaction with the teacher, explains Lawrence-Lightfoot, reflects the parent’s relationship with the school. When the school culture perpetuates cultural advantages, favoring some parents over others, the school will primarily serve the students from the dominant group, missing opportunities to bridge the gaps that would allow all children and their families to have similar “currency” when entering the school.

Although Delpit (1996) acknowledges that students need to understand the culture of power to succeed, much as Dreeben (1968) suggests, she notes that this must be done within a context that respects and understands the student’s own culture and without reinforcing societal inequalities. Similarly, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) emphasizes the need to create equal currency in the school for children and their parents. When schools perpetuate social inequalities through their reliance on the dominant cultural perspective, the concept of school as the “great equalizer” is rendered null and void. When school culture enables cultural advantage, it inevitably leaves some groups at a cultural disadvantage.

Perry (2003) suggests that the achievement gap formed as a result of African-American students being excluded from the school culture, reflecting the larger society enforcement of racism. Racism affects African-American students’ opportunities to learn. Many African-American students lack the opportunities available to other students within the school—for example, access to higher-level courses or to courses taught by well-qualified teachers. In addition, African-American students are more readily identified as needing special education services (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Hillard, 2003). The system of tracking students that is often institutionalized within a school culture creates an

unequal playing field for students placed in the lower tracks, who are disproportionately poor, African-American, Latino, and/or recent immigrants (Oakes, 1985). The tracking of students affects both students' actual academic achievement and students' self-perception as successful learners (Oakes, 1985; Sarason, 1996). The tracking systems established in many schools mimic the inequities of the dominant culture, exemplifying how schools are hostage to the larger culture despite mandates of mainstreaming and integration (Sarason, 1996). In order to create a truly accessible school system, schools may need to break free from the trap of cultural dominance. To succeed in creating equal educational opportunities for all students, schools must address unequal practices within the school culture that are supported by the larger culture, thereby allowing all students an equal opportunity to learn.

d. School culture designed for performance.

Schools that promote a performance-or ability-based cultural orientation run the risk of decreasing student self-efficacy and motivation, thereby affecting student achievement (Maehr & Midgley, 1996). A school culture that promotes performance or ability tends to offer fewer choices of tasks, to promote competition and social comparisons, and to support ability-based grading and public evaluations (Bandura, 1997; Maehr & Midgley, 1996). In this culture, individual work, in contrast to group work, is promoted and social interaction among peers discouraged. A school culture based on ability or performance tends to emphasize winners and losers, mimicking a widespread American cultural attitude (Varenne & McDermott, 1999), offering few incentives for those who are under-performing (Maehr & Midgley, 1996). In this culture, students are evaluated on a daily basis as successes and failures compared to one another (Varenne &

McDermott, 1999). This kind of culture decreases student self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Students may fear being incompetent, which can lead to a lack of effort and to poor learning. Students who arrive at school insufficiently prepared are already operating in a one-down position in a competitive environment (Maehr & Midgley, 1996). Maehr and Midgley note that many schools, acknowledging that some students enter school at a disadvantage, initiate self-esteem programs, but these programs assume that all of the problems of poverty and racial discrimination exist outside the school; only rarely do they look within the school to see the school's role in perpetuating inequality. As Maehr and Midgley suggest: "It is a race with the participants starting at different points on the track and with those behind having little or no chance to catch up. So it does little good to hug or praise when the whole environment is sending a message that winners—not learners—count" (p. 45).

Hooks and Mesa-Bains (2006) acknowledge that the culture of most schools encourages "individualistic, isolated, and competitive learning" (p. 47). This approach may discourage students who have learning challenges from even trying. In this way, a school culture that discourages the development of positive self-efficacy and student motivation hampers student learning (Bandura, 1997).

3.3 School Culture as an Avenue for Learning

a. School culture that promote self-efficacy: An avenue to increase student learning

The culture of a school can have either a negative or a positive impact on students' self-efficacy, with implications for student achievement (Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Renchler, 1992). A student's self-efficacy affects thinking, motivation, behavior,

and ability to achieve (Bandura, 1997). As discussed earlier, when racial and socioeconomic discrimination permeates the culture of a school through tracking, discriminatory attitudes, and other forms of exclusion, student motivation and self-efficacy may decrease, creating an atmosphere that is injurious to learning, especially for those who are not from the dominant culture. In addition, when the culture of the school reflects only the dominant culture, some students are left at a disadvantage, not knowing how to operate within the system without instruction. Finally with a performance-based culture, student self-efficacy decreases reducing the potential for all students to find success.

In contrast, a task-oriented school culture increases self-efficacy and student motivation. A task-oriented culture allows schools to move away from a system that labels students as successes or failures and, instead, creates an environment that allows students to succeed in their own right (Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Varenne & McDermott, 1999). A student's sense of self is at the root of motivation, and when students are motivated, achievement follows (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, 1985; Varenne & McDermott, 1999). Ames (1992) uses the term *mastery goals* and Dweck and Leggett (1988) use *learning goals*, which are similar to Maehr and Midgley's (1996) description of *task goals*, to describe the most productive environment for fostering student motivation. In this environment, students are focused on learning for its own sake rather than on comparing themselves with other students. School personnel are less inclined to label children and, instead, simply give them opportunities to succeed in a task-oriented culture (Varenne & McDermott, 1999).

In this environment, effort and growth are acknowledged over ability. When students take on task goals they are more likely to try hard and to take on challenges (Maehr & Midgley, 1996). Task-oriented classrooms typically make use of cooperative learning—heterogeneous groups in which students work together to solve problems without ability-based hierarchies. Students who have experienced task-oriented classrooms are more likely to have a propensity for lifelong learning (Maehr & Midgley, 1996). A task-oriented culture that ignores the ideology of winners and losers nurtures students' self-efficacy, creating an atmosphere that promotes success for all students.

1. Creating sustained change.

The influence of school culture provides researchers and educational reformers a powerful yet under-utilized resource for creating sustained change (Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Sarason, 1996). Reform efforts that are based on changing school culture are likely to lead to more meaningful and prolonged improvements than efforts that are introduced into schools without taking the school's culture into account. Although the most dramatic changes in schools have been legislative, legislation is unable to bring about essential changes in thinking (Sarason, 1996). These changes come when school staff shares common vision and goals. To alter school culture and, specifically, to create a task-oriented culture, teachers and administrators must work together. In this process, teachers gain autonomy and a sense of investment in their school.

The leadership of a school functions as a key player in developing positive school culture. DuFour (2004) notes that school leaders must empower staff, use collaborative decision making, and delegate authority. In addition, leaders must ensure that all staff members adhere to the agreed-on vision and goals. Just as student self-efficacy increases

when students are given more autonomy, teachers, too, need more autonomy in order to embrace change (Sarason, 1996). Sizer (1996) explains, “If teachers are given autonomy, they will perform to the best of their imaginative ability” (Sizer, p. 213).

At the crux of sustained cultural change in schools are the teachers, who interact with students every day, connect with parents, and have relationships with one another that hold much of the power to sustain change (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). As seen in the example of the principal mentioned earlier, who tried to initiate a new program, teachers at the classroom level are the ones working with students and, ultimately, deciding whether or not to implement changes. Fullan and Hargreaves explain: “The heavy burden of responsibility for change and improvement in schools ultimately rests on the shoulders of the teachers” (p. 13). Yet, Fullan and Hargreaves warn that teachers cannot implement sustained cultural change by simply working alone within their classrooms. They must also be part of a larger professional community that promotes teacher collaboration and collegiality. In addition, these authors warn that as a result of forces outside the classroom, individual teachers will not find improvement unless all of the forces affecting the quality of life in the classroom are addressed. As Fullan and Hargreaves explain, “For classrooms to be effective, schools must be effective; teachers are a big part of the school” (p. 11).

The impact of teacher culture as an avenue for sustained change is explored in detail in a later section titled “No Teacher Left Alone.”

b. A leveling culture.

Beyond a task-oriented environment that can sustain change, the school culture also needs to become a “leveling culture” in which all students have an equal opportunity

to learn (Perry, 2003, p.107). Perry defines a *leveling culture* as one in which expectations for achievement is communicated to all members and all members feel part of the group. According to Perry (2003), to close the achievement gap, schools need to promote a vision of African Americans as strong intellects to counter the broader societal construct of African-American inferiority. Perry suggests that many schools lack this commitment and do not include a culture of achievement in which African Americans are seen as full members of the community. When such a “leveling culture” is created, Perry believes, African-American students will find success in school (p. 107).

1. Avenues to creating a leveling culture.

Although there are many ways in which schools create cultural disadvantages, there are also opportunities to create a leveling culture. Some of the specific strategies for providing a leveling culture may arise through changing curriculum and teaching strategies, incorporating the home environment, and altering teacher-training programs.

i. Curriculum and teaching changes.

Teachers can promote a leveling culture by augmenting the curriculum to incorporate a student’s cultural background while also explaining cultural differences. Delpit (1996) describes a teacher in a small Alaskan village who managed to acknowledge the culture of language of her native students while also teaching the “code of power” (p. 40). The teacher, aware that her students did not know the difference between the English spoken in their village and that of the culture of power, labeled the student writing as “our heritage writing” (p. 40). Next, she wrote equivalent statements using “standard English” (p. 40) using the label of, “formal English” (p. 41). In this way,

the teacher validated her students' language while also teaching them "standard English" so that they could develop the skills to operate within the culture of power.

Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) suggest using "culturally responsive teaching," which they describe as "a pedagogy that crosses disciplines and cultures to engage learners while respecting their cultural integrity," helping all students become successful learners (p. 17). Culturally responsive teaching differs from multicultural education in that it responds to the learner's own cultural identity rather than simply teaching awareness of different ethnic groups. It also challenges teachers to identify their own prejudices. This may include considering that student failure may result from racism rather than from any inherent fault of the child (Martin, 1997). Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) explain that this pedagogy, based in motivational theory, recognizes that students' emotions are socialized through their cultures and that their responses to learning reflect their culture. Therefore, effective teaching must be culturally responsive to the students. In an example of a teacher's use of culturally responsive teaching, these authors describe how the teacher begins a science lesson on scientific research by having students engage in small-group discussions. The groups discuss their previous experiences with research as well as their concerns about the research. In this way, the teacher is attuned to the students' perspective and to their questions. The teacher then allows students to choose their own investigation so that they can pursue their own interests. The method emphasizes small-group discussion, choice, and self-assessment as ways to engage students and allow for diverse perspectives that are relevant to different cultural experiences.

ii. Boundaries between home and school.

To help create a leveling culture, school personnel then must work to break down the barriers between home and school (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Schools often present a culture that favors the dominant race and class, an approach that invites conflict between home and school. But studies of school achievement suggest the importance of positive relationships between schools and families (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Therefore, students will benefit when schools provide avenues for families to access the school by breaking down the barriers that separate home and school (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Deal and Peterson caution that connections with parents should not be limited to those that operate on a superficial level—for example, through back-to-school nights, principal chats, and parent handbooks. School culture must also reach out to parents in a deeper way such that the culture incorporates parents at Schein's (2004) level three rather than just at level one or two. Both Moll, Amanti, Neff, Gonzalez (1992) and Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) provide specific examples of how schools can enhance their relationships with parents.

Moll et al. (1992) present a model in which ethnographic researchers pair with classroom student teachers. Each researcher–student team visits the homes of students in the student teacher's classroom. The goal is for the student teachers to incorporate the community within their educational program, to understand students in a broader context, and to draw upon a “fund of knowledge” that is otherwise underutilized in school (p. 134). In addition, the visits can break down stereotypes and prejudices. Moll et al. suggest that there are widely held perceptions of working-class families as “disorganized socially and deficient intellectually: perceptions that are well accepted and rarely challenged in the field of education and elsewhere” (p. 134). Additional value, as Moll et

al. explain, comes from, “reducing the insularity of classrooms and contributing to the academic content and lessons” (p. 139). Moll et al. provide an example of a researcher–student teacher team learning of a cross-border candy-selling experience from a family. The candy-selling experience translated into classroom activities in which students developed research questions and then performed the research to answer their questions. As a culminating activity, a member of the community came into the school to make Mexican candy. Moll et al. explain that the visit to the students’ homes creates a relationship with the families, opening an avenue for the exchange of information, which stimulates and motivates student learning.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) describes a teacher who created an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance in a parent–teacher conference in which cultural and class differences had the potential for creating a divide. Meeting with the parents alone, the teacher sensed their discomfort. The teacher then asked the child to join the parent–teacher conference. Once the student joined the meeting, the parents felt more comfortable. The student’s presence helped the parents bridge the cultural gap, allowing for a more comfortable parent–teacher meeting (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

iii. Teacher education programs to facilitate a leveling culture.

To help facilitate creation of a leveling culture, teacher education programs must provide training for teachers in creating such a culture while also educating them in working effectively with a diverse group of parents. In her article *Teaching and Practice*, Cynthia Ballenger (1992) describes the ways in which teacher education programs typically teach within the dominant cultural perspective. For example, in one teacher education program, Haitian preschool teachers “felt that the way in which they were

being instructed as teachers to deal with the children's behavior was not effective" (Ballenger, p. 201). Ballenger explains that the methodology of teacher education programs utilizes a North American teacher culture, which she describes as "mainstream culture" (Ballenger, p. 203). As mentioned earlier, discipline approaches between Haitian culture and North American culture often differ. Ballenger explains that the teacher education program presented a classroom management program that appeared universal but was actually steeped in cultural bias. Teacher education programs need to acknowledge this bias and expand their methodology to promote a leveling culture in schools.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) and Sarason (1996) suggest that teacher education programs neglect to train teachers in how to work with parents. Education programs ignore the significant role of the family in a child's success in school, leaving teachers unprepared to build parent-teacher relationships and without specific strategies for doing so (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). If schools of education help teachers understand race, class, and cultural differences, then perhaps children will move more easily between their two worlds. It is the role of the teacher education program to instruct students to incorporate the family environment into the school by breaking down the barriers between home and school.

2. Changing the cultural perspective.

What if schools created a different cultural perspective—one that challenges the power of the dominant culture by allowing all cultures access and creating an avenue to share power? Delpit (1996) warns that changing the culture of power can be difficult, as those in power are less likely to recognize the power differential or want the change. But

Mead (1963) offers some insight through her studies of different tribes. Mead discusses the potential of education to be an agent of social change that challenges the status quo. She observes how tribes maintained an interest in learning about different cultures without losing attachment to their own culture. Individuals develop this interest on their own rather than having it imposed on them by the dominant group. Their interest in learning about other cultures may be a protective mechanism in case they need to defend themselves, engage in trade with other groups, or marry outside their own group. Individuals who marry outside their own culture maintain their language while also learning the culture of their spouse. Mead noticed that in this society, learning about other cultures was seen as an asset. Mead explains that she is mystified by the idea that in the United States, one group's ideas and values became dominant over others.

The 2002 abolition of the Bilingual Education Act, Title VII, may have pushed the United States away from the goal of creating a more inclusive society. The 1994 version of the Bilingual Education Act included developing both English and native language skills as its goals (Crawford, 2002). With this act no longer in force, the goal for students is simply to promote English language acquisition, negating the value of their native language.

Although cultural shifts and acceptance can arise from the teaching of native languages, hooks (2006) provides an avenue for shifting the perspective of poor students. hooks explains that the way in which mainstream United States culture views poor people negates and often ignores the knowledge they bring to others about learning to live with less resources. Hooks further notes that school personal reinforce this negative view. For example, hooks suggests that after a vacation, instead of the traditional question, "What

did you do on vacation?” a teacher might ask, “What was it like for you during vacation?” This allows students to discuss how they cope with having nothing to do over vacation. hooks suggests that much can be learned from the poor who have learned to live simply – a notion that has attained wider acceptance in the environmental movement.

3.4 Summary of School Culture

School culture holds the power to create an environment that either propels students forward in their learning or inhibits and discourages them. To counter the effects on students of the dominant cultural ideology, which infiltrates schools, school culture must be understood at its deepest level—what Schein (2004) described as the third level of culture. Revising curriculum and other reform efforts may be futile if the culture is not one that supports all students in learning (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Sarason, 1996).

Children spend many years within the institution of school, giving school personnel a long-term opportunity to expose children to an environment that counters the hierarchical structure of the larger dominant culture and, instead, creates a leveling culture in which all students have the chance to succeed. Although this has been a stated goal of schools for many years, it may not come to fruition until the school culture actually becomes a leveling culture, until the school culture allows for all students to succeed in a task-oriented environment, and until teachers received the training and support they need to inspire all children to become successful learners.

3.5 No Teacher Left Alone: A teacher culture that promotes student learning

Multiple teacher cultures exist within schools each of which may either enhance or inhibit student learning. Understanding these different teacher cultures, their impact on student learning, the barriers to creating teacher cultures that maximize learning, and the

role the principal plays in supporting and nourishing effective teacher cultures may illuminate the discourse on best practices to increase student learning.

When no teachers are left alone—that is, left in isolation without a professional learning community—additional avenues may open that enhance student achievement in ways not otherwise realized through traditional reforms. Opportunities may be lost when reform efforts ignore the important role of the teacher in sustained school improvement and, instead, focus solely on testing students and rotating curriculum as an avenue to increase student achievement. “Teachers represent the heartbeat of a school, and the changes essential to school improvement must be manifested by individual teachers at the classroom level (Dufour & Eaker, 1998, p.233). Teachers hold tremendous power to influence student learning when they are given an environment and culture that supports, encourages, and provides opportunities for growth (Rosenholtz, 1990).

Sarason (1990) notes that universities are designed as learning institutions for the faculty to increase their knowledge. The university philosophy suggests that if faculty members learn, students will benefit. In contrast, according to Sarason (1990) public schools appear to be designed for student learning without regard for the faculty. If schools are institutions of education, should teachers be excluded from this educational process—and, if so, then how can they grow professionally? Public schools can become places in which both students and teachers learn in community together—to create a “shared soil” (Heller, 1997, p.161) in which the growth of the teacher parallels the growth of the student. “The effective school must become an educative setting for its teachers if it aspires to become an educational environment for its students” (Shulman, 2004, p.334).

a. What is teacher culture?

As with school culture, teacher culture is an integral part of the success or failure of a school. Hargreaves (1994) writes extensively on this topic and offers an explanation of the meaning of the term “teacher culture.” He explains that what happens inside the classroom relates to what happens between teachers outside the classroom. Although each teacher’s classroom can seem to be a separate, isolated learning institution of its own, in fact the teacher culture pervades all classrooms and all learning. Hargreaves notes that in order to understand why teachers teach and act as they do, one needs to understand their work culture. He suggests that teacher culture has come to be defined as individualistic, isolated, and private. Nevertheless, he notes that other forms of teacher culture exist. He sees teacher culture as having both content and form. Content refers to “beliefs, values, habits and assumed ways of doing things” (p. 165) that are shared among a group of teachers; it is “what teachers think, say and do” (p. 166). Form relates to the characteristic patterns of interactions between teachers—the ways in which teachers describe their relationships with one another.

Individual teachers may possess the skills necessary to help children find success. However, when individual faculty members operate entirely on their own, learning opportunities for students may be lost as teachers fail to challenge, to learn, and to encourage one another (Rosenholtz, 1990). As Darling-Hammond (1997) puts it, “When all is said and done, what matters most for students’ learning are the commitments and capacities of their teachers” (p. 293). Teachers may work within a culture that supports them and encourages student learning, or they may work in a teacher culture that prevents growth of the teacher, the student, and the school.

b. Teacher cultures that limit student growth.

Of the many types of teacher cultures that limit student growth, I have focused on five that seem most prominent in the literature. The characteristics of these five teacher cultures reveal the connections between teacher culture and student achievement, and points to the importance of educational leaders supporting teacher cultures that promote student learning.

One of the most widely described teacher cultures is the *culture of isolation*. Lortie (1975/2002) originally defined this culture as the “single cell structure” (p. 15) or the “egg-crate school” (p. 14). He suggests that the “single cell structure” (p. 15) creates a system that resists change because of teachers’ isolation and lack of interdependence. In this teacher culture, teachers remain confined to their own classrooms without any opportunity to connect with other teachers.

Although Lortie (1975/2002) first described the isolated or individualistic teacher culture more than forty years ago, this culture continues to dominate in many school systems, diminishing both teachers’ and students’ avenues for growth (Moore Johnson et al., 2004; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Because the culture of isolation reduces teachers’ chances to get feedback, to learn more effective ways of teaching, and to try new strategies of teaching, it decreases opportunities for student achievement (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). The private nature of the isolated culture ensures that teachers’ decisions and behaviors are solely measured by the students (Nias, 1985) When teachers work in isolation, they plan alone, with little guidance or supervision, and other teachers show little interest in their teaching. Schools with this type of isolated teacher culture are less successful in educating students than they might be with a different teacher culture (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979).

The isolated culture can drive away new teachers who feel unsupported and overwhelmed because they do not have contact with veteran teachers who might mentor their learning (Moore Johnson et al., 2004). Moore Johnson et al. (2004) refer to this culture as the “veteran-oriented professional culture.” They describe the veteran culture as a place “where the workplace norms were set by veteran teachers who protected individual autonomy at the expense of professional interaction” (p. 141). These cultures, oriented to the needs of veteran teachers, create a challenging environment for novice teachers. In this culture, teachers tend to work alone. Moore-Johnston et al. explains: “The egg-crate model of schools, which today’s cohort of veteran teachers inherited from their predecessors, is public education’s time-worn version of the modern office cubicle” (p. 143). A strong desire for independence and privacy by veteran teachers dominate this isolated culture, leaving novice teachers on their own. In Moore Johnson et al.’s (2004) study of 50 teachers, 21 were in such “veteran” cultures. In addition, these authors note that although some programs espoused collaboration in theory, in reality the culture remained isolated. Specifically, they mention mentoring programs to support novice teachers were seldom helpful because novice teachers were often paired with mentor teachers who lacked expertise in the area needed by the novice teacher. As an example, Moore Johnson et al. note that one elementary teacher was paired with a special education teacher who lacked knowledge of the math curriculum—the area most needed by the novice teacher.

Moore Johnson et al. (2004) note that variations exist within the veteran culture. In some schools, new teachers are welcomed but then are not included or supported; other schools are simply dominated by veteran teachers, who may even hoard supplies,

leaving new teachers without books and other necessary materials. Both of these cultures leave novice teachers feeling unsupported in their work. Lortie (1975/2002) and Moore Johnson et al. (2004) note the high turnover rate for new teachers in the veteran or isolated teacher culture.

An isolated veteran-oriented teacher culture prevents sustained growth of teachers, students, and the school. The constant turnover rate of new teachers in this culture, noted by both Lortie (1975/2002) and Moore Johnston et al. (2004), interferes with the development of interdependence and collaboration. DuFour (2003) notes the irony of teachers working in isolation in the current age of reliance on student testing. Without the opportunity to compare student results across different classrooms, teachers are unable to see both strengths and weaknesses of their own teaching.

A second kind of teacher culture that researchers theorize inhibits or stagnates student growth can be called the *teacher powerless culture*. In this culture, teachers lack autonomy. Hargreaves (1994) refers to this culture as the “powerless culture”; Rosenholtz (1991) calls it the “stuck culture.” In this culture, teachers are given mandated curricula, they teach the same material every year, and they perform their jobs according to rules and regulations handed down by superiors. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) suggest that in this culture teacher isolation is high and student achievement is low. They note that when teachers repeat the same material from year to year without much investment in what they are teaching, no teacher growth takes place. They explain that teaching the same thing over and over for 20 years can be the equivalent of teaching one year, in terms of the teacher’s development. When teachers feel powerless and lack autonomy, it is hard to invest in their work. In this culture, teachers are passive, and so are their students. Barth

(1990) suggests that teachers in this stuck, or powerless, culture lack opportunities to examine their own teaching, to reflect on their work, and to grow as teachers. Rosenholtz (1991) notes that this kind of culture limits student achievement. When teachers are unable to grow, students are also stuck. Rosenholtz explains that this culture does not mean teachers are unkind to each other, only that they are not growing as teachers.

A third teacher culture, that Moore Johnson et al. (2004) calls the *novice-oriented professional culture*, is common in charter schools, reconstructed schools, and low-performing schools. In this culture, “The values and work modes were determined by a predominantly novice faculty” (p. 141). This teacher culture tends to attract young, new teachers and has a high turnover rate. The young teachers tend to work long hours, get exhausted, and then leave. These teachers miss the expertise they would gain from working with veteran teachers. There are few mentors and little guidance on school policies or strategies for interacting with the community. In this culture, the teachers tend to interact with one another both socially and professionally, and their teaching is characterized by innovation and creativity. But without the input of veteran teachers, Moore Johnson et al. argue, this culture lacks effective policies, procedures, and expertise. As a result, student achievement suffers.

A fourth culture, which Hargreaves (1994) labels a “*balkanized*” culture, superficially resembles a collaborative culture but, in fact, ends up dividing teachers rather than bringing them together. In a balkanized culture, teachers work in subgroups—either departmental groups, which are often found in high schools, special education groups, or teams of teachers at the elementary or middle school level. Each group operates within its own cell-like structure. Groups tend to stay together year after year

and to resist letting new members join, and there is little movement between groups. Often, certain groups have more power than others. Because teachers in a balkanized culture work within their subgroups, independent of the rest of the school, the teaching community lacks a common vision and common goals. Hargreaves suggests that a balkanized culture is not designed to meet the varying needs of students and does not allow for the professional growth needed for staff to serve all students well.

The fifth teacher culture could be viewed as a *pseudo-collaborative culture*—one that mimics a collaborative culture and, in fact, may contain many features of one, but lacks certain important characteristics of a true collaborative culture. Hargreaves (1994) refers to this as a culture of “contrived collegiality.” Williams, Prestage, and Bedward (2001), in their study of teacher culture and newly qualified teachers, use the term “structural collaboration” (p.260) rather than “contrived.” They suggest that although these teacher cultures “fall short of fully fledged collaboration” (p. 260), they do provide some support to new teachers. The distinguishing feature of these cultures is that the collaboration is regulated by administration. Certain curriculum is required, teachers have structured meeting times, and outcomes of teacher meetings are predictable (Hargreaves, 1994). With structures in place for collaborating, this culture may imitate collaboration, but teachers lack the autonomy needed for true collaboration. Instead, in this contrived collegial teacher culture, teacher disempowerment prevails, which, Hargreaves (1994) argues, interferes with teachers’ sense of professionalism. In some instances, this contrived, structured pseudoculture can be helpful, but Williams, Prestage, and Bedward’s (2001) research suggests that it is not the best culture for newly qualified teachers.

The most common teacher cultures—those based in isolation, powerlessness, and novice-oriented subcultures, as well as pseudocollaborative cultures, restrain teacher growth and development, thereby preventing students from gaining the most from their educational experience (Hargreaves, 1994). Although each of the cultures described here may seem unique, in practice, teacher cultures may blend elements of the five types presented here, and in addition to these five cultures, many others also exist in schools. The teacher culture has the power to become an encouraging and stimulating avenue for student learning. It appears logical that school leaders foster a teacher culture that maximizes student achievement rather than inhibiting student growth.

c. Teacher cultures that enhance student growth.

Research suggests that a true collaborative/collegial teacher culture, one that supports a professional learning environment in which teachers and students learn together, increases student achievement, thereby creating successful schools (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Lipsitz, 1984; Wehlage, 1986).

Because the term *collaborative teacher culture* is easy to misinterpret, I will use the term *comprehensive collaborative teacher culture* to distinguish the type of collaborative culture I describe from other teacher cultures that may also be defined as “collaborative,” but lack the characteristics I will specify here. Williams et al. (2001) call this kind of culture a “spontaneous culture,” and Moore Johnson et al. (2004) use the phrase “integrated professional culture” (p. 142).

In a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture, the norm is that teachers work together and that teacher growth is valued (Little, 1990a; Moore Johnson, et al., 2004). Teachers feel empowered and share common visions and goals (DuFour, 2003; Shulman,

2004). Teachers agree that when they work together, learning opportunities for students are increased (Moore Johnson, et al., 2004), and that this culture promotes trust and openness among colleagues (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Moore Johnson et al. (2004) describe this as a culture “where there was [is] ongoing professional exchange among all teachers across experience levels” (p. 142).

This culture retains new teachers, offering them an environment that both supports and includes them (Moore Johnson, et al., 2004; Williams, et al., 2001). In this environment, new teachers are given “novice status” (Moore Johnson et al., 2004, p. 161), which provides them with “sheltered opportunities to develop teaching skills” (p. 161). As an example, Moore Johnson et al. describe a new teacher who feels nervous or inexperienced in making a phone call to a difficult parent. A counselor or other teacher might help by offering suggestions and sitting with the teacher during the call. New teachers are “not left alone to sink; instead, they are kept afloat by a culture of support—to the benefit of their students” (p. 161). In this culture, there is an ongoing interchange and mutual appreciation between veteran teachers and new teachers. Young teachers typically have knowledge about technology, a creative sense, and abundant energy. Veteran teachers have wisdom, experience, and expertise (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

In a school with a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture, one might see team teaching, collaborative planning, peer coaching, mentor relationships, professional dialogue, and collaborative action research, as well as informal teacher conversation outside the classroom (Hargreaves, 1994). These characteristics may be seen in other teacher cultures as well. The difference lies in the way in which collaboration is defined and implemented within the school. DuFour (2003) defines collaboration as “The

systematic process in which we work together to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective result” (p. 63).

In a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture, collaboration is embedded within the school. It is systematic and purposeful. There are structures in place that promote collaboration rather than relying on chance. Teams of teachers are organized to work on addressing specific questions about student achievement. Many of these characteristics are evidenced in today’s middle schools that prioritize this kind of teaching environment by creating the very structures that allow teachers the time and space to work collaboratively (Wiles, Bondi, & Tillier Wiles, 2006).

In addition, DuFour (2003) suggests that collaboration must be used to stimulate teachers to improve their practice. In a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture, teams of teachers work on getting results and looking for evidence of student achievement. In this way, teachers in this culture take responsibility for all students, not just those in a teacher’s own classroom (Moore Johnson, et al., 2004). This curtails feelings of isolation or failure for teachers who have difficult students in their classes. The whole teacher community supports these teachers by collaboratively generating ways to deal with difficult issues. P. Jablon provides an example of teacher responsibility for all students from a school nationally recognized for both collaboration and success: “We veteran teachers would look at the programs of the new teachers, and if they had more than one difficult student in their class we would transfer them into ours and give them more reasonable students while supplying them all term long with strategies for the one or two difficult students we left in their classes” (personal communication, September 28, 2008).

Hargreaves (1994) suggests five characteristics teacher relationships that define a collaborative culture. He explains that the teacher relationship should be spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space, and unpredictable. *Spontaneous* teacher relationships are those that arise from social groups. These relationships are not dictated by administration but develop organically. Although the administration may support the teacher relationship by creating opportunities for teachers to interact, administration should not direct the relationship.

Further, in a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture, collaboration is *voluntary*. Teachers work together because they want to. In contrast, many schools have changed their monthly faculty meeting to a team meeting format. This works for teachers who want this time for team meetings, but for those who are not interested in teaming, it becomes a mandate, which runs counter to the creation of a comprehensive collaborative culture in which initiatives come mainly from teachers, not administration.

Development-oriented teachers work together to develop mandated curricula that they support along with their own initiatives. Teachers establish their own methods of working together rather than have this dictated from a higher authority. Development-oriented teachers are invested in implementing change.

“Pervasive across time and space” suggests a desire by teachers to get together. Collaboration occurs as an ongoing part of their day. It is ubiquitous and is easily witnessed in teachers’ day-to-day interactions (Nias, Southworth, & Yeomans, 1989). The outcome is unpredictable in a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture. Teacher autonomy to design, create, explore, and investigate means that the destination may be unclear.

In summary, in a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture, teachers have autonomy, they share ideas and resources, they take responsibility for all students, and they trust and desire to work with each other. They base their pedagogy on common goals and visions, and they are viewed and treated as professionals by administration.

1. Advantages of a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture.

A comprehensive collaborative teacher culture provides more learning opportunities for both students and teachers than is the case in other teacher cultures. First, this culture empowers teachers. “Empowerment” is a much used term in educational research. Here I use it specifically not just to imply shared leadership. As I use it empowerment gives teachers the flexibility to develop the knowledge they need for teaching. It allows teachers to utilize their passion and motivation and gains them status as professionals (Shulman, 2004). Student achievement improves as a result of teachers’ increased sense of empowerment in this culture (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

Second, teachers are held to a higher standard. Unlike isolated cultures, where teachers are accountable only to their own students, in a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture, colleagues are aware of and responsible for what everyone is teaching and learning (Little, 1990a). Peer pressure forces teachers to discuss and deal with students who are not performing (Wehlage, Newmann, & Secada, 1996). It is a culture that demands hard work (Lipsitz, 1984).

Third, a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture tends to directly affect student learning (Shulman, 2004). According to Shulman, recent research suggests that both teachers and students learn more when they work in collaborative environments. Shulman explains that higher-level learning requires reflection and collaboration.

Working collaboratively improves the quality of teachers' teaching, which in turn improves the quality of students' learning (Hargreaves, 1994). Teaching quality increases because teachers are willing to take risks and because they obtain additional strategies from peers. They have an increased sense of efficacy and self-confidence, which can have a positive impact on student learning (Hargreaves, 1994). Although the benefits of collaboration are well known in other professions, Shulman (2004) suggests that many educational institutions have been slow to adopt this focus. However, George (2000) notes that his longitudinal research of middle schools in Florida indicates that "teaming" (p.40) has been an essential part of the middle school movement and continues to remain a strong focus.

Fourth, in a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture, teachers share the successes and failures of all students. As a result, teachers tend to develop a collective efficacy that, as a staff, allows them to conjointly affect student learning (Tschannen-Morgan, 2004). Students clearly benefit when multiple teachers track their progress.

Fifth, when teachers act collaboratively, they are more likely to influence student collaborative learning. As explained by (Rutter, et al., 1979):

Pupils are likely to be influenced—either for good or ill—by the models of behaviour provided by teachers both in the classroom and elsewhere. These will not be restricted to the ways in which teachers treat the children, but may also include the ways staff interact with one another, and how they view the school (p. 189).

We see an example of this in the ways young children imitate adults. When teachers work in collaboration, they will likely find that they have more success in promoting student collaboration.

Finally, a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture is the main ingredient for establishing a professional learning community, one that provides an environment in which teachers and students learn together. This kind of environment suggests that as professionals, teachers—like students—need to grow, change, and develop as learners. Their growth is stronger and more pronounced when done in community (Barth, 1990; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). When teachers are given more opportunities to learn, then students will also have more opportunities (Rosenholtz, 1990). As students see teachers learning, they will do the same (Barth, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1994). In addition, in a professional learning community, all the adults are responsible for everyone's learning (Krovetz & Arriaza, 2006).

When adults and students are learning together in community, this becomes the norm of the school. It becomes embedded in the culture. It becomes their “shared soil.” It was this common interest and way of learning in community that Heller (1997) noted in her research on a women's writing group in the Tenderloin district in San Francisco. The presence of community among the women writers allowed them to expand their talents, to take risks, to experiment, and to grow as writers. It was connection to this community of learners that enabled each woman to propel herself forward in her writing. This same kind of intimacy and community can be created in schools when a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture exists within a professional learning community.

In their research, Wehlage et al. (1996) found that teachers working in professional learning communities felt enthusiastic about teaching, found satisfaction in their work, and believed they made a difference. In addition, these authors noted that teaching improved in the professional learning environment. Schools that were successful in creating a professional learning community had certain characteristics in common. They contained teachers who were committed to inquiry and innovation, they had supportive leadership, and they tended to be smaller schools with relatively simple structures. Lewis (2002) noted that research in the Chicago schools showed that students in schools with strong professional learning communities outperformed students in schools with weaker professional learning communities by a factor of four to one. Strong professional learning communities were defined by shared norms, frequent teacher collaboration, and reflective dialogue.

The work of Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Peter Senge (1990) on learning organizations informs the current work on professional learning communities that is being done in schools. Senge describes learning organizations as “organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspirations are set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 3). Senge promotes learning organizations as the avenue to propel business forward explaining that today’s marketplace demands that organizations utilize people’s interest in learning at all levels, rather than relying on those at the top to do all the strategic thinking. He emphasizes the importance of teamwork for producing “extraordinary results” (p. 4).

d. Barriers to Collaborative Teacher Culture.

Given the robust research evidence that collaborative cultures enhance student learning, it may seem surprising that these cultures do not prevail in schools. The historical barrier is the persistence of school structures that perpetuate an isolated teacher culture. The political barrier relates to mandated reform efforts. Finally, the personal barriers include issues of trust, teachers' career cycles, and beliefs about what true collaboration looks like. Understanding and analyzing these barriers makes it possible to identify strategies that allow comprehensive collaborative teacher cultures to thrive in more schools.

1. Historical level: School structure.

For decades, researchers have documented the persistence of longstanding school structures, keeping teachers in isolation and creating organizations unable to invest in a new paradigm that would encourage teacher collaboration (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994; Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975/2002; Sizer, 1996). Some of these structures include a tradition of isolation and individualism, the demands of the job, teachers' comfort level with working autonomously, and ties to traditional forms of professional development. Hargreaves (1994) explains the barriers posed by these structural forces: "The possibilities for establishing more vibrant and vigorous teacher cultures are seriously limited by the existing structures in which many teachers work" (p. 260).

As noted earlier, Lortie (1975/2002) described the structural limitations of schools as a secure cell structure emphasizing the structure's tenacity in keeping teachers from interacting and developing interdependence, which, in turn, is a key ingredient of collaborative culture. Lortie observes: "The school is not organized to promote inquiry or to build the intellectual capital of the occupation" (p. 56). The structure, as Lortie

explains, supports individualism. Little (1990) reiterates this point, noting how individualism predominates: “School teaching has endured largely as an assemblage of entrepreneurial individuals whose autonomy is grounded in norms of privacy and noninterference and is sustained by the very organization of teaching work” (p. 530). In comparing teaching to other occupations that promote interdependence, Lortie (1975/2002) notes: “Teachers do not undertake the collegial effort which has played so crucial a role in other occupations” (p. 212). The school structure and the history that maintains it keeps teachers working within an isolated teacher culture (Little, 1990). Teacher availability inhibits teacher collaboration. For example, traditional teacher schedules interfere with joint planning time, because when one teacher has a free period, another does not. The difficulty of finding common meeting time means that there is little opportunity during the day for teachers to work with one another.

The time demands of the job present another obstacle to collaboration (Hargreaves, 1994; Shulman, 2004). Collaboration demands time and availability, both of which are in short supply in most teaching environments. That is why structural attempts to change teacher isolation by physically removing classroom walls or connecting classrooms miss the point (Hargreaves, 1994). Gitlin & Margonis (1995), in their research on reform efforts, observed that teachers reported lack of time as one of the most significant limiting factors in initiating any reform efforts. These authors noted that even when there was high interest in reform efforts, time constraints prevented implementation. Shulman (2004), like Cole and Schelety (1993), promotes school restructuring to prioritize the need for teachers to have more time to work together, sharing ideas and learning from each other.

Teachers' interest in remaining autonomous is another factor that maintains an isolated teacher culture. Even when administrators make efforts to encourage a collaborative culture, teachers often choose to work individually to retain their autonomy. Some teachers are more comfortable working alone because they can avoid being vulnerable to criticism from their peers (Hargreaves, 1994; Tschannen-Morgan, 2004). Individual autonomy, a mainstay of the teaching profession, is often viewed as a loss when administration tries to impose collaboration (Tschannen-Morgan, 2004). The structures in place in schools tend to remain the same over time as a result of tradition, the demands of the job, teachers' comfort level, and a desire to maintain the traditionally autonomous style.

Lipsitz (1984) describes a successful, highly decentralized middle school that, according to the statistics, should be struggling. One thousand students and teachers were assigned to the school by court order. The student population was racially diverse but with a high number of students in special education. Within the district, this school had the second highest number of students receiving free lunch, and 20 percent of the parents had no schooling beyond the eighth grade. Yet students in this school outperformed those in all the other schools in the district on standardized tests.

Lipsitz (1984) attributes the school's success to radical changes that were made in school structure. Teachers and students were organized into teams, creating seven semiautonomous schools within the larger school. The teams were multiage and used an interdisciplinary approach. Individual teams had distinct personalities and varied teaching approaches. An important factor was the autonomy of each team to make decisions about curriculum, student grouping, and allocation of time. For example, each team developed

its own schedule, with an administrator only assigning lunch and art time. With this flexibility, teachers were able to craft schedules that allowed for more teacher collaboration than a traditional middle school schedule permits.

In another example, Aness (2001) describes International High School in New York City, which successfully altered its school culture to one of collaboration by radically changing the school structure. Starting with a small mini-school of three teachers and two administrators, the team developed a collaborative teaching environment that proved highly successful with a student population that included many new English language learners who were considered at-risk. With complete autonomy around schedule, curriculum, and assessment, the five-member team created an interdisciplinary theme-based cluster. Within eight years, the success of the mini-school spread, and the staff embraced this restructuring for the whole school. In this school, individual autonomy was traded for group autonomy, as the team gained control of the inner workings of the school.

In both of these examples, schools made radical changes in traditional structures, enabling each school to provide a more collaborative learning environment.

The traditional presentation of professional development is another structural obstacle to the development of a collaborative teacher culture (Sergiovanni, 1994). Typically, administrators design professional development by contracting with experts to teach the latest curriculum or teaching strategy. In doing so, they miss the opportunity to allow teachers to learn from each other. Bringing in experts to train the staff undermines the sense that teaching staffs are knowledgeable enough to learn on their own. As a result, staff members lose confidence in their own abilities. In addition, professional

development typically operates from a deficiency model (Barth, 1990). Teachers attend inservice programs on topics in which they are deemed to be weak or ones they don't know, rather than also building on strengths. Typically, the new math program or spelling program becomes the professional development training, with the representative from the curriculum company delivering the training. In addition, Barth (2004) notes that teacher inservice training is typically presented using a single approach, despite the fact that adults—just like students—learn in a variety of ways.

Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) use the term “deadwood” (p.63) to describe teachers who no longer provide students with the needed stimulus to help them grow. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) make the connection that deadwood is the result of infertile soil, which they contend develops when there is a lack of nourishment. In schools, this lack of nourishment results when professional development consists of supporting the deficit teacher model rather than building and teachers' interests and expertise. In addition, this model supports the isolated teacher culture in which teachers participate in inservice programs based on administrators' beliefs about what teachers need, instead of teachers collaborating and uncovering their own areas of need (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

Professional development has more sustaining power to nourish teachers and promote a collaborative teacher culture when it is seen as ongoing and when teachers are given the opportunity to learn from each other. As Ayers (2001) explains, “The best staff development ... is not another workshop with an educational guru, but is visiting the classrooms of other teachers you admire, or carving-out time and space to reflect seriously on core principles and practices” (p. 128).

Sarason (1990) pushes the notion of professional development to a new level, advocating for teacher sabbaticals similar to those granted to university and private school faculty. Sabbaticals, Sarason argues, allow faculty to recharge and generate new ideas; they provide an opportunity for intellectual growth, both individually and collectively, as teachers bring back knowledge to their colleagues. He suggests that public schools, too, need this structure in order to prevent stagnation of teachers. Regenerating and allowing for teacher growth is crucial to maintaining teachers in the profession and keeping ideas alive for students.

2. Political level: School reform.

Reform efforts fail schools in many ways. One significant failure is that reform efforts often leave the teachers behind in their existing culture of isolation. School reform typically focuses on student achievement, suggesting that a longer school day, mandated testing, new curricula, and specific teaching strategies will be effective in increasing student achievement (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Schlechty, 1990). Yet lengthening the school day or mandating curriculum ignores a powerful component of a child's education—the teacher. Teachers' voices and policies that support teacher learning and development are notably absent from many reform efforts (Shulman, 2004). Darling-Hammond (1988) notes that reform efforts that come from politicians who lack practitioners' knowledge tend to create rigid, uniform policies that run counter to the needs of teaching. Teaching, she suggests, requires flexibility, using multiple strategies that can be adapted to various situations.

Reforms, while constantly changing in title and form, have been consistently ineffective (R. DuFour & Eaker, 1998). To promote student achievement, reform efforts

need to address what is going on within schools (Schlechty, 1990) that relates to teacher culture, teacher motivation, and teacher growth. Reform efforts should encourage the development of collaborative cultures and professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). For too long, reforms have concentrated on increasing teacher skill and knowledge while neglecting to work on teacher collaboration (Wehlage, et al., 1996).

Reform efforts need to come from teachers, not from administration or politicians (Darling-Hammond, 1988; Sizer, 1996). Teachers, on the front lines of education, understand the requirements of their students and their school. Tailoring reform efforts allows the individuality of each school to be addressed (Ayers, 2001). Darling-Hammond (1988), emphasizing the importance of teacher involvement in reform efforts, makes an analogy to developments in medicine: “If the medical practice, for example, were regulated by nonprofessionals through policy mandate, we might still be treating fevers by applying leeches” (p. 62). When teachers initiate reform, they will gain a voice, validating their ideas and allowing change to occur from within. Ashton and Webb (1986) describe “ecological reform” (p. 161) as a way to “democratize the workplace.” (p161). They suggest that this approach will allow teachers to participate in solving problems endemic to schools, empowering them and increasing teacher efficacy. For example, mandated curriculum constrains teachers, limiting their desire and passion for teaching while removing avenues for creativity and growth. The mandated curriculum effectively decreases teacher autonomy and sends the message that teachers lack sufficient professional expertise to find and craft curriculum. Ashton and Webb (1986) note that in this environment teachers are effectively restricted in their intellectual

growth. These authors advocate allowing teacher autonomy in curriculum selection to promote and encourage growth.

Reform efforts that consider teacher efficacy may have a greater influence on student learning than efforts that concern themselves only with students. Teacher efficacy—teachers’ sense that they are making a difference—relates to teacher motivation, which influences the ways in which teachers deliver instruction and, therefore, directly relates to student achievement (Rosenholtz, 1990; Tschannen-Morgan, 2004). An unmotivated teacher may not provide a very stimulating lesson, thereby missing an opportunity to engage a student in learning. Ashton and Webb (1996) describe a “crisis in teacher motivation” (p. 1). They note that teachers showed higher teacher efficacy in schools that utilized team teaching and joint decision-making. Teachers with a higher sense of efficacy are more enthusiastic and organized about their teaching and apply more effort (Ashton & Webb, 1986). They have patience with their students and tend to persist when students struggle (Tschannen-Morgan, 2004). When teachers maintain a high sense of efficacy, student achievement increases (Ashton & Webb, 1986).

In isolated teacher cultures, where teachers lack opportunities for intellectual growth, teacher efficacy remains low. In these situations, motivation and student achievement diminish (Rosenholtz, 1990). Without such opportunities for growth, Rosenholtz (1989) argues, teachers protect their own self-esteem by blaming others—the principal, the parents, and even the students—for problems rather than examining their own teaching. Teachers with low efficacy spend more time talking about job

dissatisfaction than about issues relating to student learning. Isolated cultures may perpetuate a negative teacher culture as a result of the teachers' low sense of efficacy.

Reform efforts that consider teachers' intellectual growth and development, teacher motivation, and teacher efficacy may prove more effective than efforts that simply promote new curricula, lengthen the school day, or increase student testing (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Rosenholtz, 1990). Teachers know a lot about what their students need. Encouraging teachers to grow with their students seems more logical than forcing them to implement techniques and curricula that run counter to the needs of both teachers and students. Teachers are not motivated by a longer school day or mandated curriculum. Reform efforts that promote environments in which teachers can utilize their expertise may help maintain a high sense of efficacy, thereby increasing student achievement.

3. Personal level: Trust, teacher's career cycle, beliefs about collaborative culture.

i. Trust.

Teachers' trust in one another and in the administration and the administration's trust in the teachers lies at the heart of developing a comprehensive collaborative culture. The absence of such trust creates a barrier to establishing this culture. Hargreaves (1994) explains: "The establishment of trust, it is argued, is essential to the creation of effective and meaningful collaborative work relationships" (p. 251).

Trust affects the school's climate and effectiveness. Schools with high levels of trust tend toward high morale, while schools with low levels of trust maintain low morale (Tschannen-Morgan, 2004). High morale, in turn, is associated with higher levels of achievement for students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Trust develops when teachers

maintain common understandings, a common vision, and a sense of competence and commitment from their colleagues (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Little, 1990).

Obstacles to establishing trust exist both within schools and within the broader cultural context. The historical structure of schools may contribute to barriers in establishing trusting relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Teachers who are comfortable with the isolated teacher culture have little exposure to creating trust with their colleagues. Further, “bumping” privileges, common in many public schools, move teachers from school to school, making it difficult to establish a consistent staff who work to develop a common vision—a steppingstone to creating trust. A third factor is the lack of interdependence inherent in the isolated teacher culture, which affects teachers’ longevity in the profession (Lortie, 1975/2002). Constant staff changes, like bumping privileges, pose challenges to creating a sense of trust. Finally, teachers’ lack of trust in administration to alter its traditional approach to authority may prevent teachers from embracing reform efforts that encourage collaboration (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995).

Barriers to establishing trust may also exist outside the school. Meier (2002) suggests that the cultural distrust of schools in general goes beyond any one teacher or single school. She notes that the increasing use of standardized testing in the United States has fostered distrust in students’ ability to learn, in teachers, in principals, in school boards, and more broadly in public education. As Meier notes, “Standardization and bureaucratization fuel the very distrust they are aimed to cure” (p. 2). To establish trust within schools despite barriers created both internally and externally is no easy task.

Tschannen-Morgan (2004) suggests that promoting a caring atmosphere creates a context for building trust. For example, when teachers organize to bring meals to

someone who is sick, or cover for a teacher who needs to leave early, the sense of caring helps to build trust. But Meier (2002) argues that caring does not always translate having a trusting professional relationship. As an example, she explains that the classic ropes course challenge and staff retreats designed to build trust, although they may increase friendships, do not necessarily build the kind of trust between staff members that is needed to propel schools forward. She suggests that the trust required in schools includes accepting and providing critical feedback, sharing teaching concerns, and acknowledging the work of one's colleagues, which is very different from the kind of trust needed to accomplish a ropes course, deliver food, or become friends. Meier notes that she has known teachers who "trusted each other literally with their lives but who didn't (and wouldn't) give each other useful feedback on their classrooms" (p. 60).

Meier (2002) emphasizes the difficulty in promoting truly trusting relations as she explains attempts to establish trust among the teachers in the Central Park East School in New York. Meier did not anticipate the difficulty she would encounter in building trust in this situation. The teachers knew one another from other schools, they had chosen to work together, and they believed they shared a common vision for Central Park East. But within a year, Meier notes, teachers doubted one another's intentions, commitment, and ability. In response to these difficulties, more trust-building components were put in place at conception in Meier's second school. They began by creating scheduled faculty time together every week. The staff took a course together at Harvard University, and the school structure enabled all staff to take responsibility for all the students. But despite these structures and despite a shared goal of working collaboratively, teachers still shied away from visiting one another's classrooms. Structure alone proved insufficient in

building the trust necessary to provide honest feedback. The lesson was that collaboration and trust must develop organically over time, rather than relying on imposed structures. As an example, Meier describes how one teacher posted her schedule on a dry-erase tripod in the hallway. This idea soon spread to other teachers. Ultimately, staff meetings became a source of sharing, and eventually teachers did feel enough trust to visit each one another's classrooms. The lessons learned were that trust cannot be assumed, that developing trust takes time, and that trust may develop in unanticipated ways. With greater trust, teachers are able to be more vulnerable; with increased vulnerability, they have the potential to grow and develop their practice, thereby increasing their effectiveness (Tschannen-Morgan, 2004).

Tschannen-Morgan (2004) explains the importance of trust: "An atmosphere of trust holds promise for transforming schools into vibrant learning communities" (p. 108). With higher levels of trust, collaboration increases, teacher efficacy rises, and confidence in problem solving soars. In her research, Tschannen-Morgan (2004) found that higher levels of trust affected classroom practices. She observed teachers using more collaborative learning in the classroom, exhibiting an increased ability to solve conflicts, and engaging in more extensive cross-grade activities. The author suggests that honesty, openness, reliability, and competence are all factors in developing trust. Teachers need to see one another taking responsibility for mistakes and keeping promises. They must share their resources as well as their teaching practice. They want to know they can depend on one another in a reliable way, and they need to be confident that their colleagues are competent.

ii. Teacher career cycle.

Another potential barrier to creating a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture is the typical teacher's career life cycle. Depending on individual teachers' personal development and their place in their career, teachers may be more or less inclined to develop a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture. To work effectively with others, teachers must possess a strong sense of themselves (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992), have the confidence in their teaching that allows them to explore and experiment (Huberman, 1988), and have a desire for change (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). Younger teachers, typically enthusiastic and open to change, may not be comfortable enough in their classrooms or confident enough in themselves to accept and provide critical feedback as is needed in a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture. Many teachers in mid-career achieve confidence in their teaching but, by then, may be more focused on their personal life wishing to develop a balance between work and home. Change for mid-career teachers may require more work than they can afford to maintain the balance between home and work (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Huberman (1988), studying Swiss secondary teachers, suggests a specific period in teachers' career life cycle when they are best able to work in a collaborative manner. He describes this stage, at which teachers are most willing to change, as occurring between the "stabilizing" and the "self-interrogating" phases (p. 130). Stabilizing occurs when teachers feel comfortable with their teaching and committed to the profession of teaching. Self-interrogation happens when teachers question their practice and seek new ideas to keep them invigorated. If teachers are typically open to collaboration and change only during a small window in their careers, then the task of moving a group of teachers who are at various career stages into a comprehensive collaborative culture is daunting. Huberman explains: "People bent

on ‘focusing,’ on cultivating their gardens, are unlikely to support land reforms” (p. 130). Yet, Huberman remains optimistic that his research, while illustrating trends, does not exclude the possibility that individuals might deviate from these patterns. In fact, he notes that when innovation and change are embedded in the culture, it may be helpful to those who are naturally less inclined toward reform.

iii. Beliefs about collaborative teacher culture.

As mentioned earlier, one reason that it may be difficult to create and maintain a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture is that the word *collaboration* is widely used in the teaching profession, with multiple definitions (Hargreaves, 1994). For example, Little (1990) explains that some organizations mistake “closely bound groups” (p. 509) for collaboration. Although these kinds of groups sometimes promote change, they also may preserve the status quo. They do not necessarily function as collaborative cultures. In other organizations, the sharing of materials and collegiality among staff members is considered collaboration. Again, this is a misunderstanding of the meaning of a comprehensive collaborative culture (Rosenholtz, 1991). As still another example, some educators suggest that when teachers feel less isolated, they are experiencing a collaborative culture. But creating a comprehensive collaborative culture means more than just overcoming teacher isolation (Little, 1990). DuFour (2003) notes that although attending social gatherings, working on schedules together, developing procedures as a staff, and working together on school projects are all activities that create a pleasant school environment, more is needed to develop the type of comprehensive collaboration that will transform the culture of a school. DuFour emphasizes that if leaders want to help transform schools, they must not use the term *collaborating* lightly but, instead, should

give it a fuller and deeper meaning. DuFour notes that collaboration does not happen by chance but, rather, occurs “when leaders commit to creating the systems that embed collaboration in the routine practices of the school and when they provide teachers and teams with the information and support essential to improve practice” (p. 64).

e. The Role of the Principal in Promoting a Collaborative Culture with a Professional Learning Environment.

The principal, as the leader of a school, has a powerful influence on teacher culture. In fact, the success of a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture depends on the principal’s leadership style (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Principals can play a positive role by creating structures that facilitate collaborative culture, modeling and orchestrating a collaborative leadership style, and providing the space for teachers to get “messy” with the learning process. For example, one way in which a principal can help encourage a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture is by changing the structure of the school day so that teachers have both time and space to work in collaboration (Wehlage, et al., 1996). Regular, dependable times for teachers to meet can be incorporated into a daily schedule, and space to visit classrooms can enable teachers to learn from one another’s practice (Ayers, 2001).

A principal needs to model leadership that promotes collaboration by doing “less dictating, more orchestrating” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 184). DuFour and Eaker describe an ideal principal as one who leads from the center, not the top. Such a principal is not in a position of control but, rather, in a position that facilitates, models, and encourages learning. This principal is seen as an instructional leader, who encourages leadership among the teachers, allowing for ownership and autonomy. DuFour and Eaker

caution against having a single leadership team in a school; they suggest that shared leadership connotes participation by many people. Having just one leadership team continues the hierarchical structure that inhibits development of a comprehensive collaborative culture. When only certain teachers participate in the leadership team, they are placed above their peers, creating an unequal environment that excludes rather than includes. In a true shared-leadership model, all teachers play leadership roles. Shared leadership encourages teachers' commitment and increases teacher efficacy (Lipsitz, 1984).

Both Noe Middle School and the International High School, described earlier, are examples of schools with shared leadership. In both of these models, shared leadership allows teacher to work together, experiment together, and manage their own teaching practice, creating an environment that promotes student success. For example, at International, teachers worked in teams to do one another's evaluations, rather than the administrators evaluating them (P. Jablon, personal communication, September 28, 2008).

A common mission and vision are key characteristics of a successful comprehensive collaborative teacher culture. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) suggest that the mission and vision must originate from teachers working in conjunction with the principal. The authors take issue with Deal and Peterson's comments on leadership and culture; Fullan and Hargreaves state that Deal and Peterson support a process in which principals can manipulate a mission and vision statement to fit the principal's own approach to pedagogy. This approach, say Fullan and Hargreaves, is not true collaboration; in fact, it perpetuates a hierarchical structure, in which the principal

dictates the vision and dominates the discussion. As Hargreaves (1994) puts it “When the vision is the principal’s, the teachers’ voice gets suppressed” (p. 250). Hargreaves notes that it is the job of the principal to listen to the teachers’ voices and to “create a choir from a cacophony” (p. 251). For a true comprehensive collaborative culture to develop, the vision needs to come from the teachers and the principal working together.

Finally, a principal helps shape or create the avenues to promote a teacher comprehensive collaborative culture. A collaborative culture focuses on learning not just teaching (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). A professional learning environment supports a collaborative culture, enabling teachers to learn. Barth (1990) suggests that principals maintain the title of “head learner” (p. 46) to accentuate the importance of learning in a school. To help facilitate teacher learning, a principal needs to allow teachers to experience the messiness of learning (Barth, 1990). A principal who is committed to teacher learning allows teachers to make mistakes without passing judgment. When everyone in the school is learning, there is a deeper appreciation of the difficulty of learning.

Although principals alone cannot create a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture, they can provide the structures, the directions, and the modeling that promote and allow for the messiness of learning. Tschannen-Morgan (2004) found that principals who actively promoted a collaborative teacher culture maintained teachers who invested more in their teaching and brought more innovation to their work. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) note that if the collaborative teacher culture becomes embedded in school culture as the isolated teacher culture has, then the role of the principal may look different than it does today.

3.6 Role of the Dominant Culture in the Creation of Special Education

In the previous section, I explored the role of teacher culture in student learning. This culture pertains to the inner workings of the school. In this section, I will describe another cultural influence mentioned earlier in this literature review—the culture of dominance and its effect on student learning. Previously, I wrote about the ways in which school culture may transmit the dominant culture. In this section, I explore how cultural dominance directly influences and dictates students’ educational experiences through the creation of special education.

a. How the Culture of Special Education Limits Student Potential.

Special education is a social construct designed to provide an alternative education for those who do not appear to fit in with the general student population (Macedo & Marti, 2010). Special education operates according to what has been described as a *deficit model* (Crawford & Bartolome, 2010; Harry & Klingner, 2006). At the heart of this model is the belief that student failure results from deficiencies within the student, such as cognitive or motivational issues, rather than from systemic factors (Valencia, 1997). From its inception, special education separated students who did not fit a socially constructed norm. These students are labeled in ways that define the child’s deficiency (Crawford & Bartolome, 2010). The separation of special education students created educational barriers that continues today. Ironically, it is unclear whether the social construct of special education helps or hinders the students it is designed to benefit.

The deficit model on which special education programs are based categorizes students as “normal” or “abnormal” labels them according to arbitrary criteria that are socially constructed to advance the dominant culture while also promoting racism,

sexism, and classism (Crawford & Bartolome, 2010; Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010; Ferri, 2010; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Willis, 2010). Students get caught within the confines of this social construct of special education through over- or underdiagnosis, often with lifelong consequences (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Shaywitz, 2003). The social construction of the dyslexia label provides an example of the dangers of underdiagnosis.

b. The evolution of special education

The construct of *special education* has evolved over the years of public schooling. Its roots are deeply embedded in the political and societal influences that have shaped the way students are educated (Crawford & Bartolome, 2010). In the early twentieth century, students with disabilities moved from their home environments or other private-care facilities into segregated spaces in public schools as newly written education laws required all children within a specified age range to attend school. This began the process of separating special education students from the general or “normal” population. This separation did not necessarily provide the special education students with the kind of education they needed, but it did separate them from the general population while also labeling them as “other.” With the development of IQ or intelligence testing, the number of students identified as needing special education grew, and testing provided “proof” of differing abilities that solidified the concept of special education. This sorting of students on the basis of a presumed legitimate test has maintained social stratification rather than actually educating labeled children to an equal standard (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

Major changes to the construct of special education developed during the era of the civil rights movement and particularly after the historic 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision (Crawford & Bartolome, 2010). In response to this

decision, disabilities rights activists began demanding equal education for children with disabilities on the basis that an equal education could not be separate. The result was the passage of a two pieces of legislation designed to promote the rights of disabled students—the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142). These laws were precursors of the current Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), passed in 1990 and most recently reauthorized in 2006. Each reauthorization of IDEA brought many changes, including new categories of disabilities and increased access to due process if a disabled child was not receiving appropriate services. With all these legislative changes, however, students who struggled in the general education classroom continued to be categorized and labeled as having a deficit that separated them from the perceived norm.

Within the construct of special education, IDEA is designed to ensure that students obtain “a free and appropriate education” in the “least restrictive environment” available (Crawford & Bartolome, 2010, p. 157). The term “least restrictive environment” sought to create an inclusive environment for special education students, in which they would no longer be separated from their general education peers (Rozalski, Stewart, & Miller, 2010). However the term remains difficult to define and may be interpreted differently depending on the school system and the student. Student placement is determined individually for each student by the educational team at the child’s school. Parents have the right to due process to challenge any placement made by the team. The standard of least restrictive environment assumes that the best educational environment for children receiving special education services is with their general education peers.

Nugent (2008) questions the broad assumptions of inclusion, suggesting that two students with similar learning profiles may differ in the benefit they receive from an inclusive versus a separate “special education.” She notes that the special education discourse on inclusion lacks the voice of qualitative data that examines both students and parents perspective on the best learning environment. On the basis of interviews with students and parents, conducted as part of her research on dyslexic students in Ireland, Nugent found that students in separate special education schools were “happier” (p. 203) than students with similar profiles placed in more inclusive settings. Nugent acknowledges the political ramifications of “segregated” schooling and how this influences school placement. As she notes, “The word ‘segregated’ has implications relating to racism, inequality and social rejection” (p. 202). Further, although she acknowledges that a child who attends a “special school” may be stigmatized, in fact her research demonstrated the opposite effect. Students in her study felt more stigmatized by having to read in front of their general education peers and by leaving the classroom to receive special services than they did attending a school for special education students. In addition, she notes that students with severe dyslexia felt more comfortable surrounded by similar peers. According to Nugent, children with dyslexia who are placed with similar peers compare themselves to those peers and, as a result, develop a better self-concept than when they are placed in general education environments, where they compare themselves to peers who do not have dyslexia. Noting these children’s positive social experience in a school with similar students, Nugent questions the lack of attention given to social experience when making decisions based on the concept of “least restrictive environment.”

The effect of the construct of “special education” demands a sorting process of children whether special education involves inclusion or separation. This process immediately defines some children as “normal” and others as “special”—or, by implication, “abnormal” (Gurn, 2010). This labeling process has significant consequences for those who receive the abnormal label as well as those who do not quite fit the criteria and, as a result, are denied services they need. The sorting process in special education is based on statistical analysis, which compares individual students to an average, represented by a bell-shaped curve with the average at its highest point. However, the idea that human intelligence can be normed is itself a social construct with significant consequences for those who fall at the bottom of the curve. As Gurn explains, only random events distribute along a normal curve; although human intelligence varies between individuals, it is not random. According to Ball and Harry (2010), trying to establish a norm makes no sense given the many factors that make up each person’s individuality, including race, socioeconomic status, immigration, geographic location, gender, and language. Ball and Harry highlight the inequity involved in creating a norm. They suggest that average or “normal” achievement for students is standardized based on the majority of students who attend school, who are White and middle class. This population, they argue, becomes the standard by which the norm is measured. Crawford and Bartolome (2010) note that although the normed group is never actually defined, “It is clear that it [the normal group] is made up of White, middle-class, native English-speaking, and able-bodied students who, by virtue of their class standing, possess the type of cultural capital expected in school” (p. 152). Willis (2010) explains that the social construction of “normal” limits access and opportunities available to nondominant

groups. Furthermore, the idea of the normal curve in education suggests that some students must fail, yet the stated goal of the No Child Left Behind Act is that all students must be successful (Ball & Harry, 2010). Despite all of these issues relating the normal curve to education, this measure remains central to special education sorting process. Special education relies on the deficit model, which labels the student with a deficit as a prerequisite for allowing that child to get the education he or she needs (Gelb, 2010).

c. Consequences of the deficit model.

Numerous problems arise for students stuck within the confines of this deficit model of special education. This paper will not deal with all the complexities of this issue but will mention four consequences that are relevant for this research:

1. In this model, the child is blamed for the deficit, rather than the educational system being held responsible for the child's learning (Ball & Harry, 2010; Gurn, 2010; Harry & Klingner, 2006).
2. Sorting students allows for separate curricula with different expectations for different groups of students (Crawford & Bartolome, 2010; Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010; Gurn, 2010).
3. The learning disability label affects the emotional life of labeled children and their families (Maccartney, 2010; Shaywitz, 2003).
4. Special education sorting is done in the guise of a fair, objective system that will assign students to the best learning environment for each. But, in fact, the system often appears more random than systematic and, at times, is influenced by political and social pressures that perpetuate racism,

classism, and sexism and reinforce the power of social capital (Ball & Harry, 2010; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Willis, 2010).

When a child is identified as having a learning disability, the child owns the problem of not learning at the set pace of the “normal” children in the classroom (Ball & Harry, 2010). In this way, the child is blamed for not learning and is perceived as having a deficit rather than the classroom teacher being perceived as failing to educate the child. Gleb (2010) suggests that children should not have to be labeled in order to receive the education they need. Rogers and Mancini (2010) describe the problem with the deficit model with respect to students labeled with ADHD. These children discover that in order to be successful, they must take medication. In this way, the disorder becomes the child’s problem, which the child must fix with medication. Harry and Klingner (2006) note in their research that students were identified with a learning disability when, in fact, “school practices, such as limited opportunity to learn, present a powerful explanation for many children’s educational outcomes” (p. 68), rather than any deficit with the child. Olson (2009) notes that teachers often told special education students that “if they would just try harder they would do better in school” (p. 103). Yet, from her interviews, Olson found that students wanted to do well and worked hard but felt they were unable to succeed. The result of this unfair blame, Olson noted, was often defiant behavior, which led to further exclusion and a reduction in opportunities to learn.

The second problem for students who are separated from the general population through their special education identification is the implicit permission to provide one curriculum, and perhaps one teaching methodology, to the general population while establishing different curricula and lower expectations for those not in the general

population. Dudley-Marling and Gurn (2010) note the dangers of assuming that most students are clustered around the average. This allows teachers to use a “one size fits all” (p. 19) curriculum and promotes the expectation that all students will learn through a single methodology, ignoring the natural differences in student learning. Again, this approach has the potential for identifying the struggling student as the problem. In addition, robust research suggests that students who are removed from the general population receive undifferentiated instruction, poorly trained teachers, and lowered expectations, thereby ensuring a lower quality of instruction for students removed from the general education classroom (Ball & Harry, 2010; Crawford & Bartolome, 2010; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Maccartney, 2010).

A third problem with the segregation of some students defined with the special education label is the effect of this labeling on students’ feelings about themselves as learners (Maccartney, 2010). Special education students compare themselves to the normed group, which lowers their sense of their own ability or self-efficacy (Gurn, 2010). Gurn suggests that labeling affects special education students’ status. Students given the “disabled” label are seen as “problematic and in need of fixing” (p. 242). Olson (2009) comments that labels assigned to children tend to become “self-perpetuating and self-confirming” (p. 48). Students begin to view themselves as less able than the normed population simply because of the treatment they receive with the disability label. For example, students are typically pulled out of classes for extra help and, in some cases, are identified as lazy by teachers (Olson, 2009). In contrast, Glazzard (2010) noted in his research that the diagnosis of dyslexia helped the child’s self-esteem. Once students, teachers, and peers understood the disability diagnosis, the child no longer felt badly

about his or her performance. Students were able to distinguish between intelligence and the effects of their disability. However, although Glazzard's study seems to counter much of the literature on negative effects of labels, Glazzard's research involved only nine students in one setting and specifically dealt with the knowledge gained in understanding one's disability. Humphrey and Mullins (2002), in a larger study of 63 students with dyslexia, noted that students in mainstream schools felt more isolated and excluded than students in special education schools. They observed that the self-concept and self-esteem of mainstreamed students with dyslexia were negatively affected in comparison to students in special education schools. Currently, the special education label is necessary to get services, but in fact, all students should be able to get the education they need without the assignment of this potentially damaging label (Gelb, 2010).

The fact that the social construct of special education involves a sorting system for children implies that an accurate system exists for placing each child in the appropriate learning environment. In fact, the sorting process is far from perfect. Both Shaywitz (2003) and Harry and Klingner (2006) report inconsistencies in the referral and diagnosis process from teacher to teacher, school to school, and state to state. Shaywitz noted in her research on 445 students in Connecticut schools that "less than one-third of the children who were reading below their age, ability, or grade level were receiving school services for their reading difficulty" (p. 30). Furthermore, she found that boys were three to four times as likely as girls to be identified with dyslexia, although in her study of the same population of students, she found equal numbers of boys and girls with dyslexia. Identification of dyslexia, Shaywitz notes, often depends on what the classroom

teacher sees and therefore greatly varies from classroom to classroom and school to school.

Harry and Klingner (2006) contend that criteria for special education referrals are not only random but often overtly racist, leading to overrepresentation of minority children in special education. Crawford and Bartolome (2010) suggest that this overrepresentation of minority students dates back to the desegregation of schools after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Placing minority students in special education was a way of circumventing court-ordered desegregation, a trend that, according to Harry and Klingner (2006), continues today. These authors suggest that the special education label reflects societal social processes rather than any scientific measure. For example, they observed that schools that maintained “high academic standing” (p. 136) referred children to special education services who, in schools with “lower academic standing” (p. 137), would not have been referred, based on their academic profile. They describe numerous examples of students referred to special education because the general education system was failing to educate the child, not because the child actually had a defined disability. Placement in special education, they contend, may depend on a school’s need to have its students attain high test scores. In this situation, students may be referred to special education to remove them from the general education pool, not because of specific problems with their academic performance. Harry and Klinger suggest that “The overrepresentation of minority groups in special education should not be understood to mean that these children ‘have’ more disabilities than others. Rather, we believe that institutional and personal biases and beliefs combine with political pressures to produce a pattern of minority overrepresentation” (p. 92). Macedo and Marti (2010)

also note the impact of bias in special education placement, suggesting that when minority students are overidentified for special education, the group becomes excluded from the “equal education” (p. 55) offered to the general education students. This in turn affects their prospects for an equal opportunity in society. Harry and Klingner (2006) comment on the connection between race and the construction of special education: “It should not be surprising that race had become intertwined with the construction of special education, since race has been an essential ingredient in the construction of all aspects of American life” (p. 7).

To summarize, the unnecessary labeling of children, which assigns them to a socially constructed category within public education, has the effect of blaming students for their educational struggles, expecting less of these students, decreasing their confidence in themselves as learners, and perpetuating a system that promotes inequality within public education, denying many students the right to a quality education. Shaywitz (2003) notes that an underdiagnosis of dyslexia in schools denies some students services they need. Harry and Klingner (2006) suggest an overdiagnosis of minority students as having special needs relegates these students to placement in special education, where they are likely to receive lower-quality instruction and lower expectations. Both over- and underdiagnosis are problematic, suggesting a broken system that may do more harm than good for the students dependent on this system for services they need. Many students are being left behind not because of their own deficits but because they are victims of a social construct that limits their education (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Shaywitz, 2003).

d. Social Construction of Dyslexia and Equality of Treatment

Historical confusion about the definition and diagnosis of dyslexia provide an example of the disparities that result when some children receive educational services while others with similar learning issues remain untreated because of the limitations of the way “special education” is provided. The social construction of a disability such as dyslexia may unintentionally promote discrimination and inequity in our education system despite intentions and efforts to promote equality. Dyslexia is the most common special education diagnosis within the category of learning disabilities, with 80 percent of learning disabilities reflecting reading struggles (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007; Shaywitz, 2003). Here I explore the historical and current definitions and criteria for diagnosing dyslexia, as well as the equity of the educational programming available for students with dyslexia and the environment that serves or does not serve them, as I believe these areas most accurately inform my own research. Although reading struggles have been documented as far back as the seventeenth century, the cause of reading difficulties and their diagnosis and treatment remain problematic today (Shaywitz, 2003). The history of dyslexia provides evidence that this is not a new condition. Successful instructional strategies for teaching reading to the child with dyslexia are well-researched but underutilized. Although the definition of dyslexia has evolved, the diagnosis remains elusive for many children despite scientific advances that allow for clear diagnosis and the availability of instructional strategies that can help students with dyslexia break the reading code. Furthermore, inequities exist within the population that receives educational services for dyslexia and in the environment and kind of services that students receive.

1. History of dyslexia.

Difficulty with reading is not a new phenomenon; it was documented as early as the 1600s (Shaywitz, 2003). The early cases involved adults who suffered neurological damage from strokes and, as a result, lost the ability to read. In 1877, Adolf Kussmaul, a neurologist, coined the term *word-blindness* to describe a difficulty with reading (Wolf, 2007). At that time, people were often referred to ophthalmologists for treatment. Kussmaul also noted that word-blindness was uncorrelated with intelligence but related specifically to difficulty in recognizing and reading words (Shaywitz, 2003; Wolf, 2007). In 1891, Dejerine, a French neurologist, noted that that a specific area of the brain, the left posterior region, was critical for reading (Lyon, Sally, & Bennett, 2003). This laid the groundwork for future studies and for a growing understanding of dyslexia as neurobiological in origin. In 1895, Hinshelwood, a physician, noted that word-blindness was unrelated either to sight or to cognitive abilities (Shaywitz, 2003). He observed many patients who excelled academically but struggled with reading. He came to understand that “congenital word-blindness,” as he called it, was a specific problem in learning to read that was unrelated to other cognitive functions. A child who is considered cognitively slow in all areas would not be diagnosed with congenital word-blindness. Hinshelwood also noted the importance of early detection to help children to read, noting that children were often blamed for being lazy when in fact the problem was congenital word-blindness (Shaywitz, 2003).

In 1977, Rudolf Berlin used the term “dyslexia” to “refer to what he perceives as a special form of word-blindness found in adults who lose the ability to read secondary to a specific brain lesion” (Shaywitz, 2003, p.15). For a complete lesion, he used the term

“alexia,” and for a partial lesion “dyslexia.” *Alexia* describes an inability to read, whereas *dyslexia* describes “great difficulty interpreting written or printed symbols” (p. 15).

The idea that reading difficulty was correlated with the understanding of sounds as they related to symbols dates back to Lucy Fildes, a reading researcher. In 1921, Fildes attributed reading struggles to “problems in the auditory system” (Wolf, 2007, p.173). Wolf describes Fildes’s discovery, which she relates to our current understanding of dyslexia. Wolf writes: “Children with problems in reading were not able to form auditory images (these are similar to our notion of phoneme representations) of sounds represented by letters” (p. 173). In 1944, Schilder, a neurologist and psychiatrist, discovered that struggling readers could not relate letters to sounds nor could they “differentiate a spoken word into its sound” (p. 173). This early work set the stage for the current understanding of reading struggles as the “inability to process phonemes within words” (p. 173).

More recently, the use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) has allowed researchers to map brain activity, revealing differences in brain activation between children with and without dyslexia (Gabrieli, 2009; Wolf, 2007). Using fMRI, scientists can watch the neural systems at work while a child is reading, translating letters into sounds. Through observations of both dyslexic and nondyslexic readers, scientists have discovered that “[t]he core problem in dyslexia is phonologic: turning print into sound” (Shaywitz, 2003, p.87). With this new information, Shaywitz notes, researchers developed treatment for children with dyslexia, giving these children the potential to “reach adulthood feeling confident and able to achieve their potential” (p. 89). With new research findings, dyslexia has become easier to diagnose, but its cause remains a mystery (Hoeft et al., 2006).

Inequities in the treatment of dyslexia has been observed since the early years of diagnosis. For example, Dr. E. Nettleship, an ophthalmologist in the early twentieth century, noted that word-blindness was more easily identified in children of “well-educated” parents (Shaywitz, 2003, p.23). Observing these inequities, Nettleship advocated for equal treatment for all children.

This history reveals some long-held understandings of dyslexia that foreshadow many of the challenges that remain today. Children are still identified as “lazy,” diagnosis continues to be problematic, treatment continues to be delayed, and inequities in treatment persist (Shaywitz, 2003).

2. Definition and diagnosis.

The word *dyslexia* is derived from the Greek for “difficulty with words”(Frankel, 2009, p. 10). Dyslexia results from a disruption in the neural circuits in the brain that are used for coding language. This affects a person’s ability to read, spell, retrieve words, articulate words, and remember facts (Shaywitz, 2003). While other terms, such as reading disability and learning disability, are often used to describe this struggle to learn to read, Wolf (2007) prefers the term *dyslexia*, acknowledging the term’s historical roots while noting that it is less important what the problem is called than it is to gain an understanding of how to diagnose and treat it.

Shaywitz (2003) distinguishes between developmental dyslexia and language-learning disability: “In developmental dyslexia the phonologic weakness is primary, other components of the language system are intact” (p. 140). Intelligence is not affected, and the disorder originates at birth. In contrast, “[i]n language-learning disability the primary deficit involves all aspects of language, including both the sounds and the meanings of

words” (p. 140). People are also born with this disorder but this disorder may affect verbal intelligence. In this paper, I will use the term *dyslexia* to mean developmental dyslexia.

Dyslexia represents a problem with reading that has nothing to do with intelligence. It is a “weakness within the language system, specifically at the level of the phonological module” (Shaywitz, 2003, p.41). English words are made up of 45 phonemes in different combinations. The brain needs to break words into phonemes before they can be processed by the language system. A reader must convert letters into sounds and understand the smaller sounds of phonemes. Children with dyslexia have difficulty understanding the phonemes. They do not understand the “internal sound structure of words” (p. 44). To become a reader, a child must develop phonemic awareness. A deficit in phonological process interferes with the ability to decode, which prevents word identification (Shaywitz, 2003).

Reading difficulties such as dyslexia are not uncommon. Dyslexia “affects one out of every five children—ten million in America” (Shaywitz, 2003, p.6); 4.4 percent of children ages six through twenty-one receive special education services in school. Reading disabilities are estimated to constitute 80 percent of all learning disabilities. According to Frankel (2009), dyslexia affects one in ten children in Britain and is the most common reading disability. Shaywitz (2003) notes that dyslexia is a worldwide condition, with reports of word-blindness in the early twentieth century in Great Britain, Holland, Germany, France, various South American countries, and the United States. Dyslexia “knows no boundaries, neither geographic nor ethnic nor intellectual” (p. 31).

Shaywitz also emphasizes that dyslexia is found all over the world, regardless of the alphabet that is used.

These statistics may not be too surprising when one understands that reading, unlike vision and speech, is a cultural invention developed relatively recently in evolutionary history. Vision and speech are genetically programmed and therefore are passed on from one generation to the next, so that it is natural to learn to speak and to see (Wolf, 2007). But, Wolf notes, “We were never born to read” (p. 3). There are no genes specific to reading. It has to be learned by each new brain, just like other cultural invention. No pathways exist to set this up. Every time the brain learns a new skill, the neurons in the brain make new connections, which change the brain. Learning Chinese creates different neuron pathways than learning English does. We are able to learn to read because our brain can create these new pathways within its existing structure (Wolf, 2007).

Shaywitz (2003) notes that new research divides groups of poor readers into two distinct categories based on information from fMRI. One group includes the “classic” dyslexic, who is “born with a glitch in his posterior reading systems. This group has higher verbal abilities and is able to compensate somewhat—improving in accuracy but remaining slow readers” (p. 85). The second group develop into poor readers as a result of a disadvantaged reading environment, either at home or because of poor instruction in school. “In this group,” according to Shaywitz, “the wiring for the posterior reading system may have been laid down early on but never activated appropriately; the system is there, but it is not functioning properly” (p. 85). This group, like the first group, will remain slow readers, but they will also struggle with accuracy.

The current widely accepted definition of dyslexia evolved from previous definitions and has been adopted by the board of directors of the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) and by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (International Association of Dyslexia, 2002):

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge (Lyon, et al., 2003).

This definition is significantly different from previous definitions, and some aspects of it remain controversial. This definition labels dyslexia as a specific learning disability, thereby creating a distinct category for this reading struggle. In describing dyslexia as having a neurobiological origin, this definition acknowledges the findings of recent fMRI research, which has identified the neural pathways that differentiate people with dyslexia from those without the disability (Lyon, et al., 2003).

One of the most significant changes in the current definition is that it attempts to address the controversy about the use of IQ discrepancy testing as an indicator of learning disability. The idea of “unexpected” academic difficulties suggests a need to measure “unexpected.” Historically, comparing IQ scores to other academic achievement tests,

commonly referred to as *discrepancy testing*, satisfied this measurement. Shaywitz (2003) explains: “This was based on the belief that in the average person, ability (as measured by IQ) and reading achievement are very closely correlated.” This IQ discrepancy was and still is used to qualify or not qualify students for special education services. However, evidence of the cultural bias of the IQ testing renders this avenue invalid for minority students. This draws into question the validity of IQ discrepancy testing as a criterion for special education placement for minority students (Harry & Klingner, 2006). In addition to the cultural bias that should render IQ discrepancy testing obsolete, this type of testing disqualifies many students or delays their access to special education services, even though they are struggling to read (Lyon, et al., 2003; Shaywitz, 2003). Shaywitz explains: “There is an emerging consensus among researchers and clinicians that the dependence on a discrepancy between IQ and reading achievement for a diagnosis of dyslexia has outlived its usefulness except in very limited circumstances” (p. 137). The reauthorization of IDEA in 2006 recommended doing away with discrepancy testing to qualify students for special education (Gurn, 2010). In addition, the new definition of dyslexia removes the comparison to age and academic ability to eliminate the IQ discrepancy (Lyon, et al., 2003). In its place, the new definition adds the effectiveness of classroom instruction, acknowledging the importance of what happens in the classroom and of other environmental factors that influence the student’s reading capability. Children in language-deficient settings, who lack quality early childhood education programs and linguistically enriched home environments, enter school with a disadvantage compared to their peers. Classroom instruction that adjusts to these gaps

may avoid reading failures (Lyon, et al., 2003). Therefore, the definition includes the ways in which a child responds to quality reading instruction.

A clear definition of dyslexia, along with scientific advances that use technology to identify the brain characteristics associated with dyslexia, should facilitate diagnosis, removing much of the doubt about which students should receive services for dyslexia, according to both Shaywitz (2003) and Wolf (2007). However, diagnosis and treatment remain problematic for many students.

3. Inequity in diagnosis and treatment.

As with Nettleship's observations in the early 1900s, Shaywitz (2003) contends that today, children from poor families are more often overlooked and not treated for reading difficulties compared to children of wealthier parents. Shaywitz identifies problems with treating students with dyslexia relating to late diagnosis, no diagnosis, and poor quality of services.

The majority of students with dyslexia are not identified until third grade, making remediation more difficult (Shaywitz, 2003). Awareness of the value of early diagnosis and treatment is not new, as Hinshelwood noted this in the early 1900s. The earlier the diagnosis, the easier dyslexia is to remediate, for a variety of reasons. First, the brain is better able to reroute neural circuits. Second, children have less to catch up on as their peers continue to move ahead. Third, younger children are less likely to feel defeated or to have developed the deflated sense of self-worth that arises from years of failure and struggles to read.

Shaywitz (2003) notes that often children who do not qualify for a diagnosis of dyslexia in schools would still benefit from help in reading. Because these students do not meet the criteria for dyslexia, they are left to struggle on their own. As a result, the focus on clearly identifying dyslexia can limit the learning opportunities available to other struggling readers.

Shaywitz (2003) found that when students are offered services to remediate dyslexia, the services were often inadequate. As Shaywitz explains, “Children received help for very limited periods of time, often from well-meaning but untrained teachers and with methods that did not reflect state-of-the-art, evidence-based instructional strategies” (p. 35).

Wolf (2006) and Shaywitz (2003) express their frustration with the lack of early diagnosis and treatment for all children with dyslexia, given the current knowledge of both diagnosis and treatment. Shaywitz writes: “The greatest stumbling block preventing a dyslexic child from realizing his potential and following his dreams is the widespread ignorance about the true nature of dyslexia” (p. 89).

3.7 Conclusion to Literature Review

Many aspects of culture play significant roles in our educational system. Both school culture and teacher culture can either enhance or inhibit student learning and achievement (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994). The powerful role of the dominant culture can trump positive cultures set up in the school when the racist, sexist, or classist influences of this culture are allowed to infiltrate the school (McLaren, 2003). The social construction of special education is one such example, where the biases of the

larger culture may constrain and limit student learning (Ball & Harry, 2010; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Special education, designed to help struggling learners, may be the cause of student failure resulting from under- or overdiagnosis, the use of detrimental labels, or the influences of racism, classism, and sexism on the services students receive.

There are multiple avenues to creating school cultures that resist the influences of the dominant culture and, as a result, establish environments that enhance student learning. Teacher collaborative cultures that promote a professional learning environment can augment student achievement, creating a school where everyone is involved in education (Barth, 1990; Sarason, 1996). In these schools, students and teachers learn together, experiment together, and make mistakes together. Everyone is involved in the “clay” of learning (Barth, 1990).

Special education operates on the basis of a deficit model, providing an education that is “special” but often not helpful and sometimes even harmful (Harry & Klingner, 2006). This deficit model assumes that for children to receive services they may need in order to learn, they must be given a label that identifies the problem as existing within the child (Crawford & Bartolome, 2010). This model of blaming the child is not only archaic but also ineffective in promoting student learning. All children can be provided with an appropriate education without having to submit to labeling and testing to prove that a special need exists.

3.8 My Research

By examining these multiple layers of culture, we can identify a clearer path, which, if followed, may help our educational system to embrace all children—truly

allowing no child to be left behind. When we are able to look at the systemic causes of student failure and end the practice of blaming the child, all children will finally have an equal opportunity to succeed in school. My own research examines ways in which students that were blamed, unmotivated, and academically unsuccessful in one educational setting had their educational lives altered when they entered a school that no longer blamed them for their disability but instead found the ways to teach to them so they could find success. It is this environment that all students should have access to.

Chapter 4 Equal Access

“It is just terrible how a child has to suffer and a parent has to spend thousands of dollars to prove a child needs help” (Mary, May, 2009).

“I strongly believe that behind the success of every disabled child is a passionately committed, intensely engaged, and totally empowered parent, usually but not always the child’s mother” (Shaywitz, 2003, p.9).

“What about the kids that the parents don’t fight for them, and ... how they’re suffering inside?” (Libby, April, 2009)

4.1 Introduction

The learning-disabled children in my study—all from different school districts and from varying socioeconomic backgrounds—were unable to successfully access the available public education. This study follows the educational journey of nine students who found their way to an accessible education through a costly, sometimes treacherous, and surprisingly serendipitous pathway. For these parents and children, the journey began when the parents became aware that despite accommodations, individualized education plans (IEPs), and the good intentions of many professionals, their child was not learning how to read. These parents’ belief in their children’s ability to learn became the driving force that propelled them to fight for an accessible education for their children.

When I describe the pathway to an accessible education as “serendipitous,” I am referring to the unique set of circumstances that appeared to come together to direct each parent to become an ardent advocate for his or her child, regardless of costs or consequences. Both the parents and their children encountered multiple barriers to the children’s learning before serendipitously discovering a variety of catalysts that helped secure access to an appropriate education for the child. The barriers to accessing an

education impacted the child's ability to learn, which affected both parent and child.

However, despite these barriers, the parents and children persisted, and the child ended up with an accessible learning environment at the Kelsey School.

4.2 Barriers to an Accessible Education

The children and parents in this study consistently encountered barriers along their journeys. These barriers included: 1. Students and parents found the traditional special education models of pullout and mainstreaming, designed to support their child's learning, had unexpected consequences that actually inhibited learning. 2. The students developed coping strategies to deal with the stress of trying to be readers without the necessary skills. 3. Their parents also developed coping strategies to deal with the frustration of watching their child suffer. However, these coping strategies further hindered the children from advancing in their education. 4. Teachers and parents blamed children for their disability. 5. School personnel blamed parents for their tenacity. 6. The families suffered undue emotional and financial sacrifices in their fight for their child's education.

Most of the students stayed in public schools after receiving a diagnosis of dyslexia, but eventually their parents realized that the public school system was failing to educate their child. Some reached this conclusion sooner than others. For example, one mother, Mel, removed her daughter, Raya, from the public school even before the school had developed an IEP. Other parents kept their child in the system and tried to make it work, but without fully realizing what they would need to know in order to accomplish this. As another mother, Mary, explained: "Now, all this time, I'm ... ignorant beyond belief. I had no idea." Mary was referring to her daughter, Beth's early school years,

when the school system talked about mainstreaming her and decreasing her pullout time. Although the children left their public schools at different ages, they shared many of the same experiences as they struggled to get an education.

a. Pullout and Mainstreaming.

With the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142), the concept of educating special education students in the least restrictive environment that could meet their educational needs emerged (Salend, 1990). Terms such as *pullout*, *mainstreaming*, and *inclusion* refer to the different venues schools use to meet this requirement. In pullout programs, students leave the general education classroom and spend a portion of the day in a resource room with a special education teacher, as determined by their IEP. Special education teachers provide individualized instruction in specific skills to a small group of learning-disabled students. They may also provide supplemental instruction that supports the instruction students receive in the general education classroom (Salend, 1990). Pullout is used in conjunction with mainstreaming. Schwarz (2006) distinguishes between *mainstreaming* and *inclusion*. He states that in mainstreaming, students are placed in separate classes (such as the resource room as described above), but join the general education population for subjects such as art, physical education, music, and perhaps science and social studies. The inclusion model, by contrast, is designed to keep special education students in the general education classroom, with classroom support, differentiated instruction, and curriculum adaptations. In my study, both parents and children used the term *mainstreaming* more commonly than *inclusion*, although neither parents nor children ever distinguished between the two and I never asked them to define or explain their understanding of these terms. Although

inclusion may include pullout time, according to Schwarz (2006), this pullout is not necessarily to a resource room but, instead, could be to a library, a hallway, or a study hall.

Many students I interviewed said that it was difficult to be pulled out of their regular classroom to go to a resource room. Their concerns included embarrassment about being pulled out, stress upon returning to the classroom, and disappointment at missing out on what others were doing.

Evette was the only student in this study who spent most of her years in public school in a self-contained classroom. When Evette was in fifth grade, her mother, Barbara, pushed for a mainstream placement, as Evette had made little progress in the self-contained classroom. Barbara described the problems Evette faced in the mainstream classroom:

They feel that mainstreaming allows the kids to be inspired by their [peers]....

Instead, it was being put in their faces every single day: "You're inadequate." So

Evette would feel embarrassed about her work, compared to the other kids'....

Instead of it being inspiring, it was actually more disheartening for her.

Evette described her experience with the cycle of pullout and return to her mainstream classroom. She found that after she had been pulled out to work on something, she fell behind in her regular classwork, so she would be pulled out again. The more she was pulled out, the more she missed in her mainstream classroom:

You have no idea what was happening, cause it all just seemed the same. When you're pulled out, you're missing everything, and then you get pulled out again and again and again to make up for the stuff that you're getting pulled out for.

Polly's mother, Lesley, mentioned Polly's embarrassment whenever the teacher came to the classroom door to take her to the resource room. She also noted Polly's difficulty in maintaining friendships as a result of the constant pullout. Further, Lesley questioned the value of the resource room—which, she noted, had the same student–teacher ratio as the regular classroom:

The regular classroom had twenty students and a teacher and an aide, and the special classroom had one teacher and ten kids, but all with disabilities. She [Polly] would say that she would be working with some girls that she liked, doing a little ... project in her homeroom, and then get called out. So she didn't have a chance to develop friendships or nice ties with people in *that* environment [general education classroom] because it was always interrupted.

Libby, Nancy's mother, explained Nancy's frustration in trying to pursue her interest in art or in getting a break from regular schoolwork because her free time was filled up with the resource room. "Nancy didn't have much of an outlet in the public school, because all her recess or ... an empty class was filled up going into the resource room whenever she got a break." Nancy described her experiences of pullout:

When I would get up, all the kids would look at you, "oh, they're, going somewhere else." And they knew. 'Cause in seventh grade, my math teacher, he'd call us "the travelers."

Nancy explained that because a few students went to the resource room together, their teacher referred to them as “the travelers.” This embarrassed Nancy; it made her feel different from the other kids. In addition to feeling “weird” about going to the resource room, Nancy remembers the difficulty of returning to the classroom and not knowing what the other students were doing:

When I would go back into the class, they would sometimes still be doing math, and they would have, things written on the board that I had no idea how to do it. ...I just felt that I wasn't learning ...what the other kids were....I was, like, behind.

Nancy recalled that when she was younger she had found it easier to be pulled out, but as she got into later elementary and middle school, she felt embarrassed and behind the other students. Furthermore, she did not feel that the resource room teachers were helping her learn. Nancy described situations in seventh grade when routinely after finishing a test in the classroom, the test was then put in the resource room where the resource room teachers would erase her answers and tell her to try again. She explained that she was given word boxes to help her find the correct word to put on her paper or just told to keep trying. During our interview, Nancy repeatedly became emotional and choked back tears as she talked about the difficulty of being singled out to leave the classroom:

I was ... really, really frustrated, 'cause I thought they would [change my answers]. I want my own answers, not theirs.... And I didn't feel like I was learning.

Mike described feeling anxious upon returning to the classroom after being pulled out. He was confused about what he had missed and about not knowing the current classroom work. He stated: "I really never knew when, each time I was taken out, a new test was coming or a new book report was coming out." He also relayed his frustration about being taken out of social studies—a class in which he excelled: "Social studies, I was doing really good at, but I was always out, 'cause I ... had a teacher who took me out of class during important subjects." Mike's mother reported an incident in which Mike missed the opportunity to present a project on which he had put in substantial effort, because he was pulled out of the classroom during the class presentation time: "It took him a long time [to do the project]; it was very, very hard for him. And everybody got to present; [but] he was out, [so] he never got to present. He was devastated."

While pullout heightened Mike's anxiety, Frank felt that his identity was defined by being pulled out. Frank's mother, Ella, related what Frank told her:

It was four times a week, 45 minutes a day, he was being pulled out, and he hated it. Hated it. He says, "Ma, I'm stupid, huh? Is that why they pull me out?" He just didn't fit in, he really didn't, and it really bothered him. His anxiety didn't start till, like, second grade, when all this was going on. That's when his anxiety kicked in.

Over time, the parents of all of these students observed flaws in the public schools' special education programs that contributed to their child's struggle with learning to read. Many parents praised some classroom teachers and special education teachers, noting their hard work and good intentions. However, the parents came to realize that despite good intentions, the teachers in this system were simply unable to teach their child. Mike explained that he did not blame the teachers for not knowing how to teach him: "I had some really nice teachers, I had some really ... not so good teachers; they were all nice, but they didn't really teach the way that I needed to be [taught]." Ella, Frank's mother, also praised the efforts of the teachers: "They tried to help. I can't say a bad word about the public school system. I have to say they did try to help Frank as much as they could." Shaywitz's (2003) research reports instances of parents feeling similarly—that teachers were well intentioned but simply untrained and lacking knowledge in "state-of-the-art, evidence-based instructional strategies" (p. 35). The parents' realization of the futility of the special education system's approach became a catalyst that promoted parent advocacy.

b. Children Blamed.

Most of these students experienced blame for their inability to learn to read—from professionals and sometimes from their parents as well. The blame may reflect an educational gap in school professionals' and parents' understanding of dyslexia rather than anything intentional. Olson (2009) explains that those without proper training in dealing with educational differences often view the child as the problem. Wolf (2007) notes that children arrive at school full of enthusiasm and energy for learning. As the

child with dyslexia advances in school and reading becomes problematic, the child gets messages of blame from both teachers and parents:

He's told by his parents to try harder; he's told by his teachers that he's "not working to potential" ; he's told by other children that he's a "retard" and a "moron"; he gets a resounding message that he's not going to amount to much (p.166).

The phrase "not working to potential" commonly appeared on the report cards of the students in this study, along with comments such as "defiant" or "lacks effort and focus." Both Evette and Frank admitted they had given up in school, which may account for these negative comments. However, they explained that they had given up only after years of frustration as they struggled to learn to read. Many of the students reported working hard in school but with little result. In time, they gave up trying, and their parents stepped in, doing the child's homework and intervening with teachers in an effort to keep their child's frustration level contained.

Evette explained that the homework was just too hard. She could not do it, so she stopped trying. Then, because she had stopped doing homework, she lost certain privileges:

If you don't do your homework, you can't go outside; if you don't do your homework, you can't eat a snack. I lost all my privileges. They were taken away, but it's like I slave over some pieces of homework for four hours, just to go outside.

For Evette, going outside at recess was not a motivator. She preferred to lose her recess time over trying to do her homework, which she found too difficult. During the last six weeks of fifth grade, Evette's teacher said that she had to read for thirty minutes every night in order to participate in special fifth-grade activities. Although Evette desperately wanted to participate in these activities, reading for thirty minutes a night overwhelmed her, and the consequence—being excluded from the special activities—angered Evette rather than motivated her. Evette's mother wrote a note indicating the level of Evette's stress, but the teacher insisted that Evette was just being lazy. In the end, Evette lied about her reading time in order to participate in the fifth grade activities.

The comments on Evette's IEP and on her report cards indicated that Evette's academic issues related to emotional problems and that she had the ability to do better academically. For example, one IEP report stated: "Evette's teacher reports that Evette appears to be a child who is carrying a lot inside and often uses academic time to talk about personal issues. Evette's teacher and the school nurse report concerns about Evette's social and emotional functioning." In addition, the IEP noted: "Evette has developed some learned helplessness around academic tasks that are challenging for her." Evette admitted to giving up on some of her work, but she noted that this came only after years of humiliation and frustration in struggling with assignments that were over her head.

Similar to the professionals in the school system, Evette's mother, Barbara, pushed her daughter to work hard. Barbara agreed with the teacher that Evette needed the push. In an e-mail to Evette's teacher, Barbara explained that she had tried to push Evette to work to her potential:

I am ok that it [a homework assignment] counted as a missed homework because I have been pushing her to do more each day. Her comments have been that everyone is tougher on her since the parent–teacher meeting. I explained to her that we are just trying to get her to work to her potential. Now I get the “I hate school,” “I hate reading,” and the occasional “I hate you Mom” for pushing her.

Evette’s mother, like the professionals, blamed Evette’s poor work ethic rather than her disability.

Frank’s report cards from his public school identified a lack of focus and effort as the problem at the heart of Frank’s academic struggles. In second grade, Frank’s teacher wrote: “Frank enjoys his peers and likes the social part of school. A goal is to become excited about learning.” The comments on his March report card for the same school year were similar: “Frank is a friendly child who continues to embrace the social side of this day and holds back and is less involved in learning.” In third grade, Frank’s high level of distractibility was noted: “High level of distractibility hinders progress.” In March of the same year, Frank’s teacher wrote, “Frank requires consistent redirection and monitoring.” The IEP developed that year identified Frank’s lack of effort: “Frank’s difficulty attending and maintaining focus further interfered with applying himself in the classroom. At times, Frank does not put forth any effort to the task at hand and does nothing.” One of Frank’s goals on this IEP related to attention. It stated:

Frank continues to require adult cuing for attention to instruction and to assigned tasks. He does not seem to be motivated to attend or to complete assignments. Sometimes he whines and says, “I don’t want to.” His attention is characterized

by staring off, playing with an object or his pencil, talking to others, looking in his desk or wandering around the room. Discussions and minor consequences have not produced any change.

The consistent message in Frank's reports was that he maintained some choice in the way he approached his schooling. He was blamed for needing adult cueing and for his lack of motivation and focus. But from Frank's perspective, his teachers did little to help him learn to read: "The teacher never asked me to do anything, just sit there all the time and do nothing." Frank also commented: "The homework was pretty easy, but I felt like I wasn't learning anything.... I was just talking to friends and never really did anything." In general, whereas his teachers thought that Frank could be more motivated and focused, Frank felt that they did little to help him learn.

As with Evette, Raya's problems with learning were blamed on emotional and behavioral difficulties. On Raya's report card from public school, teachers stated that Raya's behavior and emotional problems were getting in the way of her learning. In May 2005, Ms. Kames wrote: "Often she will become defiant and or make excuses for why she is unable to complete an assignment or join the class for a learning experience." First-grade teacher, Ms. Rolst, wrote: "Raya's emotions and behavior often affect her reading ability and effort level. It can be difficult to decipher when Raya is having a hard time reading and when she is pretending to be stuck and struggling. She works well when she can have the individual attention of an adult." This series of comments seemed to imply that Raya sought adult attention and that when she got her behavior under control, she

might have greater success in her studies. A school psychologist's report likewise suggested that Raya's parents contact a psychologist to address Raya's emotional issues.

Raya reported that both teachers and students blamed her for her disability. She stated that teachers got frustrated when she could not answer a question. As Raya explained, most of the time, she did not understand the class discussions. Therefore, when called on, she simply repeated what she heard other students say:

The teachers would be, like, "That's what they [another student] just said; can you say something else?" But I was, like, "No," 'cause I didn't get it. They were just, like, "Answer it." I'm like, "Can we move on?" And sometimes they'd get really angry and I would have to go to, a different teacher and they'd start over the whole thing.

Raya recalled that other students also blamed her because her work was modified to accommodate her needs:

They'd say, "It's not fair that you don't do tests and, you don't have to do, anything," because I'm dumb and people would always ... they'd, like, blame me for things they had to do; like, if they had to write ... ten sentences, on ... homework, and I had to write, three, they would blame me for them having to do hard work.

Thus, modifications in homework that were intended to help Raya cope with the workload and to minimize academic stress created a different type of stress when her peers blamed her for having easier assignments.

For Nancy, blame came in the form of humiliation for incomplete homework even if she did not understand the assignment. Nancy's mother, Libby, explained:

And then one day she cried to me and said, "Oh, my God! If I don't get this math homework done, I'm going to have to stay, and my teacher's going to put my name on this big white board, on the chalkboard, and I'm going to have to stay after school and I don't get it."

Nancy explained to me how she felt when she tried her hardest to do work that she didn't understand:

I wouldn't get the math so I wouldn't do it. And I'd eventually try to do all the ones that I knew, and just leave the ones that I didn't know blank. And then, he would stamp your ... assignment notebook and say that ... your work was incomplete. And then you'd have to take your assignment notebook home and have your parents' sign it, and ... he would write your name on the board to stay after class and you'd have to do it then.

As with Evette, Nancy's parents, as well as her teachers, initially blamed Nancy for her learning disability and viewed her lack of progress as her own fault. When Nancy was in first grade, her teacher wrote, "Stop guessing," on one of Nancy's papers. Libby recalled the conversation she had with Nancy after seeing this comment:

One day I got upset; I said, "Nancy, we have got to sit down and pay attention, we've got to concentrate on what we're doing." I said, "Right here it's telling us to stop being lazy." And that's when she looked up at me and she said, "I wish I could get it, but I don't." And I said, "OK." And I said to Bob [her husband], "She

wouldn't be the type to say that, and she wouldn't be the type to cry." And I said, "She's dead serious that she does *not* get this."

As Libby began to understand how hard Nancy was working, she started writing notes to the principal, explaining the efforts her daughter was making despite the lack of apparent progress. These notes led to controversy between Libby and the principal, and Nancy's concerns were never addressed.

James's parents also blamed their child until they fully understood James's learning issues. They described how they tried to get James to keep up with the work during the school day by having the teacher send home the unfinished work:

Some time in November, in all of these team meetings, I said, "Look, if he's not finishing his work, send it home on the weekends, so that he's not feeling like he's falling behind, and so that you feel like he's ... right with the class when they need to start on Monday." So [in] second grade, she would send home eighteen sheets of paper for him to do over the weekend. And James is the type of kid that ... would sit there Saturday mornings and do it. And ... we would feel like, "OK, well, you know, get the work done! Get the work done!"

While James's parents tried to help him keep up with the work, upon meeting after meeting with his second-grade teacher, they also felt that the teachers were blaming James for not being able to learn. James's mother explained:

I remember just feeling heartbroken, 'cause here's this wonderful ... kid who is just getting trashed by the teacher who's responsible for teaching him. And all of

these other teachers ... who were giving him services, were like, "Well, you know, we're trying stuff, but it's not really working." And ... what we really started hearing was, "We're *giving* him these things. He's not picking them up." And it really started to feel very early on like it was *his* job to fix things, and I think at first, for that second grade, we were like, "All right, well, you know, we got to work on *him*." And I think we all put a lot of onus on him to be responsible for fixing whatever the problem was.

By fourth grade, James had a different teacher. As his mother described it, he was falling apart while the teacher implemented programs that singled him out and blamed him for his lack of academic progress. James's mother relayed what she heard from the teachers: "You know, he's not trying; he's being kept in at recess because he's not finishing his work. He's not paying attention." James's father noted, "They singled him out and put him in a special cubicle in the back of the room so he could do his work." James's mother added:

Which, interestingly, was right next to the wall to the second-grade classroom. So ... he could hear the second grade teacher, so if there was ever a place, to be put to do work, that wouldn't be the place....And we're looking at it like, "Why would you think, in any stretch of the imagination, that this would be an appropriate place to put ... out of all the kids, this kid, next to the person who has ... been the bane of his existence?"

At that point, James's parents realized that James's academic needs were not being met. Further, they felt the teachers in the school system expected James to take responsibility for making it work:

In fourth grade we really started saying, this isn't ever going to get any better. If this is really the best that they can offer him, I don't think it's up to him to fix this problem. And that was when it started to become clear that this was a problem that they were continuing to push down on James. If he just tried harder, he'd be fine.

James's report cards reinforced his parents' feeling that the teachers were blaming James for not trying. In fourth grade, his second-term report card read: "He has met with success with a language curriculum that has been tailored to his learning style. James continues to struggle with consistently demonstrating the concentration needed to work independently and complete daily work." From this statement, it would appear that the teacher had given James a curriculum that would work for his learning style but that James was not working efficiently to complete the assignments. James stated that he had to stay in for recess "because I didn't get my work done, at least twice a week," and that teachers often told him he was not trying hard enough:

It's like, "Yes, I'm trying hard enough. If I wasn't trying hard enough, do you think I'd be in tears, every day I came home, because the work was so hard?" ... My fourth grade teacher ... didn't think that I was trying hard enough; that was the reason why I was lagging behind, so I'm like, "I don't get this!"

"You're just not trying."

Next day, “This doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, try harder.”

“I don’t understand this.”

“You’re just not trying hard enough.”

James noted that he was prescribed Ritalin for attention-deficit disorder (ADD) and took it for two years but said that it only made his anger and emotions worse. His parents acknowledged that they had tried medications for ADD because James’s teachers insisted that his focus issues interfered with his learning how to read. When medication did not help James learn to read, his parents explained, his teachers said he was “willful and lazy.” In one meeting with James’s teacher, James’s parents reported that the teacher tried to start with some positive statements but quickly got into negative descriptions: “James is wonderful. James is disorganized. James distracts the class ... and there’d be this ... litany of things that he did.” Beyond their own experiences dealing with James’s dysfunction in school, James’s parents were keenly aware of the emotional consequences of his prolonged frustration. When James was in third grade, an eighth-grade boy, who James’s mother described as having a profile similar to James’s, committed suicide. James’s parents felt that this could be their child. James’s father explained:

And it was very much a wake-up call as a parent to say, ... “Where but for the grace of God, that kid could have been ours.” ... These parents did absolutely everything to try and get their kid the help that he needed. And for whatever reason, it just wasn’t enough.

James's father explained that he feared that if James stayed in the public school setting at the same failure rate, then James might resort to some kind of high-risk behavior.

It might not have been that [suicide], could have been drugs, could have been dropping out, could have been ... just checking out completely, could have been behavior. But, I was fearful that without some sort of positive intervention, he was going to be in that at-risk category in a middle school or high school setting.

As James's parents reflected on James's years in the public school system, they recognized their own role in blaming him for his disability. In time, they also came to realize that the teachers expected James to fix his problems himself. They feared that without a change in his learning environment, James would succumb to antisocial behavior. At multiple levels, James was being blamed for his learning issues and was being expected to find ways to remediate himself.

Beth also experienced blame for her disability through her years in the public school system. Her mother, Mary, explained that despite efforts to get teachers to modify schoolwork, the teachers continued to expect Mary to read books to Beth and to expect Beth to be able to do the work in school. Mary explained:

Beth came home in tears with a paper with a big red F on it. It was a paragraph, and [there were] sentences you had to answer based on the paragraph. [Beth] couldn't read it. [The teacher] wrote on [it], "Beth can't read this," and put a big red F on it.

Mary was furious and, as she described it, “stormed” into the school the next day. Despite modifications written into her IEP, Beth’s teacher had expected Beth to do the assignment assigned to the class.

Debbie’s oldest son experienced blame when he was accused of faking his disability in order to get attention. Debbie described one meeting with a special education director:

[The] special ed. director [sat] across from him and said, “You’re faking your disability.” I’ll never forget that: shaking her finger and saying that to him, and [I’m] saying, “Oh, 16-year-olds always do that. They always fake their disability so they get more attention...” I’m like, “Come on!”

Debbie also recalled hearing similar statements about both of her children. She explained:

... and he doesn’t apply himself and he needs to try harder.... I did hear that a lot. “Well, you know, he’s a boy, he doesn’t write neat—he needs to try harder.” I heard the same thing about Tim.

Mike recalled that teachers blamed him and got frustrated with him for not working fast enough. Mike remembered a teacher “telling me I need to work faster; ... ‘You don’t have all day.’” They would take me out in private and, like, ‘Can you maybe work, ’cause I don’t want to wait at least twenty minutes for you to work on one problem.’ Like, ‘OK, I’m sorry.’” Mike felt bad about his speed but also knew he was doing the best he could. He recalled other times when teachers directly questioned why he was not like the other children. One teacher asked, “Why aren’t you working

properly?” Mike replied, “Um ... excuse me?” The teacher repeated, “Why aren’t you working as ... well as the other kids.” Mike also recalled that a gym teacher once blamed him for not understanding directions and then called him a name. “He [the gym teacher] screamed at people when you’re not getting in the right position. For instance, if I’m standing on the sideline, he wants me to stand on the other one, ’cause ... they way he talks I can’t really interpret it right. ‘No, not over there, you idiot, over there.’”

Blame for these students took the form of a request to work faster, harder with more interest, more focus, and more accuracy. Some of the students had teachers who felt that emotional issues were blocking their learning potential. Yet these students were not alone in feeling blamed for their disability. Shaywitz (2003) reported that, in the early 1900’s the eye surgeon, E. Treacher Collins, who studied “word blindness” (then the term used for dyslexia), observed students who were blamed and bullied for a learning disability they had inherited through no fault of their own. Schwartz (2006) acknowledges that the blame-the-victim mentality remains an issue—one that is left over from the 1950s model of special education. Olson (2009) also noted that students with learning disabilities often felt “unfairly blamed” (p. 104) for their lack of effort, behavioral issues, and defiance, when in fact it was their learning disabilities that were interfering with their ability to learn. For the students Olson studied, blame often led to self-blame, which resulted in depression --a common diagnosis for students in this study, as well. Olson describes how students in her study maintained this sense of self-blame throughout their years of schooling, thinking of themselves as stupid and incapable of learning despite their tremendous effort to perform. Blame often appears in times of frustration, when students, teachers, and parents cannot make sense of a child’s inability

to learn and when all remedies seem to have been exhausted. Schwartz (2006) explains that because of the self-contained special education classrooms implemented in response to the 1975 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), many general education teachers today are left unprepared to deal with a diverse range of learners who are mainstreamed into their classrooms. There are no winners in the blame game. Students suffer emotional consequences, adults' concerns are never addressed, and the student's disability needs are not met.

c. Parents Blamed.

While their children bore the brunt of the blame, parents also experienced blame, expressed in how school personnel treated them. The parents felt confronted by school personnel who, they believed, perceived them as pushy and “neurotic.” Mary explained her frustrations:

I knew everything was wrong, that we weren't getting anywhere, that ... “Oh, well, we're giving you these services, what are you complaining about?” Then ... they started treating me like I was crazy and neurotic. It was like, “Well, we don't understand what your problem is.”

“Well, my problem is she's not learning to read.”

And then it was, like, “Well, it's not our fault.” The same thing, it's like, “Well, you know ... she can only do so much.”

Ella, Frank's mother, acknowledged that she had become a strong advocate for Frank's best interests. In that process, she noted school personnel's disrespectful

response: “So, I was ... really pushing. And I was always there and, of course, they would roll their eyes, like, ‘Here she comes again!’”

Libby, Nancy’s mother, sent letters to the math teacher when Nancy’s homework was too hard for Nancy to complete. Libby described the principal’s reaction:

And I would write letters, and they would get so mad at me for writing letters, and I’m like, “She doesn’t get it”... And one day [when] the principal was wild at me for sending letters to the math teacher to say this, I said, “Who do you want me to send it to? You know?”

Mike’s mother, Evelyn, also noted that teachers disliked her because she pushed for services: “Once again, the artillery showed up from downtown, the special liaison. She didn’t like me very much at all, ’cause I was very articulate about asking, ‘Well, why didn’t he have services for all these weeks at Wanely [a public school].’” In another meeting, Evelyn described a diatribe from school personnel in response to her advocacy for her child:

So this woman from downtown ... ripped me apart. And as she’s ripping me apart, I’m ripping right back. “You want your child to overachieve! You’re pushing a kid that doesn’t have the ability to do it!” Whew! What? I’m like, “No, he does have the ability. And she’s saying, one minute, he’s not very bright. And the next minute saying, “Well, he’s *only* two points off proficient in reading!” And I said, “Well, you can’t have it both ways.”

“Well, this is not a very good med. You know, Strattera is not a very good medication for ADD.”

I said, “Well, when did you get your PhD in medicine?” So she ripped, [and] I ripped right back.

Parents in this study who pushed school personnel to provide the educational resources that they believed their child needed felt they were perceived as overbearing parents who had unrealistic expectations. Many parents developed an adversarial, at times, contentious, relationship with school personnel, in which parents appeared to be blamed for their concern and ultimately for fighting for their child’s education.

Ella witnessed another kind of blame, which established criteria for behavior and learning based on a parent’s marital and socioeconomic status. She described an IEP meeting in which school officials were trying to understand her son’s behavioral issues and lack of academic progress:

They would look at each other on the team, “they don’t fit the quota.” And I’m like, “What’s this?”

“Well, you know, you’re married, you both live together, you don’t live in a housing project.”

And I’m like, “What does that have to do with a learning disability?” They just floored me, when they said that to me, that day. I was like, he’s having behavior problems because he’s frustrated, ’cause he can’t read, and you guys just don’t get it. And that’s what used to make me angry... “He doesn’t fit the criteria, for a student ... having problems like he was having.” ... And I was like, ... money has nothing to do with if you can learn or not, you know what I’m saying? ... I didn’t feel good that day, about them saying that. I was like, “Are you OK? I

mean, you don't say that about people. I'm sorry, you don't. Yeah, he has both his parents, but what's that got to do with it?"

School officials in this case looked to marital and socioeconomic status as one place to lay blame for a child's educational status. Frank did not fit their image of a child with learning and behavioral issues. Judgments of children's educational ability based on their race or socioeconomic status have long been documented in education. Oakes's (1985) groundbreaking work detailed a tracking system in schools that separated racial minorities and students of lower socioeconomic status, placing them in educational tracks with lower expectations. Harry and Klingner (2006) describe the disproportionate number of African American students placed in special education because they were assumed to have learning issues. Olson (2009) describes the "school wound" of "underestimation" (p. 48) when students with working-class parents are thought of and tracked as underachievers.

Blame for a child's learning issues takes multiple forms and doesn't only affect learning-disabled children and their families. Students were blamed for their lack of understanding and labeled as lazy and unmotivated. Parents were blamed for their advocacy on behalf of their child. Sometimes a child's educational ability is viewed through the lens of race, social class, or the parent's marital status. In these cases, children are, in effect, blamed for their background and, as a result, placed in an educational environment that may be detrimental for their learning.

Shaywitz (2003) noted this trend of blaming parents as well as using societal issues to explain reading difficulties. Shaywitz describes the experience of Peggy, a

parent of a learning-disabled child: “Perhaps most frustrating to Peggy was the attitude of the school. The principal acted as if Peggy had some unspecified emotional problems; the school guidance counselor suggested that she was an overly anxious mother. But no one at the school seemed to be doing anything to address Caitlyn’s lack of progress in reading” (p. 7). When Peggy tried to advocate for her child, she was viewed as having emotional problems. Children and parents are sometimes blamed for children’s learning issues, and blame has also been placed in unexpected places to explain the high prevalence of reading difficulties in the United States. Shaywitz (2003) notes that “Too much television watching, lax discipline in the classroom, teaching children to read too early or too late, and too many mothers working” (p. 31) have all been cited as reasons for the current high levels of reading difficulties in the United States, despite evidence that reading difficulties occur around the world, with no connection to ethnic or intellectual attributes (Shaywitz, 2003). Blame may be a way to try to make sense of frustrating situations in which answers may be hard to find or inconvenient to hear.

d. Student Coping Strategies.

Both the students and the parents developed coping strategies to deal with the stress and pain of school. All of the students reported hating school until they enrolled at Kelsey. Some of the strategies for coping were widely used; others were unique to particular children. For the parents, completing their child’s homework was one common strategy for dealing with their frustrations of watching their child struggle. For students, a common strategy was school avoidance. For example, Evette had seventy-two tardies during her fifth-grade year, which was her last year in public school. Evette’s mother explained her difficulties in getting Evette to school:

I was dragging her to school. I even threatened to drag her in her pajamas. I was literally, physically, dragging her out of bed and pulling her by her hair a few times, ... just whatever I could do to get her up and out. And by the time we'd get down there, we were anywhere from five to ten to fifteen minutes late.

Evette explained that she would kick, scream, yell, and do whatever else she could to avoid going to school. She tried putting the hairdryer to her forehead to simulate a fever and ripping up her homework, then saying she could not go to school because she had not done her homework. Evette described her school day as "torture." According to her mother, she was well known to the school nurse and occasionally called her mother from her cell phone to say that she was sick.

Other students developed day-to-day strategies. For Raya, it was getting out of the classroom as much as possible. Raya found the school nurse's office a haven from the stress of school:

She started coming home and she had about 200 "I love the nurse" stickers on her folder. It was like [the] *entire* folder was covered with [them], and when she pulled that out I was, like, "Why do you have so many of those?"

She goes, "Oh, well, I like the nurse." She'd go ... to the nurse to get out of class.... She was *very* good at that behavioral ... like, "I'm out of here," ... "My stomach hurts," that kind of thing.

Raya used other coping strategies as well. She copied from students she perceived as smarter and answered questions randomly on standardized tests. In the classroom, Raya explained, she would listen to what the "smart" kids were saying and then say the

same thing: “I would listen to what they said because most of them are smarter than me, and then I would say the same thing because I didn’t know what to say.” Raya’s mother explained further that when Raya was unable to finish her work, she had to put it in a green box to work on later. Raya found it embarrassing to put work in the green box, so she copied from others to avoid this embarrassment. In addition, she asked friends to tell her about books they were reading so she could talk about the book:

The teacher would ask questions, and she would raise her hand, stand up, and ... it appears as if she was reading the book, and I told her teacher that, she was like, “Well, you know ... she’s very interactive in class, and ...” And I said, “She’s not ... she can’t read that book, her friend’s telling her everything about it.” And then she used to have her sister read to her at home, and then she used to put a bookmark in the book and then verbalize what she had read, but she ... was faking.

Raya’s mother described Raya as a “professional at hiding her disability.” On standardized tests, when Raya had to fill in bubbles to answer questions, she just filled them in randomly:

There was a sentence and you had to answer it, like, A, B, C, and D. And I couldn’t read it, and I didn’t know the answer, and I just ... filled in each bubble ... ’cause I was like, “Oh yeah, this is going to take me forever,” and I was so scared ’cause everybody was, like, on the third page when I was on the first problem.... And so I just bubble-filled, and I was actually the first one done, and everybody was like, “Oh, my God! Raya, you are so smart,” I was, like, “Yeah.”

Raya used multiple strategies to get her through her day. She used visits to the school nurse as a way to stay out of the classroom. She used her friends to camouflage her disability. Raya appeared successful, as she was never put on an IEP.

James, like Raya, relied on friends to help him with his work. Rather than use the school nurse, he told “outlandish” stories to explain his missing work. His parents explained:

So ... as school broke down, this wonderful, rich, vivid imagination became sort of his comfort zone...[He told stories] to mask the fact that school was hard.... I think it was, “Gee, you know, James, you didn’t do your work.”

“I’m sorry, I’m really tired.”

“Well, why are you tired?”

“My father dragged me outside in the middle of the night.” You know, [he would say that his] Dad woke him up at two in the morning to go outside with night vision goggles, and they were out in the woods.

James also found excuses that would allow him to hide his disability. For example, his grandfather asked him a question about something in the newspaper. James could not read the newspaper. Rather than explain this to his grandfather, he made it clear that he would prefer another activity. James’s mother recalled the conversation:

“No, I really don’t feel like doing that, and I think I’m going to do something else.” And I thought, you know, to have to exert so much energy to mask something that ... really is OK, and really isn’t his fault, ... it’s just exhausting, and I think to have to go through that on a daily basis with his peers is really draining.

James remembers a close friend who helped him get through his work. James did not copy from this friend, but the friend stayed inside with him during recess:

He was one of those, caring kids, so if I had to stay in, he made sure he had to stay in, so I wasn't alone...He would ask me... "Are you staying in for lunch?"

"Yeah," so he would, like, slow down. "Oh, I haven't finished this!"

Probably, like, "I'm on the second one; OK, you want me to stay in and do it?"

Next day, "Are you staying in for recess?"

"No." [So] he breezes through ... the entire thing.

Another strategy James developed was to make himself look different. His parents noted that in trying to accept his academic difference, he distinguished his outward appearance by letting his hair grow long and getting a pierced ear when all the other kids were getting a buzz cut:

He started to make an outward show of the differences. And I don't think it was to be off-putting, I think he was sort of making a stand, of, you know, "I'm different, so I'm going to get my ear pierced, and I'm going to wear my [hair] long, and I'm ... different than all of you."

A unique strategy that James used was telling stories to explain his missing homework. James was one of the few students in this study who did not complain about going to school. He described having good friends at school, but he also talked about coming home in a bad mood and being yelled at by the teacher. He felt annoyed at the teacher, but he never talked about trying to get out of going to school.:

Well, I thought I was stupid. Until fourth grade, then I was just like, “You know what? I’m smart, and you guys are just stupid!” I had this completely different outlook; I would be ... completely devastated whenever the teacher yelled at me, but after that I would be, like, “Whew! You know what? I’m smart, and they’re not smart enough to realize that I’m smart, so ... I’m done with it.”

In a follow up conversation, James admitted that he really did not feel smart in fourth grade and that it was not until he was in his third year at Kelsey that he realized that he was smart. When he was in fourth grade, his mother explained, he thought of himself as “the village idiot,” and, according to his mother, he spent many hours with a therapist who helped him maintain his self-esteem.

Mike developed his own unique coping strategy: He learned to be an outstanding chess player. “I beat a lot of people, and people who called me stupid, I played them in chess and beat them, and they didn’t really say anything to me anymore. So ... it was pretty much my way of saying, ‘Don’t call me stupid ever again.’” Evelyn, Mike’s mother, added that Mike would actually make sure he had a good crowd and then he would “cream” the other player. It was Mike’s way of getting back at kids that embarrassed him about his academic challenges. Similar to Evette, Mike faked being sick to avoid school. When he told his mother he was sick but had no fever, she would say he had to stay in bed all day. He did this without objection, preferring to stay in bed all day with the curtains drawn than to go to school. Evelyn felt sure she had solved the problem of his feigning sickness by making him stay in bed all day, but she soon realized that she needed to adjust her policy to a no fever no staying home rule.

Faking sickness was a common strategy for many of the students. Ella explained that Frank would call her from school on a regular basis:

I mean, *every* day, to get Frank to public school, *every* day was ... “I have a stomach ache, I don’t feel good, I got to throw up.” Every single morning was like that. He’d call me from school, “I don’t feel good. Can you come get me?” It was *always* like that.

Nancy, who sobbed throughout our interview when she talked about her years before coming to Kelsey, explained that sometimes she took a day off of school:

“Sometimes ... I would skip school because I just couldn’t deal with it... Like, I would skip a Friday and then I’d have the weekend to, like, recover, and then I’d have to go back Monday morning.”

For these students, school represented a place of shame, embarrassment, and difficulty that required creative thinking to avoid. So they feigned illness, excused themselves to the nurse, called parents from school, and found alternative ways to maintain a sense of their own intelligence. In these ways, they managed to survive in an environment that challenged their sense of confidence rather than supported them.

e. Parent Coping Strategies.

The parents strongly identified with their children as a way of coping with the stress and struggles the children were enduring. This was evident in parents’ use of the pronoun “we” and in their involvement in their child’s homework. The education of their

child became a family project requiring hours of work by the parent, mostly the mother, doing or supporting the child's work in keeping up with school assignments.

I commonly heard parents use the pronoun "we" rather than the child's name when they spoke of their child's work. For example, Mel, Raya's mother, described the process of teaching Raya her letters: "*We* definitely had a hard time remembering letters." Libby, Nancy's mother, also used "we" when she talked about Nancy's grades:

We're getting C-pluses, a couple of B's, and she's ... you know ... "Needs to participate more in class." She comes in with her homework and ... it was because *we* did it."

Libby, knowing that Nancy struggled with homework, often did it for her—a common strategy for the families in this study.

Many parents started by helping their child with homework and, in many cases, moved to just doing the homework for their child to avoid witnessing their child's frustration. When Mary, Beth's mother, went to talk with the teacher about the homework, she used the pronoun "we," as homework truly was a group effort. Mary explained:

We would sit and do it together for hours. She'd be in the third grade, we'd be doing two, three hours of homework a night. And I went to them and I said, "*We can't* do this. This is horrifying; *we* can't do this."

"Oh, well, just do the best you can. Oh, and we'll make some modifications."

So they made modifications, like if they had a paper with ten math problems on it, she only had to do three.

Mary described the modifications as unhelpful, however, because Beth could not read the directions. So Mary read the directions, leaving Beth dependent on her mother to complete her homework assignments.

Evette's mother, Barbara, also pushed for homework modifications. However, in some cases, the modifications were insufficient to allow Evette to work independently. Despite Barbara's insistence that the work overwhelmed Evette, the teacher refused to modify further. At this point, Barbara started doing the homework for Evette, knowing that it was above her daughter's ability:

I'd be doing the reading with her because she couldn't access that material because it was difficult for her to read. I would read it, I'd have to explain it, and I felt that I was doing more of the teaching, which is why we would butt heads on occasion in fifth grade. There would be times that, because she would be so frustrated doing it, I'd say, 'OK.' And I would put down, "Dictated by Evette," because that was part of her IEP, that I could scribe for her. And, you know, it got to be the point that I scribed a lot.

Barbara scribed more than she wanted and, at other times, found herself actually doing Evette's homework. She related the unbearable struggles that ensued as she tried to get Evette to do her homework. Barbara explained, "What we'd end up doing, is end up in a screaming match sometimes because she just wouldn't want to get it done, and I'd end up finishing it off so that it would just be done."

Mike noted that he was unable to do the homework by himself:

I think about 95% of the time, Mom had to help me do my homework. She pretty much had to do the note cards. She had to tell me the answers. She had to write everything down in a big textbook.

Mike's mother, Evelyn, reported that she was working twenty hours a week helping Mike with his homework. She ordered books on tape for him, organized his spelling words, and gave him study sheets for tests. She felt this consumed the whole family, affecting vacation time as well: "It was like this big noose around our neck, constantly, constantly. Vacation time—wait! What vacation? We're spending it catching up and doing these horrible projects!" Evelyn knew she needed to help Mike in order for him to progress and to avoid embarrassment at school. For both Evelyn and Mike, Mike's schoolwork became all-consuming.

James's mother also found herself doing her child's homework. She recalled that by fourth grade, she read James's book report books to him to avoid embarrassment that he might endure if he read a book at his actual reading level:

I would read the books to him he couldn't. He just couldn't read at the level to what his reading level would have brought him in. [It] would have been so demeaning and embarrassing to say, "I read this as a book report."

Rather than have James face the embarrassment of presenting a book below his grade level, James's mother read a book to him so that he would appear to be reading at grade level.

Frank's mother, Ella, explained that she got tired of arguing with Frank about homework and, eventually, just did the work for him, because she knew he was not able to do it independently:

The frustration was horrid; to sit there and argue with him.... I was arguing with a kid that could not do it, 'cause he didn't have the *tools* to do it. He didn't *know* how to do it. To even write a sentence. And you know, towards the end, I would just, "Here. Gimme. I'll write this." And I'd write the sentences down for him and I'd give him, "Here, copy it." 'Cause I just couldn't deal with it anymore.

Tim was having shutdowns in school and the parents found themselves doing the homework just to get him to school:

He was just having a hard time and he [was] having shutdowns in the classroom and homework, at home a lot of times, he refused to do it, and basically, my husband and I did it. It was the worst thing you could do for your kid, and I think every special ed. parent makes that mistake in the beginning: You think you're helping them, and you're not.

These students developed their own coping mechanism to get through a difficult and stressful day of struggling to compete at the academic level of their peers. Their parents also reached heightened levels of frustration, sometimes finding it easier to do the child's homework rather than engaging in a nightly battle. The child's educational experience intruded into family life, as noted by one parent who felt the family could not vacation and by other parents who used the pronoun "we" in describing their child's

work. The all-encompassing nature of trying to help a child learn without the necessary tools and support pushed these parents to find another way.

4.3 Emotional and Financial Sacrifices

The students and families in this study experienced many sacrifices in their journey to the Kelsey School. Some parents paid for private tutoring and private testing, while all the parents paid for lawyer and advocate fees. They spent countless hours working with school personnel to get services to help their child learn, and then they spent innumerable hours fighting with the same people to get their child an out-of-district placement. For some students and parents, the emotional strain of this arduous journey had lasting effects. One child cried through most of our interview, and her mother developed an illness that doctors determined was likely brought on by stress. Other parents felt their child's self-esteem plummeted during these troublesome years of schooling. As tireless advocates demanding services, parents also dealt with negative perceptions of themselves from school professionals. Some families, recognizing the financial and emotional commitment required to get their child to Kelsey, discerned the inequity of a system that relies on parental resources and supports.

The parents of the students in this study all received some funding from their district schools for their child's education at Kelsey, a private school for learning-disabled students. Funding amounts varied depending on what each town offered, the nature of the child's disability, and the nature of their legal battle. Some were fully funded by their towns, while the majority received partial funding. Barbara borrowed money from her mother for Evette's first year while she brought a lawsuit against the

town for inadequacies in educating her child. The agreements between families and school systems varied between districts and between individual families. Where a child lives, the nature of the child's disability, and the lawyer hired can determine how much money a family will ultimately have to pay.

When the law stipulates that all children are entitled to an education it seems odd that individual families need to advocate for their children and demand services while paying lawyers to negotiate a desirable outcome. Mary hired a lawyer when no one from the school system contacted her after she had submitted the outside testing performed on her daughter. The lawyer walked Mary through the steps of applying to Kelsey and another school. With her lawyer's representation, Mary then began the fight to persuade the school system to pay for both summer school and the regular school year at Kelsey. Mary, a single mother, lacked the \$50,000 she needed for legal fees and her daughter Beth's tuition at Kelsey, but she knew she needed to make it work:

I was panic-stricken over the money. I'm like, "I don't have this kind of money. Where am I going to come up with this kind of money?" And then ... I don't know, it was like ... an epiphany, I was just sitting there and after two days or so, I went, "How can I not do this? So what if I ruin my credit rating? Who cares? How could you leave someone to flounder like that?" It was like she was in a lake and I wasn't doing anything to pull her out. So, I said, "I *have* to do this." So ... I just got great big student loans. And I said, "You know what? The worst that could happen is ... and it won't happen, is that I would have to pay the whole thing back."

Mary then began the fight to get the school system to pay. While many families make compromises, Mary was unwilling to settle. She explained:

After this much time, I wasn't willing to try anything else. I gave them two years of kindergarten and grades one, two, three, four. My child's life was passing her by. Well, they told me how wonderful she was doing in school, what a wonderful child she was, and how she tried so hard and everybody loved her. But nowhere does it say that Beth could read. So ... I wasn't willing ... and I told my attorney that: "I'm not willing to play footsie with them anymore. It's ... she goes to Kelsey and they pay. *That's* the way it is now. They lost their chance." It's not like I came to them and said, "This is what I want. Bingo!"

Mary succeeded in obtaining full funding for her daughter to attend Kelsey. However, she recognized the injustice of a system that only allows some children to receive this privileged education and a system that had put her through so much to get there:

I was just like, "This is wrong." I find it completely reprehensible that there are so many children that need help that will never get it, because they can't borrow sixty, seventy, eighty thousand dollars ... while they fight with the school department to get the child what the child needs. 'Cause I said that to my lawyer; I go, "What happens to people? People who are from foreign countries ... people who don't *know* any better?"

She goes: "Their kids end up in jail or on welfare."

I'm like, "It's not right." You know? You shouldn't *have* to do these ... ridiculous things. And some of the things I had to do are ridiculous ... just ridiculous.

In addition to the injustice of needing finances to fight for your child's education, Mary noted how people comment about the funds spent on special education:

And then, you have to deal with people who think that you have no right to take the money out. ... I think ... what's wrong with people? Every child deserves to learn to read; every child deserves to get the education to the best of their ability, whatever their ability is. And I'm ... just angry that ... they put me through so much, they put my child through so much, ... when it's something that should be ... every child's right.

Mary further explained how this fight for her child's education consumed her life. She also drew an analogy to her line of work, policing, noting how it might look if the same standards were applied:

So, it was very grueling. It was very, very grueling. It took over my life. People hated to see me coming; I know they did, 'cause I knew that ... I was at times all consumed by this fight, as opposed to everything else in my life. I kind of resent it, to be honest with you ... I do ... because ... I wouldn't treat people that way, in my profession, you don't ... if something happens to you If you walked out of here now, and somebody hit you with a baseball bat to steal your purse, we would do *everything* to put him in jail ... *everything* we could. We wouldn't ask you what kind of person you were, how much money you had ...

The differential treatment offered to some children with the resources to find their way to Kelsey disturbed Mary. In her career in police work, as she noted, the police act

on a person's behalf regardless of their background. Many of the parents I interviewed for this study understood how both financial and emotional stress disqualified many students from finding their way to Kelsey.

Mel, like Mary, recognized the injustice of this educational system. Financially, her family could ensure that her child received the proper education. Mel, in a conversation with her husband, discussed her fear that budget cuts in district schools would pull students unable to afford Kelsey on their own back into the public school system. She explained:

You know, Kelsey may end up like another private school that you can only go if you can afford it. So then it's just such an elitist thing, that you offer a certain type of education just because you can afford it, and no one else can take advantage of that type of environment. It's just so sad.

Despite the high cost of sending a child to Kelsey, both in tuition and in legal fees to win the battle with the district school, many of these parents knew they could not allow financial hardships to deter them from sending their child to Kelsey. In a conversation with her husband, Paul, Libby acknowledged the cost of sending her daughter to private school but also noted the absence of another option:

I don't care if I have to pay for it, Paul. I don't care. She is *not* going back there [the public school system]. I know what Kelsey can do for her for the summer, and I know what this public school is doing, and it's not it. And I did everything the lawyer asked me to do, and ... from second to sixth grade, excluding the lawyer, has cost us about \$40,000, and I have a husband who's on a disability at

35, so I'm the only one working. And I was like, "I don't care if I have to re-mortgage my house. She is going to Kelsey." And she would write in her diary every day: "I hate school. I hate school. I don't get it. No one understands me. I really want to go to Kelsey."

Libby explained the emotional sacrifices while noting the hardship for those who do not have support:

And I don't wish that on another child to be tormented. I mean, I thank God that I have my parents, I have four sisters and Paul's parents that ... financially helped us out, emotionally helped us out, 'cause there were days where I would be like, "I don't even want to get out of bed. 'Cause I don't even know what the next ... task is going to be." It was just so draining.

Libby recounted the cost and sacrifices on their lives both in time and their health:

We finally get our lives back together [when Nancy started to attend Kelsey], this poor girl doesn't have to go from testing to this, ... to be pulled out, you know? She's accepted where she is. My husband has two health issues neurologically, so we're at the doctors for him. I found out, ten years ago, I became a Type 1 diabetic, and ... they think that was stress ... brought on [by] the years ... helping Nancy ... there was no family history of it. I had a lot, that whole year.

In Libby's case, the fight to get Nancy a viable education took its toll in both financial and emotional sacrifices. Libby developed a stress-related illness but continued the fight until she secured Nancy's placement at Kelsey—an environment in which she surmised that Nancy would thrive. Libby recalled Nancy's suffering throughout her years in public

school and worried about the children whose parents were ignorant of the importance of advocating for a child who cannot access the education that is offered:

[It] was torturous for her! She's a lot stronger than I think some people are, 'cause I don't think I could have made it everyday, just feeling humiliated. And I said, "Uh!" you know? What about the kids that the parents don't fight for them, and ... how they're suffering inside?

For James's parents, like others in this study, the emotional stress and strain on both the family and the child during their years laboring for the proper education outweighed any of the financial stress and the ultimate fight with the school system to obtain funding. Peter, James's father, explained:

Financial stress is *nothing* compared to the kind of stress of your child failing and looking at this poor other kid who'd committed suicide, and thinking that could be your kid in four years....

Research shows that Peter's response is prescient. Adolescents with reading difficulties have higher rates of suicide than those without reading difficulties, suggesting the life-or-death importance of helping children learn to read (Stephanie, Adam, David, Elizabeth, & et al., 2006).

Ella mentioned her intent to pay an advocate, whatever the cost, to enlist help at her IEP meetings. Without the advocate, Ella feared that she would not be able to obtain the necessary services for Frank:

I paid her. She goes, “It will cost ...”, [and] I’m like, “I don’t care what it’s going to cost me, you come to *every* meeting with me.” And I did, I paid for her to drive to and from the meeting, and I paid for her to come to the meeting. I didn’t care what it was going to cost me, I was going to have her there.

During our interview, Ella became emotional as she recalled the moment she heard that Frank was accepted to Kelsey. She relayed both the joy and then the panic as she thought about finding the means to finance the tuition. Immediately, Ella contacted her advocate, who telephoned the town’s special education director. The advocate, aware that the school system would deny funding, instructed Ella to retain a specific lawyer from a well-known Boston firm. Instantly, Ella began incurring more fees:

So, I called [the lawyers] and they told me to fax everything over: the core evaluations, all my IEP stuff. They said, “And while you’re in the process, you need to send us a retainer fee of \$15,000.” I just choked. So I called my husband up and I’m like, “What do we do now?” and he goes, “Well, we have life insurance we can cash in.” So I said, “OK,” and we called the life insurance place and they’re like, “Yep”. If you need the money, you can borrow against it.” And we’re like, “OK.”

The advocate called the school with the name of the lawyer. With this new information, the school acquiesced, and agreed to pay for Kelsey. Despite the additional legal expenses she had incurred, Ella recalled that she felt as though she had won the lottery that day.

Evelyn described sacrifices of time. She organized Mike's homework, made study sheets, and obtained assignments in order to adapt them for Mike. In addition to the day-to-day work, Evelyn drove Mike to various after-school tutors. In our interview, she described driving fifty miles each way for six weeks during the summer in order to have Mike tutored in a special reading program.

Debbie was the only parent in this study who moved so that her children could attend Kelsey. Debbie's family lived on a farm six hours' drive from Kelsey. After visiting the school, Debbie decided that she must move so that her children could attend Kelsey. She rented a small apartment in a neighboring town, leaving behind her husband and farm. She described the strain on her marriage and the difficulty of maintaining her home:

In the beginning, we went home at least one weekend a month, and, of course, holidays and things like that. But it was ... very, very hard on my husband. He lost his job within three months that we were away ... He was working at a nursing home, [and] now he's driving a bus, [so] that was a big hardship, 'cause we had to pay health coverage for a couple of months, and things like that.

Emotionally, it's been very hard for him; he feels like we've deserted him, 'cause he definitely has the same learning disabilities they have.... So we all just lived in this one-bedroom apartment, and we have a picture of all these blow-up beds in this one room.... It's become a big strain on our marriage.

Debbie noted that the trip home has become harder, leaving the children with less time to see their father. But leaving a home she loved and even jeopardizing her marriage

were sacrifices she felt she had to make in order to get her children the education they needed:

They do miss their life. We did have a nice little happy family life on the farm. They do miss that and they see what it's done with, you know, it's strained now between them and Dad....And it's really put us financially in debt—unbelievable, ... especially with Cally, this is the third year we're footing the tuition.... And ... no amount of money could ever equate to what it's done for my kids. [*Gets emotional.*] ... This is one window of opportunity in my kids' lifetime, and I could say, "Well, I'll put that on hold for me. But this ... I *have* to do this; I can't put this on hold for them." I can't say, ... [when they're] thirty-five, "Oh, I wish I had done that for them." ...I know that when they get out of here, they're going to have the normal bumps and bruises, rather than the normal bumps and bruises *along with baggage*. They're not going to have that baggage dragging them down on top of it.

Unlike other parents in this study, Debbie experienced firsthand how school personnel might deny a child an appropriate education. Her older son graduated from high school with a sixth-grade reading level and continues to struggle today. He began receiving help when he started to attend Kelsey's affiliated college. From this experience, Debbie knew the consequences of relying on the public school system to educate her children in the way they needed. Her sacrifices for her children were both emotional and financial, and also life-altering.

The parents in this study experienced both financial and emotional sacrifices as they pursued their efforts to have their child attend the Kelsey School. They noted their own suffering while at the same time acknowledging their privilege in having the means to assume the financial burden of pursuing an accessible education and the ability to obtain the necessary support systems to go through the process. While the public school system presents as providing an equal education for all children, privilege in schooling has been widely challenged both in the division of resources and in the way students gain access to better education (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Kozol, 1991; Oakes, 1985; Olson, 2009). The parents of these learning-disabled children enjoyed the advantage of getting their child to Kelsey, while at the same time understanding how many other children are left behind.

Multiple barriers prevented these students in this study from learning to read; yet their parents persisted in pursuing an alternative educational environment once they fully understood the barriers. Although these families managed to deal with the financial consequences of pursuing an education at this private school, many other families with children who need the services offered at Kelsey might encounter these same barriers without the means to overcome them.

4.4 Catalysts that Promote an Accessible Education

Seeing their child continue to struggle with reading, with little progress, motivated all of the parents in this study to take the role of educational advocates. Along their journey, they encountered various catalysts that provided the necessary tools to finding success. These catalysts included: 1. The parent's relied on their own parental

instinct, which served as a significant catalyst providing the parents with the assurance that their child could learn. 2. The parent's ability to read their child's behavioral and emotional changes clued them in to their child's frustrations. 3. A person with experience in special education served as an additional catalyst directing them to the Kelsey School. 4. The parents educated themselves in special education law and dyslexia in order to understand their child's disability. 5. The parents acknowledged their own loss of trust in the public school system creating the final push for them to exit the public schools.

a. Parental Instinct.

Parental instinct set in motion the push for advocacy. All of the parents were convinced of their children's ability to learn, despite messages to the contrary from school personnel. These parental instincts arose from the experiences of parenthood and from knowing and understanding their child. Many parents knew what "normal" learning or "delayed" learning might look like based on parenting an older child. These parents held on to their belief in their child's ability to learn and achieve, despite test scores and testimony from local school officials that the misguided parent simply did not understand the child's true academic abilities.

For some parents, the knowledge they had gained from raising older children provided them with benchmarks to use in understanding this younger child's learning difficulties. Four of the families interviewed—the families of Raya, Beth, Polly, and Tim—included older siblings who, for their parents, helped to define the parameters of

“normal” and “abnormal.” This gave the parents a clue that the younger child might have learning issues. Raya’s mother, Mel, explained:

We definitely had a hard time remembering letters, learning letters, writing letters; that was a big job in kindergarten. The repetition of all that, you know, we’d show it once and then she would get it, and then she would see it two seconds later and there was no recognition that she had ever seen it.... And having an older daughter, I kind of was like—my older daughter couldn’t have been *that* spectacular, but this is where we are. So that’s kind of when I started clueing into it....

Comparing the capability of her older daughter to Raya, Mel began to suspect that learning issues were the cause of Raya’s delay.

Beth had older grown siblings. Her mother, Mary, recognized issues in Beth’s learning to read but felt that school personnel viewed Beth as an uneducable child. They said that Beth tested at a low-average IQ and that Mary expected too much of her daughter. Mary, however, remained confident in Beth’s ability. In our interview, I asked Mary about her level of confidence in Beth’s abilities, given the information to the contrary she had received from school professionals in the school system. Mary explained that her personal experience in raising two older children provided this confidence:

I never thought they [the school system] were right, because I already had two children who were normal. Whatever “normal” is, but who sailed through school. They were above-average students. I knew what to expect with development, you

know? I was fairly confident in my abilities as a parent, 'cause I'd already had two children through adulthood. If you make it through the teenage years, you can make it through anything! So, you know, I was confident.

Mary's parental knowledge gave her confidence to continue fighting for her child's education.

For two of the parents in this case study, having an older child with learning issues immediately put them on guard for the younger child. Polly's mother, Lesley, explained:

But even though her first kindergarten teacher said she could go on to first grade, I didn't think she was ready; I didn't think that she had mastered all the letters, all the sounds ... I didn't think she was doing as well as the other kindergartens were. I saw that the older brother had had some difficulties in school and I just wanted her to have the advantage of another year of kindergarten. So I ... requested that and, with a bit of hesitation, was granted that.

Lesley remained involved and watched Polly's progress as she started in first grade. Teachers began to notice difficulty in reading and writing and therefore instituted some remedial instruction in the classroom. Lesley became alarmed:

Red flags went up because my son I think at that point was already on an IEP, three and a half years older than her, and having had some learning difficulties himself. So pretty much January [of] first-grade year, she had a core evaluation and she was placed on an IEP.

Lesley's knowledge of a possible learning disability came from her experiences with her older son. She insisted that Polly remain in kindergarten for another year despite the school professionals' insistence that Polly's work in kindergarten showed her readiness for first grade. Lesley pushed for the core evaluation and got Polly on an IEP before the end of first grade.

Professionals in the local school system viewed Raya and Beth as functioning well below average, suggesting that their cognitive faculties would hinder their performance. Their parents countered this notion, as each viewed their child as capable of learning beyond the school professionals' expectations. In Polly's case, the school professionals viewed her as progressing normally, but her mother independently identified potential learning issues and advocated for both retention and testing. In all three cases, the parent countered the school system professionals and pushed for what the parent saw as the best avenue for their child's education.

Tim, the youngest of three children with dyslexia, benefited from his mother's knowledge of the academic struggles of her older children. With eight and a half years' difference between Tim and his oldest brother, Robert, Tim entered kindergarten as Robert's disabilities in high school were becoming evident. During the interview, Tim's mother, Debbie, explained that she initiated early intervention for her middle child, Cally, and for Tim at a younger age than she had for Robert. Debbie noted:

They all had early [intervention.] Robert, we didn't start until four years old; Cally, we started at three; Tim, we started at eighteen months.... [B]y the third kid, you're like, oh, wait a minute: [the] antenna goes up and you're like, "No."

And you find out how many professionals with degrees don't have a clue, because

my kids have no behavior problems, they're well-loved; it shows. They're happy kids. And so, they're the kinds that slip through the cracks, because ... they're going to sit there and suffer and not interfere with anybody.

Aware that her oldest son had graduated from high school with a sixth-grade reading level, Debbie knew her children needed a different kind of education. She presented this knowledge to the younger children's teachers: "I made a big mistake with my older one; this is not going to happen to Cally and Tim. You're going to have to teach them differently." Debbie kept a watchful eye on her two younger children and demanded more from the teachers. She followed her instincts because she knew what her children needed.

Polly, Tim, Raya, and Beth directly benefited from knowledge their parents had gained through raising older children. These parents and the others in the study also built on their core instincts that their children could learn, based on the parents' intimate and consistent knowledge of their child and how he or she behaved in many different situations. Nancy's mother, Libby, described simply knowing her daughter's capabilities. Nancy has an older sister, but her mother, Libby, did not say specifically that her knowledge of the older sibling's academic development aided her understanding of her younger child's learning issues. Libby explained that she just knew that her younger daughter could learn:

When you talk to her, she's very intelligent when talking to you, so you know that she can learn.... It wasn't like keeping her back was going to help her. Because she had a disability; I knew she had a disability. You just knew it. And I said

keeping her back isn't going to help her.... She doesn't get it now and she hasn't been getting it so ... she has to be learning differently.

Libby knew her daughter had the capacity to learn, but retaining new knowledge proved challenging if not impossible. So Libby suspected a learning disability:

She could not even get the basics of two plus two. She would say, "Two plus two is four," but if you asked her two minutes later, "What's two plus two?" she had no idea. She'd have to start counting on her fingers. She could never ... memorize, ... have them stick into her brain that, "OK, once I learn this, it'll always stay with me." It just never clicked for her.... And her reading was very, very slow; she couldn't comprehend anything. So I said [to my husband], "You know, there's a lot more going on here."

Like Libby, Mary felt confident that her younger child, Beth, was capable of learning more than the teachers in the local school system suggested. Mary's knowledge of Beth gave Mary additional confidence:

They ... tested her [and] said she had a ... low-average IQ, but there's a lot of scatter. So ... but still, she was low-average IQ, so I ... was expecting too much. I said, there's nothing low-average about this child: I live with this child every day. I'm not delusional; she's an intelligent child. Anyone who asks 400 questions a day to the point where you want to jump out the window ... about, "Explain this to me, explain that to me," is an intelligent child.

Mary remained convinced that she knew her child best despite the messages she received:

It's like they treat your child like your child is retarded and you know that they're not. And they try to make you think that—that they're not capable, and you have to trust your own instincts.... Every mother knows what their child is capable of ... themselves, and it's not delusional. Every mother knows. 'Cause ... you're with your child every day; any pediatrician worth their salt will say to you, "If I want to know, I'll ask the mother, 'cause the mother knows." And ... it's the same about their development: If ... she wasn't capable, I would know, but ... they tried to make me think that I was deluding myself into thinking that she could be capable of something, and I know I wasn't.... I was that confident in myself, I guess I was lucky that way.

Mary's strong parental instinct maintained her confidence in her child's academic abilities. Evelyn, Mike's mother, like Mary, trusted her parental knowledge regarding her son's cognitive ability, based on his ability to learn chess and build complex structures:

The fact that he could play chess, he could build *amazing* structures, he could ... go and buy a Lego that was three or four years above his ... chronological age, and he would sit there with those instructions, and yes, he would get frustrated; sometimes he'd throw them in a heap, but he would go back to that, and he would get that thing made. He would make it. I knew because he could persevere.... And he could look at ... picture cues, he could put stuff together. You know, as a mother, I didn't give up hope.

Tim's mother, Debbie, with the support of a group for mothers of children with disabilities, also felt that she knew her child's abilities best: "You know we [the support

group] all knew that we knew our kids better than these people [the school system] did, and we believed that, so we supported each other that way.”

Raya’s parents both rejected information from school officials and chose, instead, to believe in their daughter’s ability to learn. Raya’s mother, Mel, explained during our interview that in one of her meetings with school district professionals, they informed her that she and her husband held unrealistically high expectations for their daughter. Raya’s test scores came back low, making it difficult, according to Mel, to attend the IEP meetings [hearing consistently low scores]. Yet despite the disappointing test scores and the opinions of school officials, Raya’s parents refused to accept a dismal outlook for their child. Mel explained:

It was frustrating as a parent to go through [the meetings] because their test results would come back and they would say, “Well, you know, she’s in the fifteenth percentile for *this*....” And my husband, in particular, ... said ..., “Would ... you be happy with these percentiles if this was your child?” He’s like, “You’re comparing them, like, this is a comparison of kids that are in Harlem that don’t have any ... I mean, they basically have no schooling or no support, and ... you know ... the family life can be tragic, and ... here we are fully supporting her, and you’re saying that this is OK that she’s in the fourteenth percentile.” And they basically looked at my husband and said, “Well, you’re looking for a Mercedes, Mr. Darby and we’re offering you a Chevy.” And he said, “Damn right, I want a Mercedes, and we will be leaving.”

This “Mercedes–Chevy” meeting became a turning point for Raya’s parents. Mel reported that after this meeting, she and her husband knew they would get Raya into

another school. Raya's parents maintained confidence in rejecting what they heard from the school officials. They felt confident enough, given their home environment that their child could and should succeed. With this confidence, Raya's parents ignored the school officials' claims that their daughter was doing the best she could.

As another example, Frank's mother, Ella, knew from an early age that Frank had dyslexia. She was confident of this despite the comments from school officials that he had attention-deficit disorder (ADD). Although in our interviews, Ella never described having any instinctual knowledge of Frank's intelligence and capabilities, she firmly believed that the school had misdiagnosed him, and she refused to resort to medicating him for a diagnosis even his doctor had not identified. Ella knew the importance of Frank learning to read, and she maintained her high expectations. Ella noted:

We started kindergarten and I kept asking the teacher faithfully, ... "Is he delayed? I see other kids doing better than him."

"No, he'll catch on, he'll catch on."

Well, he'd never catch on, so we tutored all summer long after kindergarten. We started first grade, same thing. "No, he'll catch on." So every year was, "He'll catch on, he'll catch on." ... They didn't want to admit that he had dyslexia. They kept saying it was ADD, ... So I brought him to the doctor; he's like, "No, he doesn't have ADD." He goes, he probably has ... just ... like, a learning disability.

Ella explained her frustration that the school personnel continued to encourage her to put Frank on medication for ADD. She noted that she often broke into tears:

They would say to me, "Why are you crying?"

I'm like, "This is my son; it's his future. If he can't read, he *has* no future." So I was really pushing. And I was always there and, of course, they would roll their eyes, like, "Here she comes again!" But he's my son, and I'll do whatever I can to help him, so that he's better off in life later on.

While school professionals insisted Frank would eventually learn to read, Ella became frustrated with Frank's lack of progress and transformed herself into an advocate for his education. Throughout his education in public school, Ella questioned his progress with school officials and eventually hired an advocate to get him the services she felt he needed.

All of these parents maintained their confidence in their child and refused to accept school officials' opinions about their child's lack of academic ability or reading progress. In some cases, despite dismal test scores, persistent negative messages about their child's abilities and limitations, or assurances that reading skills would develop, each of these parents used knowledge gained from their experiences parenting other children, along with their gut instinct and knowledge of their own child, to keep them on a solid footing as they continually rejected what they were hearing.

This research raises questions about outcome for children whose parents may not have the confidence to use their own instincts to challenge what they hear from school professionals. For parents unfamiliar with how to advocate for their child, who advocates for these children, and what happens to their learning? All of the parents told me they were happy to participate in the study even if it helped just one child. If one family did not need to go through what they went through, they felt it was well worth it. Olson (2009) quotes a college student reflecting back on her school years and noting the

consequences of a lack of parental advocacy: “I had never been documented as having a learning disability. I was just considered a slow reader or lazy, my parents were not providing honors-track pressure on the school or me. This lack of advocacy allowed the school to sweep me under the rug” (pp. 48–49).

As a social worker and teacher in the public schools, I see my job in part as an advocate for the child’s education. Yet, before conducting this research, I did not appreciate how little I knew about children with language-based learning disabilities. I never understood the anxiety of a child who could not read or the frustrations of a parent who lives with that child. As a school professional, I thought I did my job well, but I lacked the education and firsthand experience that I needed to fully understand these learning-disabled children. Unfortunately, I am in good company: Many other school professionals also lack the necessary training to identify and work effectively with children with differences in abilities (Olson, 2009). As a result of my own ignorance about learning-disabled children, I missed opportunities to advocate for the children I taught and worked with as a counselor. I wonder about the parallels between my experience and the experiences of parents who, similarly, are unaware of the importance of school advocacy.

A public school system should provide access to education for all students, giving them every chance to succeed as required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. Yet, for the learning-disabled students in this study, acquiring an education that met federal goals and requirements seemed possible only when a student’s parents pushed back against the professional advice of school officials. Parents found the confidence to do this

by following their parental instincts and relying on their personal knowledge of their child.

b. Notice of Behavioral and Emotional Changes.

In addition to instinctively knowing their child's ability, parents also read their child's behavioral and emotional changes as clues that something was not right in their learning. The behavioral changes tended to emerge around the time when other students were learning to read. This understanding of their child's behavioral changes was another factor leading to parental advocacy on behalf of their child.

Mel explained what happened with Raya:

This is first grade, and [in] the beginning months of first grade ... she just started getting very emotional.... We'd bump into her, she would start crying, it was *not* like her *at all*.... [I]t just started escalating from there. I just knew she needed help because she was ... just becoming sadder. You know, I thought ... yeah, she was sad at school, she didn't like school; she'd come home... [I]t was carrying over at home: You know ... very grumpy, ... never wanted to do her homework, doing her homework at night in second grade, ... just those few pages they get would produce *tears*, and I just was like, "Something is really wrong."

Mel took Raya to a psychologist based on the school's recommendation that psychological problems were preventing her from learning. The psychologist diagnosed Raya with clinical depression. Mel now recognized the severity of Raya's issues:

And as a parent it's so frustrating to sit and watch your kid just ... she was clinically depressed; that's what Dr. Shirley said in second grade because she saw

Dr. Shirley too before she came here [Kelsey]. She said she thought she was stupid, she didn't feel good about herself. ... Anything she did, ... "Oh, I can't do that. I'm stupid," or "I can't." ... She just was giving up. She would say she was stupid *all* the time, and either someone was saying that to her, or ... where would she get that? ... That's what was concerning. We just felt she was in such a hole, that we were ... like, "We are out of here." ... And ... that's why we came [to Kelsey].

A neuropsychological evaluation by Dr. Beth Stanson dated June 6, 2005, states:

The parents reported that academic difficulties have been noticeable since her entry into first grade. At the beginning of that school year, Raya's behavior changed "drastically." Parents saw regression at home with "meltdowns" and not wanting to be read to or to attempt reading. At school, Raya avoided schoolwork.

It was no mystery why Raya was not feeling good about her academic ability. In an interview, Raya explained that she was pulled out of class, went to summer school, and was described as "stupid":

I remember that I was taken out of my classes ... every day to do work because they didn't know why I wasn't doing anything right or getting anything done the right way. I'd always be at ... summer schools and ... programs, but, like, they didn't know what was wrong. I only had a few friends because a lot of people made fun of me for being, like, dumb.

Raya's behavioral changes, like Mike's, occurred mostly at home. Evelyn, Mike's mother, described her frustration that Mike's behavior was often directed at her, while he showed few behavioral problems at school. Evelyn described Mike's behavior and his anger toward her:

He was angry. He was ... pissed off with me, he was pissed off with everybody. But he was really nice to the teacher. He'd come home and I would get a rash. He would just be horrible, horrible! But he'd be nice as pie at school, and the teacher never saw it. She's like, "I don't see what you're saying; I don't get it, I don't see it." Finally one day, I came to pick him up [and] he started ... he had these panic attacks, and he would, you'd drop him off in the playground and there's 600 kids and he would just start a meltdown. He would just stand there and freeze. The kids would all be lining up, going to the classroom, and he wouldn't move. Or he'd go and hide.

Mike's behavior became extreme. In first grade, he locked himself in the bathroom and refused to come out. During our interview, Evelyn described removing the bathroom door to get him out. At this point, Evelyn obtained a prescription for anxiety medication for Mike. Yet Mike continued to have meltdowns and became disparaging of himself especially by fifth grade. Evelyn reported:

It became a horrendous year, 'cause they were always assigned the homework on Mondays, so he would come home on Mondays and you could guarantee on Mondays, he would have a massive meltdown.... Crying, banging his head on the

table, puking. “I hate school, I hate myself! I’m dumb! I’m stupid!” All these disparaging things he would say.

Evelyn felt Mike was overwhelmed with all the work. Even if she tried to break it down into manageable portions, he could not handle it. Mike recalls how he felt:

I was just very depressed. I remember, almost every single day I went crying to my room, I was really depressed. I hated my life, I’ve said that out loud. On top of my schoolwork, I just said, “I’m an imbecile.” I wrote all this bad stuff about me.

Like Raya, Mike received counseling for depression.

The school professionals also identified Evette for counseling services. School officials suggested that Evette’s emotional issues were interfering with her learning. Evette’s mother, Barbara, reported that the school professionals encouraged her to get counseling for Evette because she was “depressed, anxious, irritable—all signs that they thought she as a child at risk at that point.” She had been in a self-contained classroom from second grade through fourth grade. When Evette reached fifth grade, Barbara thought that mainstreaming might be better for Evette. But the fifth-grade mainstream placement brought its own set of problems. Trying to keep up with the work proved impossible. According to Barbara, Evette became more and more despondent. Evette went to great measures to avoid going to school including feigning sickness, ripping up homework, and screaming. Evette described feeling singled out and hating going to school: “In public school you’re like completely singled out ... into, like this freak and ... no one else is like you.” Evette explained that students even accused her of faking it: “You’re faking it to get attention, we know you’re faking it.” During our interview,

Evette expressed her feelings about going to school. “No! No! No! Please don’t make me go! ’Cause it’s like torture to go. It was like torture to go.” Barbara described her fears about leaving Evette in public school for the next year:

I didn’t want her going through sixth grade at the middle school, because my fear was that I would lose my child. Because she was just getting more and more despondent about going to school, had nothing positive to say about school, was finding everything she could do to avoid doing her homework and everything, staying up late and not wanting to go to sleep, ’cause if there was a test the next day, she wouldn’t fall asleep until almost two or three in the morning because she’d just get so hyped that there was a test the next day, and then would have a bad day doing it. There were a couple of times, though, when she was really, really sad. She says: “I don’t want to go. I just want to stay home. Keep me home from school, or else I’m gonna hurt myself.” She only threatened it once, but it was enough that I really became concerned.

Evette’s emotional state and her resistance to going to school persuaded Barbara that she needed to find alternatives for Evette.

Tim, like many other students, showed some behavioral symptoms at school. According to Tim’s mother, Debbie, the teacher did not appear overly concerned. But Debbie could see that Tim’s frustrations during the day were affecting his behavior at home and in school:

I see him still melting down.... And they’d say, “Oh, well he *does* go under the desk when we ask him to write.” It’s like, “OK.” I said, “And one time, he’s not going to come back for you, he’s going to stand up with the desk and throw it at

you.” I said, “He stuffs it.... I see it at home, he stuffs all day when he’s with you, and then ... it’s nothing that we did wrong at home, but instead all that frustration ... that he’s stuffed all day in school, we may look at him wrong and it’s like: ‘That’s it! I’m not doing this!’ You know? And it’s like, ‘Wait a minute.’ And then he’ll go ... he’ll have to go find a space outside.”

Libby, though aware of Nancy’s dislike for school, did not appreciate the full impact of school on Nancy’s emotional state until she took her to a therapist: “And [the therapist] says, ‘But you can see, when I talk about school, she starts fidgeting and biting her nails and is getting uptight. So, she *is not* coping with it.’” Nancy cried several times during my interview with her as she recalled her schooling before coming to Kelsey. Nancy had disguised any behavioral changes, but she appeared to struggle emotionally.

Frank’s mother, Ella, did not comment on any behavioral changes at home but noticed that Frank was getting into trouble at school: “He was frustrated, ’cause he was starting to act out.... He got in trouble quite a bit in school.” Ella connected Frank’s frustration in schoolwork to his “acting-out” behavior in school.

Although James did not exhibit the same behavioral challenges as other students in this study, his parents’ concern centered on his increased anxiety about participating in any school activities that might take away from his academics. James refused to participate in special school programming because he feared he would fall behind in his work:

James refused to take music lessons, because the music lessons were scheduled during school, so he would miss schoolwork. So, even in September, when this

became an option, James said, “I can’t miss the school work, ’cause then I’ll fall behind.” And it was just this whole litany of, “I can’t do this really fun thing because I’m gonna miss important schoolwork, and then I’m going to have more homework, and then I’m going to be falling behind and then the kids won’t like me, and ...” You know, it’s just this whole big mess of “Can’t do it,” and I was thinking, “OK, when you have a kid who needs that outlet and who’s sitting here saying, ‘I can’t do it,’ for all these reasons that really made sense, there’s something wrong.

The parents of these students observed behavioral and emotional changes in their children that signaled a climax of frustration in their schooling. Based on these clues from their child, along with their belief in their child’s ability, the parents were motivated to become ardent advocates for their child. Like many other school professionals, I tended to disregard the clues to what lay behind a child’s behavior. I often thought parents were out of line when they seemed to be excusing their child’s behavior. I realize that I often failed to interpret both children’s behaviors and their parents’ understanding of these behaviors. When a child threw a desk down in the middle of reading time, I failed to see the connection and the child was disciplined for this behavior rather than taking this behavior as a signal that this child’s frustration and embarrassment had reached a climax.

c. Experienced Helper.

In all of these case studies, one catalyst to action was the involvement of someone who provided information that helped direct the parent to the process that, in turn, led

them to enroll their child at the Kelsey School. This person may have been a relative with knowledge of special education, an insider in the school system who might have worked at Kelsey, an outside tester, a friend, or a co-worker. No consistent procedure or process identified these students as dyslexic, nor, once identified, were students consistently directed to a program either within the school system or offered by an outside provider. Rather, this appeared as a more random process resulting from parental advocacy and, often, a serendipitous encounter with a person who might direct the parent to the proper testing, to an advocate, or directly to the Kelsey School.

For example, early in Frank's educational career, Ella learned that her son, Frank, might have learning issues. When Frank was in preschool, a former Kelsey teacher talked with Ella: "She told me, she says, 'I shouldn't tell you this, but Frank [is] dyslexic.' She goes, 'I know it, I see it.'" Armed with this knowledge, Ella became diligent about getting services for Frank and eventually, on advice from her sister, hired a school advocate when Frank reached second grade: "Second grade, I got smart, I got an advocate. 'Cause my sister, that's what she ended up doing to get Nolan here [Kelsey]... I didn't think I was getting the services I deserved. And I wanted somebody that knew." With the heads-up from a former Kelsey employee, Ella knew to watch Frank's progress. In addition, her sister's experience informed her that an advocate would help her obtain the needed services. Eventually, it was the advocate that helped bring about the move to Kelsey:

She [the advocate] said the biggest thing was, we have to prove that they can't educate him. And they're going to try to do everything under their power to keep

him here. And we just have to prove that he's not going to advance. So that's basically what we did.

With the help of the advocate, Ella demonstrated Frank's lack of progress and substantiated the need for a different learning environment. Ella recognized the importance of the advocate in getting Frank to Kelsey. She noted that she now recommends advocates to people she knows with struggling children. She explained her reasons for participating in this study:

Anybody that has learning problems in school, that's the first thing I tell them to go get, is an advocate. 'Cause *I* didn't know. And how *would* I know ... about any of that stuff? You know, until you experience it, you don't know; and ... that's why I agreed to do this with you, because if I can help just one person, ... and just make their life so much easier ... my life is a hundred times easier with Frank being here than Frank being in public school.

In another case, multiple people along Mike's educational journey helped his mother, Evelyn, put the pieces together that culminated in Mike's going to Kelsey. A teacher recognized Mike's challenges and recommended that he get testing outside of the public school system. The teacher suggested outside testing after witnessing Mike behaving inappropriately toward his mother:

This day, I said to him as we were leaving, ... "Oh, this afternoon, you're going here." I can't remember where we were going, and he just let me have it. And the teacher's standing there ... [*Laughs*] ... 'cause she'd never heard him. She finally saw what I had been telling her, and then she said to me: "We've got to get him

tested ...” And she said to me, “You didn’t hear it from me, you need to have him tested outside [not within the school system].”

Before this incident, Evelyn recalled having conversations with the pediatrician and starting the process of getting outside testing. The teacher’s apparent lack of confidence in the testing provided by the school system also confirmed the need for an outside evaluation. The testing showed increased levels of anxiety, so Evelyn placed Mike on medication, but his learning issues remained. Another outside tester eventually diagnosed Mike with dyslexia and recommended the Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing (LiPS) reading program. Instead, the school chose the Wilson Reading System, which Evelyn later discovered was considered less effective than the LiPS program.

To reinforce the Wilson reading program that Mike received at school, Evelyn hired another Wilson tutor when Mike was in fourth grade. This tutor asked whether something else was going on: “She kept saying to me, ‘Evelyn, there’s a problem. He doesn’t get this. I don’t know why they move him up.... [He] does not have a clue.’” Evelyn shared this with Mike’s school reading teacher, who had been praising Mike’s progress. But Evelyn persisted, and enrolled Mike in a summer tutoring program. Talking with another parent outside a tutoring session, Evelyn learned about Joe, a tutor from Kelsey. Although Mike continued in the public school, Evelyn now knew about Kelsey from these sources.

James’s parents, Mia and Peter, were also directed to Kelsey by both a school system professional and an outside evaluator, who, in combination, planted the idea of an outside placement. Both Peter and Mia felt that James’s evaluation, done by school professionals, lacked sufficient information. A school counselor suggested an outside

evaluator and gave them the name of a tester. The private evaluator recommended an out-of-district placement for James. Mia explained their reaction: “And at the time, you know, we said, ‘Absolutely not! We’re public school kids. We think that we’re gonna be able to make this work.’” Peter added, “We moved to this town just so we could send the kids to this school.” Mia explained the tester’s reactions:

So she said, “Well, you might want to find an advocate, just to sort of help you, work through the process and understand what your rights are.” And so she referred us to an advocate who, again, we were very naïve, and said, you know, “We don’t want the team meetings to become confrontational....”

Mia and Peter kept James in the public school through his fourth-grade year, trying to find ways to work with the school system and make it successful for their son.

Eventually, however, Mia and Peter used an advocate and enrolled James in Kelsey.

For many parents, the process of learning about their child’s disability and getting their child to Kelsey centered around knowing about their rights to ask for school testing as well as knowing the differences between school-based testing and private testing outside the school system. The outside evaluator, paid for out of pocket by the parents, appeared to start the process by which they came to understand their child’s learning issues. Public schools do not traditionally advise parents about or promote the use of private, non-school-based testing. Parents in this study learned on their own or from another person that an outside evaluation may offer more assistance in understanding their child’s learning issues. Raya’s mother, Mel, described the resistance she received from school professionals when the parents inquired about testing. The teacher suggested that Raya was a little delayed but “developmentally on track” and that given more time

“it would come together.” Mel noted that, “we bugged them some more, they finally did some testing, but they didn’t come up with anything really shocking.” Mel persisted with outside testing after talking with a friend:

I knew through a friend that I was talking to, that they [the school system] don’t do the full set of tests, they don’t do the neuropsych part, which would give me more insight into what type of learner she is. So that’s why we did that [got outside testing], and then the whole time, she was being tutored by a woman in town who did have some Kelsey connections, because I kind of was thinking—what? “Can you give me some background of what kind of learner she is, and what kind of environment might be good for her?”... They [the school] were giving us no answers, none. So when we had her tested outside of school, it was like a *complete* red flag; they were like, “She is dyslexic.” They didn’t even question it. And so we brought that information to the school, [but] they said they thought it was too early to identify her with that type of diagnosis ... so we just said, “We’re out.” We just felt like why waste ... Raya’s time at that point?

As a result, Raya entered Kelsey in second grade, the earliest grade possible. For most of these parents, out-of-school testing offered a more comprehensive and unbiased view of their child compared to the school testing.

Libby sought outside testing for her daughter, Nancy, because Libby’s sister, a special education teacher in another system, told her to ask for it. A second sister’s friend, who worked as an advocate, helped them get Nancy into Kelsey: “So ... a friend of one of my other sisters was starting off being an advocate, so she kind of helped us. She did get us into Kelsey for the summer school.”

Evette's mother, Barbara, had a cousin who knew about a testing center out of state. The school psychologist who tested Evette never gave her a diagnosis. Rather, the school psychologist referred to Evette's disability as a "dyslexic-like kind of problem." Evette had qualified for a self-contained classroom, but by the end of third grade she was reading at only a first-grade level. Barbara explained that the test center had the capability to do a more thorough analysis of Evette's learning issues:

They go through a complete diagnostic workup, they go through a review, and they do all the different testing, and they even had brain-wave testing and other things that they could be doing, because they were associated with the medical school. I wanted to get away from this school. I wanted to go somewhere that ... it wasn't being influenced, that their opinion [wouldn't] mean ... you fit into this mold or something like that. By going out of state like that, I felt that they would give a very true analysis of what was going on with her. And through that, that's when we found out that there was the problem with the auditory processing, about the dyslexia, and they graded it as severe. They said she was reading at a first-grade level, and that was halfway through fourth grade.

Barbara further explained that although she had known about Evette's reading difficulty since kindergarten, she had trusted the school professionals to find the right solutions for her daughter. However, she came to realize that she had to take the initiative in asking for services from the school system and had to find others outside the system who could help direct her. Barbara noted:

Since kindergarten, I have known that Evette was having difficulty with reading. I just was hoping that the school system, which had identified that she was having

trouble, would ... know the best placement for Evette, having experience with other kids like her, but the bottom line has been, until you ask for help, they will not volunteer any additional help until forced to. I have a few friends that are teachers that had told me that they cannot make suggestions that a child needs additional help until the parents ask for it. Even with asking, the parents have to learn on their own or from friends what other options may help. If I did not have these good people [a support group of parents of children with learning disabilities] pushing me to get Evette tested further and make suggestions that she could be doing better with a different learning style, Evette would be struggling in the middle school a very frustrated, picked-on, and rebellious kid, wanting only to find ways not to do her work and skip school.

Mary went through a long process of trying to understand why Beth was not learning how to read. This included countering the school professionals who suggested that her daughter was incapable of learning. Mary knew the public school teachers were not educating her child, but she did not know where to turn. A co-worker helped her find an outside evaluator, who then sent her on to Kelsey:

I didn't really know what was going on, and I was trying to find out. And it was hard to find out. And you couldn't trust them [teachers in the public school] to tell you, 'cause they weren't telling you the truth. It took me a long time to figure out that they were more interested in ... not spending too much money, not spending too much time, than they were in Beth's education. I have two co-workers who had children [at Kelsey]. And I went to them and said, "What is going on? What

do I do?” And ... Deborah [Mary’s co-worker] said to me. You need to reject this [the IEP], and get an independent evaluation ... which is what I did.

Mary did not know where to go for the independent evaluation, so she again turned to her co-worker, Deborah who gave her a referral. Mary was shocked by the tester’s advice:

So when I went back, for the post interview, ... she said: “You need to get her out of the school system *today*. Not tomorrow—today. I’m calling the Kelsey School *today*.”

I go, “Huh?”

She goes, “If you have to go to a hearing, and you can’t afford to pay me, I’ll testify for free.”

I’m like, “What?”

She goes, “This is pretty appalling.... This borders on child abuse, what the school system has done to this child.” And I wasn’t prepared for that; I was prepared for her to say, “Oh, she needs this, that and the other thing.”

The tester directed Mary to Kelsey and validated her own perception that her daughter’s needs were not being met.

In two situations, someone within the school system suggested that the family look into Kelsey as a better educational environment for their child. In Polly’s situation, a school psychologist, a former Kelsey employee, helped direct this process. Leslie attended Polly’s third-grade meeting at the beginning of the year and discovered that Polly read two grades below grade level. Lesley was shocked. She knew that Polly

struggled with reading, but she had no idea of the extent of her daughter's difficulties.

She went to the school psychologist for advice:

I went to talk to the school psychologist ... because I was very upset about it and I wanted to ... see what she thought we could do to help Polly, and ... [the school psychologist] used to work [at Kelsey] and gave me the idea that maybe [it] would be a good place for her.

According to Leslie, the school psychologist was covering a maternity leave. Later, Lesley learned that school officials did not approve of her suggestion. From my own experiences in public schools, if a member of the staff suggests an out-of-district placement, it puts the school system in the position of funding that outside placement. Therefore, this advice is generally discouraged. In our interview, Lesley reported how this recommendation happened:

So I think she was only there for a short time. And they didn't appreciate her saying that [suggesting a placement at Kelsey]? She was kind of in her private-practice mode of advising people of what they thought was the right thing for their child, not in the 'I'll protect the school district' mode.... So it wasn't like she could ... be on ... *our* side. She couldn't.

Two significant people directed Debbie to an avenue that helped her children. First, she found a preschool teacher who recommended out-of-school testing. Second, the special education director suggested Kelsey for Debbie's youngest son. This was the only situation in this study in which a special education director recommended an out-of-district placement:

She [pre-school teacher] goes, “I think you need a neuropsych; you need something else other than just the school’s opinion.” And *that’s* how the doors all opened; we saw the neuropsych, and he said, “Oh, yeah, your school has it backwards: he *does* have low self-esteem, but it’s because he thinks he’s stupid because of his learning disability. And he doesn’t know it’s a learning disability that can be addressed.”

The more Debbie learned, the more she knew that she had not gotten the services she needed for her two older children. Tim started having behavior problems, and Debbie became a strong advocate for all three of her children:

I said, “Look, I made a big mistake with my older one, this is not going to happen to Cally and Tim. You’re going to have to teach them differently.”

And so the special education teacher, I think at one point, she used it as a threat, and she just said, “You know, I think you’re right. I think we can’t teach your younger one. I think he’s more severe than your other two put together. And so, we’re going to have to send him away.”

This is in second grade. Now, of course, I’m *not* about to send my second-grader away! And I think she thought I’d fold and back off; and she must have done it to other parents, and ... of course, I *did* start crying, and I just said, “Where? Where would you send him?”

She goes, “Kelsey, the Kelsey School.” Now, luckily, one of my friends had told me about Kelsey, so I said, “Really?” And she goes, “Yes.” And I said, “Great! Let’s put that on the IEP.”

Debbie explained that she believed the special education teacher thought that Kelsey was residential for out-of-state families and knew that Debbie would not send her second grader six hours away to a residential program. Debbie discovered that there was no residential program, and she began the process of getting Tim admitted to Kelsey knowing that she would make it work for her family.

For all of these students, a person who provided information, guidance, or a suggestion opened the pathway to Kelsey. Without this direction, which often came about through serendipity I wonder what these children's destiny would have been. When I worked as a counselor in the public school system, I attended many IEP meetings in which the child's emotional issues were tied to learning acquisition. At the time, I did not understand how the learning methodology might render the learning inaccessible to the student, as evidenced by so many students in my study. From my experiences attending contentious IEP meetings with parents and advocates, the possibility of moving a student to Kelsey provided a backdrop for these meetings. Fears of the financial impact on the district created an undertone of tension and stress that might account for the backdoor conversation I witnessed about pushy parents with advocates who were out of touch with their child's issues, as well as direction from special education directors to keep the reporting about a student positive. Looking back on those meetings, I now understand those parents' concerns and their children's struggles. My colleagues and I believed we were fully capable of educating most children. I did not understand how an outside placement could completely change a child's access to education. I was naïve in not realizing that when professionals in the school system felt they could educate a child, they might sometimes be mistaken. I was unaware of the impact of other educational

opportunities. These families were fortunate that someone directed them, based on their own experiences, to take steps that helped these families either find the correct diagnosis through outside testing or learn directly how Kelsey might be able to help their child. I wonder about those children whose parents do not have such experiences.

d. Self-Education.

Some parents in this study educated themselves about learning disabilities, special education law, in-school testing, the IEP process, or how to represent their case legally. As they sat through IEP meetings and tried to make sense of their child's struggles, they pursued their own answers. This education took the form of online research, reading books, or hiring an advocate who educated them about their rights. These parents wanted answers, and they identified ways of finding them.

In our interview, Mary explained:

I started hitting the computer; I was spending six hours a day reading LD [learning disability]online, Wright's Law; I was going everywhere. I went on Wright's Law, and he says in there, how to read your IEP. And ... it's a 32-page document, and I went over it page-by-[page].... He said, "You're going to have to read this, probably four or five times before you get it," right at the top paragraph, but go over it, paragraph-by-paragraph with your IEP in your hand ... do it ... and I did it. It took me a couple of days. He says, "It will show you from IEP to IEP, from evaluation to evaluation, if you have regression, ... by going through these statistics, the data, the testing ..." which I did, because it's very ... for most parents, the testing is intimidating. And so, I went through it, I'm like, "Oh, my God! This is *so* awful." I mean, regression in every single area. Every single area.

Once Mary understood the IEP and evaluations, her suspicions became reality: Her daughter was not learning. She found a friend who referred her to an out-of-school evaluator to get more information.

Mel, Raya's mother, became frustrated with the lack of response she received from the professionals in the school system when she asked to have her daughter tested. She talked to a neighbor and then commenced her own search online into special education regulations:

I just was like, this is so weird ... there's definitely something going on with Raya, but every time we go in they don't want to test her. Then someone who had had a child on an IEP was like, "Mel, they *have* to.... It is a *right* of yours." I said, "It is?" I said, "where did you read *that*?" ... So then I started going online and I started reading all those rules about laws and I was like, "You're right!" And we *could* have fought for them to pay for the neuropsych, 'cause I think they're required also ... if we demand *that*.

After attending an IEP meeting, Libby realized that she needed to learn more. She felt intimidated by the number of school personal at the meeting as well as their knowledge. In order to hold her ground, she knew she must educate herself. She states:

And her tutor ... did come into a couple of our meetings twice and really emphasized what she needed, and they would challenge us every time. And it was always like ... bullying; it was always like ten of them, with the three of us, you know? This ... power thing, and I'm like, "You know, ... I don't know all the rules to this, I'm going to have to start learning them."

To “learn the rules,” Libby talked with friends with children in special education. Taking the advice of friends, Libby hired both a lawyer and an educational advocate.

Evelyn’s education about dyslexia happened by chance. While waiting for an older daughter’s dismissal from school every day, Evelyn began borrowing books from the parent library. This self-education gave Evelyn the information she would need to help diagnose her son:

Over the years, I’ve borrowed lots of parenting books, and one of them that I borrowed very early, before I even had Mike, was on dyslexia.... And ... I learned about sensory, and I learned about executive functioning, and I’m looking at it like, “Oh, no, no. Can’t be.” And ... as more time went on, I went and revisited these books, and I could see Mike; he didn’t fit typically in any pattern, but he definitely fitted in this dyslexic pattern.... And I can’t even recall what book it was, but it certainly noted that if... left-dominancy was ... apparent before they were a year old, it was very likely that they would be dyslexic.... The second year ... it started to come together, and I kept saying to the teacher, “Do you think he’s dyslexic? I think he’s dyslexic; do you think he’s dyslexic?”

With knowledge gained from her reading, Evelyn questioned the teachers at the school regarding Mike’s progress. Evelyn kept a watchful eye throughout Mike’s schooling keeping the diagnosis of dyslexia current in her thinking. Evelyn’s research on dyslexia continued throughout Mike’s schooling. From an outside tester, Evelyn learned that Mike needed the LiPS reading program, but the school offered the Wilson program. Evelyn

explained why she did not insist on the LIPS program: “By this stage, I’m not educated enough to know ... what’s going on, so we are flogging this dead horse, so to speak. Mike now has a tutor two days a week after school.” Evelyn subsequently educated herself about different reading programs that appeared to be a better match for Mike, and became increasingly insistent as she gained confidence about what would be the right program for his learning needs.

Debbie educated herself about learning issues as well as the law. She attended seminars on a variety of subjects and, together with a friend, taught herself how to win the legal battle to get her children the out-of-district placement that she felt they needed. Debbie explained in our interview, that educating herself by attending seminars gave her the knowledge to interpret test scores:

After everything I’ve gone through with seminars, and ... teaching myself, I look at ... we just had Tim’s meeting now, I’m going, “Oh, gee. There’s a twenty-point discrepancy between his perceptual and his verbal comprehension; isn’t that significant?” And Cally had a twenty-five-point difference. So I’m like ... these are things that, when I saw those before, no one explains them to you, and you look at them and you go, “Oh, whatever that means.”

Debbie further explained that by going to a variety of seminars, she found a diagnosis that fit her children—one that the school professionals had missed:

We would go to North Shore University Hospital, go to seminars they had, we’d go to all these different seminars, and ... she would even drag me to ones I’d say, “That doesn’t apply to my kids!” And, it was, like, for ADHD and ... oppositional defiant disorder. And I didn’t want to go to this, but I went with her, and lo and

behold! They had breakout sessions, and Dr. Tanner who's a speech-language pathologist that does auditory processing, I listened to her and I'm going, "Oh, my God! This is ... these are my kids." And I never even knew what auditory processing was or anything, and ... neither did my school. And that's when we found out. And that was in '04 and that's when I thought that was like ... that's a whole 'nother, issue, you know, that I had to bring in...

In addition to educating herself about her child's disability, Debbie taught herself how to represent her case legally, with the help of online information and advice from a friend: "And she has one year of law school, my friend, and so ... it's online how to do it, but it's really involved! And you got to do everything exactly they said, oh, they just kick it back. And ... anyway, ... we won that decision."

Other parents became educated through hiring an advocate who informed them of their rights and how the IEP should be followed. Ella's advocate came to all the IEP meetings. Ella described the value of having an advocate: "She was wonderful; she knew that system like ... the back of her hand. I mean, we would go to meetings, she's like, 'Oh, no, you can't do that.' And they'd look at her. And they knew she was right."

Many of the parents pursued their own education in the terminology, language, and rules of special education. They learned about their rights in the writing of an IEP and under disability law. Debbie was the only parent who also studied legal representation. These parents took ownership of the responsibility to learn about their child's schooling. They took this education upon themselves in order to discover the root causes of their child's difficulties, to know how to ask the right questions, and to know

how to push for services. Evelyn had a note attached to the front of her notebook that contained all of Mike's records. It read, "It's your responsibility to educate our child; it's our responsibility to ensure you do it." Although Evelyn does not remember where this quote came from, she noted that she lived by it.

Many of the parents in this study felt the need to educate themselves or find an educational advocate to increase their knowledge of their child's disability, the special education system, and their rights. Both Evette and Tim have fathers who are dyslexic, as is true of at least one parent of many children with dyslexia. Dyslexia is a genetic trait and therefore does run in families (Shaywitz, 2003). These dyslexic parents continue to struggle with reading as they did in their own childhood. In these cases, it was the non-dyslexic parent who pursued education about learning disabilities and special education, and who became the primary educational advocate for their child. The question remains, what about children whose parents are illiterate, have minimal reading skills, do not speak English, cannot afford to hire an advocate, or lack the social and cultural capital needed to advocate for their child? Would their children be at a disadvantage in school compared to other children whose parents have the ability to self-educate?

The concepts of *social capital* and *cultural capital* may play a role in these parents' relative advantage in getting their child to Kelsey. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) defines *cultural capital* as "Instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed" (p. 488). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) define *social capital* as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and

recognition” (p. 119). In other words, *cultural capital* refers to the parent’s match with the dominant culture, which allows them to participate more fully in the school. *Social capital* gives parents the confidence to question school authorities and provides social connections that help parents know where to get answers (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). “Cultural capital includes “parents’ large vocabulary, sense of entitlement to interact with teachers as equals, time, transportation, and child care arrangements to attend school events during the school day” (Lareau & Horvat, 1999, p. 42). Social capital includes access to social networks within the school community from which parents can obtain information about the school (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Parents who are white and from a middle and upper socioeconomic status have more social capital than Black parents or parents from a lower socioeconomic class in schools (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Harry and Klingner (2006) noted that even in schools that had predominately Black students and Black faculty, Black parents lacked the social capital, such as social connections, and cultural capital, knowledge of their rights or confidence in their instinct, to advocate for the proper educational environment for their child.

Nord and West (2001) measured social capital in terms of parent educational expectations and shared educational activities. A higher level of parent involvement correlated with higher levels of social capital. Nord and West (2001) note the direct correlation between parent involvement in school and parents’ education level. As the parents’ level of education increases, their involvement in school also increases.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) describes the “currency of the classroom” (p. 138), a phrase she takes from a teacher who described the advantage some parents maintain over

others in the school system. Lawrence-Lightfoot explains that parents of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds present differently in school. Privileged parents have high expectations and demand more. They act entitled, aggressive, and determined, and they are strong advocates for their children. Poor parents—“often parents of color or newly arrived immigrants” (p. 109)—do not know how to advocate or to negotiate the school system. They rarely question the teacher, whom they see as the authority.

Shaywitz (2003) comments on the discrepancies in treating students with dyslexia, noting that as early as the turn of the twentieth century, Dr. E. Nettleship, an ophthalmologist, acknowledged differences in treating and identify all dyslexic students based on socioeconomic status. She explains:

Today, as in Nettleship’s time, reading difficulties are often overlooked in children from disadvantaged circumstances. It is not that children from enriched backgrounds are “over-identified” as reading disabled but, rather, that far too few poor children with the same difficulties are ever noticed, much less treated, for their reading problems (p. 23).

Given the effects of social and cultural capital, along with Lawrence-Lightfoot’s notion of “currency of the classroom,” it appears that certain parents have more opportunity than others to obtain an accessible education for their child.

In my study of nine white learning-disabled students, I asked families to self-identify their socioeconomic status: One self-identified as “lower middle class,” one as “working-class,” one as “upper middle class,” one as “upper class,” and the other four as

“middle class.” Most of the families acknowledged their privilege in getting their child to Kelsey.

Five of the parents educated themselves in order to understand how to help their child. This education was one of the factors that helped lead the parent to advocacy, which then opened the way for the child to gain access to an appropriate education. I believe that possession of cultural and social capital gave these parents the confidence to self-educate and to then use this knowledge to challenge the authority of the school.

e. Loss of Trust in the Public School System.

Parents in my study spoke of a broken trust with school system personnel. Many began their experience in public education with an implicit trust in the system, centered on a belief that teachers would do their best to educate their child and that the child's best interests were at the forefront of their decision-making. Entering school with this level of trust, suggests Lareau and Horvat (1999), is more commonly an experience of white parents than of Black parents. They explain, “Given the historical legacy of racial discrimination, black parents are more likely to begin the process suspicious and critical of the risk of unfair treatment for their children” (p. 42). Gasbarra, Johnson & Public (2008) note that Latino parents also have an implicit trust of school personnel “to an even greater degree than other parents” (p.2). For the white parents in this study, the trust appeared to be a given, which broke down over time through a variety of interactions and experiences that pushed parents into advocacy. Parents came to realize that school personnel were not going to address the child's needs due to either differing views about the child's ability or a lack of the necessary skill set to provide the proper services.

Mary explained her frustrations and her lost of trust:

My issue was, I didn't really know what was going on, and I was trying to find out. And it was hard to find out. And you couldn't trust them to tell you, 'cause they weren't telling you the truth.... But why doesn't everyone in education do what they're supposed to do? ... When you go into education, isn't it because you want to teach children, you want to help children? Yeah, I guess that is naïve on my part. That's the thing that bothers me the most, even more than the money, though the money bothers me!

Mary expressed her frustration in a letter to the mayor, who then contacted the special education director, who convened a meeting. Mary described this meeting:

Not one teacher looked at me the whole meeting; they were all looking at the special ed. director, because they were pedaling; they were nervous.

[*Whispering:*] "My ass is on the line." So they had ... they couldn't care less about what Beth's needs were, 'cause they were just wanting to make themselves look good. Not one person looked at me the whole meeting; no eye-to-eye contact. They were all looking at her. And she's throwing these papers at me like this and going, "These are beautiful! I don't know what you're talking about!" I'm like, "Oh, my God!" Yeah, ... her schoolwork. Perfect schoolwork, you know? And I'm like, "Well, gee ... it doesn't look anything like the homework that I get back every day." "Well ... I was expecting, ... horrible work, and these ... these are just *wonderful!*" ... I was foolish enough to think that in the school system, they want to help your child. And I really thought that for the longest time. And they don't ... they're just trying to get out of it the easiest way they can." To me that's appalling ... because I had never felt that way.

Mary's experiences and interactions with school personnel eroded her trust that the professionals were competent and willing to do what was necessary to help Beth learn to read.

Evelyn, Mike's mother, described her gradual loss of trust as she fought for her son's education. In one meeting with the reading specialist from the school system, Evelyn attempted to discuss the coordination between the outside tutor and the reading specialist but found the reading specialist defensive. Evelyn described the meeting and her reaction:

She wanted total control. "You will never get total control. This is my child, and my child can't read, and it's my job to make sure he learns to read. You can't provide everything he needs here in this school; I need to go outside and make sure he gets everything he needs." So, she didn't like me in that way right from the start because I guess I was ... "This is my kid; my kid's falling apart."

In another example, Evelyn described how she ended up with "zero faith" in a teacher after in a planned meeting during which the teacher began talking about another student, not Mike:

I go in to see her [the teacher], and ... we starting talking about what I thought was my son; [but] she's talking about another kid. I now have zero faith. So now I lose it.... I totally lose it now. So, from that day forth, I never, ever spoke to her.

James's parents were committed to public education. Even when the neuropsychologist told them they should get an out-of-district placement, they remained

convinced that the school could help James. James's parents followed the advice of school personnel for addressing James's issues. After attentional issues were identified as the probable cause of his reading difficulties, James began medication for ADD but continued to struggle with reading. It became clear that something else was causing his reading difficulties. As James continued to struggle with reading, his parents' confidence in school personnel began to erode. They questioned the ability of the school professionals and doubted that the professionals really understood their child. When some school professionals told them that their child lacked intelligence, James's parents, in turn, found themselves questioning the intelligence of the professionals:

The fact that somebody could sit there and say, "He's not smart," and not have anybody else in the room say, "Whoa! Whoa! ..." You know ... people don't go from being smart to being dumb. People don't go from having a language disability to having attentional issues [back] to having a language disability.... It was so obvious at that point, and we felt stupid; we felt, OK, we've been listening to these clowns for *three years*, and it finally took the moron to come in [and] say something totally off the wall like that for us to realize these people did not have a clue.

James father further noted that an e-mail exchange with a teacher eroded his trust in that teacher as well:

We questioned in an e-mail, and she wrote back and listed all her degrees, and her years of experience. And I looked at that and said, "OK, I know in *my* business, when somebody has to resort to what their degrees are, they don't have a clue!

Right? They don't have any rational argument for why they're saying what they're saying, they're falling back on their degrees. I remember saying, "She's stupid!" You know, "She can't even answer this question! All she has to say is, 'Don't ask that question' I have twenty years experience and two degrees, so shut up!" And we said, "All right!" So it was clear to me, she doesn't get it.

As James's parents began to question the ability of the school professionals, they also came to realize that the school offered programming that would not accommodate James:

And I think in hindsight, you know, we should have been pushing way back on the school for making them responsible for what it was they were providing him, not, you know, "We're giving him a box; he wants a circle." "Well, if he's asking for a circle, he probably needs a circle." But we didn't ... we weren't there yet.

James's parents had enrolled their son in public school with confidence he would get the education he needed. Even when issues started to arise, they maintained their faith in the school personnel until, after repeated meetings, they began to question the abilities of the school personnel and the school programming to provide the services James needed.

Libby, Nancy's mother, described a meeting in which she felt the school personnel were trying to trick her into believing that her daughter was actually doing well:

I sat at a meeting, and oh, of course, they had *everybody* there: all the teachers, the principal, the guidance counselor, ... a psychological counselor.... And ... I'm sitting there and I'm like, "Oh, well. This is it; this is the bullying again." And

they're telling me how great she is, and ... what she's doing, and [that] she's progressing, she's really ... catching on. And then I saw the middle school principal wink down to the special ed. director. It was like, "We've got them in the bag." That was it! I hired a lawyer. I said, "I'm out of here. I'm so mad." I blew up at them. I said, "I have nothing against you as teachers, you are great teachers, but you're not good for my daughter. You don't know how to teach her." So we hired a lawyer.

Lesley, Polly's mother, described how she discovered that her daughter, a third grader, was reading at a first-grade level. Lesley trusted that school personnel would monitor her daughter's reading and communicate with her. Lesley suspected her daughter had reading issues but had no idea that Polly was two grade levels behind. Once Lesley understood the extent of Polly's reading deficit, she reacted immediately:

In the beginning of third grade, they told me she was reading at, the beginning of first grade, and that's when I felt a pit in my stomach.... I didn't know that she was a full two grades below grade level. And you know, until they came out and told me and that document that they told me that ended up being, like, so important ... it was ... otherwise hard to see that ... the special ed. teacher would say, "Oh, you know, based on the Leapfrogs, or the this and that, reading," ... all these different reading charts, and ... things that they do, she's at this level. And the levels didn't really mean anything to me, it's not my field. .. then, at that moment, that was just like, "Oh, my God, I have to do something. I have to do

something. I can't leave her here, I can't ... I just ... have to do something to help."

Debbie relates how her older son realized, when he went to visit a college for learning-disabled students, that he could not trust that the public school would be able to meet his educational needs: "OK, I need to get out of General Education, because they're never going to know how to teach me. They don't understand how I learn." Debbie took her knowledge from her son's experience and rather than trust that school personnel would teach her other children appropriately, she demanded that they teach them differently. Debbie also explained that because she did not trust the school's testing, she took her daughter to a private tester. Through that testing, she found out that her daughter had made only three months' progress in a year of school.

Mel, Raya's mother, explained that they knew enough to question the education her daughter was receiving in the public school system, but she also realized that some parents are more trusting, not knowing that they need to question, and that this can become a problem: "I mean the public school kind of put us forward with outside testing and tutors and then ultimately applying here [Kelsey].... It's just sad,... I feel sad for families that just kind of think that they're going to be taken care of under the system."

The parents in this study entered their children in the public school system trusting that teachers would educate their child. Their experiences dealing with school personnel who appeared unprepared to teach their child and seeing their children struggle as learners led them to question this trust and became a catalyst driving these parents to push for change. Parents doubted both the teachers' skill level and the programming

provided by the school system. Lacking trust, they stepped in as their children's advocates, first pushing for services within the district and then, eventually, advocating for an out-of-district placement.

Meier (2002) describes trust as a cornerstone of education. She believes there are many levels of distrust associated with the public schools, from parents' distrust of teachers to an overall distrust with the school system as a whole. She finds evidence of this distrust in the decisions of outside authorities to mandate standardized testing and dictate other policies and procedures. Yet, the parents in this study began with a trusting relationship, which eroded over time as a result of their children's experiences.

Meier also discusses another kind of trust that is often denied in school. She explains, "Nor do we trust in the extraordinary human penchant for learning itself" (p.2). From this study, I believe that the parents maintained this type of trust in their children and that it was partly this trust in their children's desire to learn that enabled them to reject information from professionals in the school district and then to advocate for their children. However, they witnessed this lack of trust in school personnel, who often viewed their children as lazy and disinterested in learning. The trusting relationship, Meier contends, propels education forward; without trust, education cannot advance to its fullest degree. Meier suggests that this trust must be earned. In the case of the parents in my study, once this trust was broken, the parents took over the educational program for their children—a step that often led to an adversarial relationship with school system personnel.

4.5 Conclusion to Equal Access

Public education law gives every child the right to an education. Yet, as the stories of these nine students suggest, this right does not necessarily give children access to the type of education they need for academic success, which I define as student's positive feelings about themselves as learners, and self-confidence about their ability to learn. Despite legislation and multiple reform efforts, gaining access to an appropriate education for each of these nine students ultimately relied on the advocacy of their parents. Their stories highlight the arduous, circuitous, and sometimes contentious educational journey each family took before their child finally entered a school that specialized in teaching children with learning disabilities. In the process, these children suffered from anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem as they struggled academically to compete with their peers and meet the expectations of their teachers. They developed coping strategies to get through this grueling educational experience—but only to survive, not to become academically confident or successful. The struggles of these nine students is not an uncommon story despite current research that both identifies dyslexia and prescribes specific strategies to teach children with dyslexia to read (Shaywitz, 2003; Wolf, 2007).

The process by which these children finally gained access to an appropriate education at the Kelsey School appeared serendipitous at times and relied on parent advocacy that, in turn, often depended on those parents' degree of privilege in society. The parents pursued this goal for their child in the face of numerous barriers, both financial and emotional. Their determination empowered them to demand educational access for their child. Given the paths of these nine students, one can only wonder what happens to other students who cannot overcome the many barriers that impede a learning-

disabled child's access to an education and, in particular, who do not have the good fortune to encounter the types of catalysts that brought these students to an appropriate education. Wolf (2007) contends that the cycle of failure, experienced by many learning disabled students is largely unavoidable, given the current understanding of dyslexia. However, it is only the "lucky ones" (p.166) that either discover a hidden talent to develop in spite of the dyslexia or find their way to a diagnosis of dyslexia and then a program that enables them to learn to read.

I worked with some of these undiagnosed and misunderstood students in public schools before I had an understanding of learning disabilities. Naïve about the complex interplay between learning disabilities, anxiety, and misconduct, I neglected to provide what these students most needed. I did not understand how anxiety interacts with learning disabilities or how hard it is for a child to be the only one in the classroom who cannot read.

John was one such student. I worked with him during his third-grade year. Assigned to a behavior classroom, John, like other students in this repressive environment, was often physically restrained for out-of-control behavior. John could not read, and he suffered from anxiety—a diagnosis he received toward the end of that year. John's antisocial behavior had started in the second half of first grade, when other children in his class were starting to read. John began hiding under his desk, refusing to come out, and occasionally throwing objects at the teacher. These behaviors resulted in his removal from his neighborhood school and his placement in an in-district behavior classroom. Multiple days of education were lost each week to deal with behavior that I came to understand as probably caused by John's anxiety in dealing with his learning

disability. John's mother was clearly embarrassed by the constant calls from the school asking her to pick up her son because of his unruly behavior. Perhaps her embarrassment prevented her from advocating for her child. This raises the question: Is it the parent's responsibility to make sure his or her child is getting an education, or is it the responsibility of the school? If it is up to the parent to monitor, as Evelyn's quote indicated, then do all parents have equal access to the information, privilege, and circumstances that will allow them to be effective advocates?

Given the journeys of these nine families, it appears that parents have no handbook, no written rules or directions for how to succeed at overcoming the obstacles to obtaining an accessible education for their children. And without such guidelines, it appears that not all children will succeed.

Chapter 5 Inner Workings of the Kelsey School

“The effective school must become an educative setting for its teachers if it aspires to become an educational environment for its students” (Shulman, 2004, p.334).

“I am a server dyslexic. I cannot write. That really limits you in what you can do. I wish I had a choice. I went to Kelsey high school for two years at the end of high school but it was to late” (Ryan Colter, Kelsey School janitor, April 2009).

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of my investigation into the aspects of the Kelsey School that make it successful from the perspectives of students, parents, and staff. From my interviews, observations, and analysis of school artifacts, I identified three consistent themes regarding the inner workings of the school, I assembled the measurements of student success, I surmised the connections between the Kelsey School culture and the larger discourse on professional learning communities, and I noted the drawbacks of the Kelsey School.

The three themes relate to the Kelsey School culture: Theme I: The dedication of the staff to the mission of the school appears to be a driving force. Theme II: The structure of the school program allows for a high teacher–student ratio, a selected population, a consistent curriculum, and structured communication between staff, teachers, and students. Theme III: For the nine students in this study, the supportive and safe school environment, as documented by staff, students, and parents, appears to be conducive to learning. The measures of student success include an increase in self-efficacy and self-advocacy, academic independence and advances in reading, social growth, increased participation in extra curricular activities, and improved behavior, such as a willingness to go to school. These measures were the ones mentioned in

interviews despite the fact that Kelsey staff maintains a plethora of formal testing results that mark specific advances in academics. Many aspects of the three themes resemble characteristics of a comprehensive teacher culture. This kind of teacher culture supports a professional learning community that research shows has higher rates of student success compared to schools without professional learning communities (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). However, no school contains the perfect model and Kelsey is no exception. Kelsey's drawbacks, such as teacher's low pay and frustrations with spacing needs, as recorded by teachers and parents, are also included in this analysis.

School culture can have a powerful influence on student learning (Deal & Peterson, 1999). I have chosen to focus on this area rather than on curriculum, as the school culture appeared to embody the consistent themes that I interpreted both in my interviews and from my own observations.

5.2 Theme I: Dedication to the Mission

Like many schools, Kelsey has a mission statement, which was developed at the school's inception and appears on the Kelsey website and in its literature. Kelsey's mission statement reads:

Kelsey School's mission is to enable and empower people with language-based learning disabilities (LBLD) to realize their educational and social potential through an exemplary school program complemented by outreach and training, diagnosis, and research (Kelsey publication, n.d.).

From my interviews with Kelsey teachers, it appears that the mission statement truly does reflect the core values expressed by staff members and provides the common vision that

unites the teachers in shared goals. This felt connection to the mission is one of the crucial ingredients in creating a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). It enables teachers to work together for a shared purpose. Dr. Anthony Black, the founder of the school, along with the board wrote the original mission statement in 1971, and it remained unchanged for many years. According to Mathew Kroft, headmaster of the school, in the early 1990s the school embarked on its first strategic planning process with the administration, some faculty members, and the board. This group revised the mission statement, which has remained virtually unchanged since that time. The revisions reflect succinct writing but the actual meaning remained the same.

Bert Stack, head of the elementary and middle school, explained how dedication to the mission pulls the community of teachers together to focus on a central goal:

My own experience with public schools has often been that teachers get isolated; they often refer to their own turf and their own room and their own material and their own curriculum: "It's my stuff." Whereas here, I feel like everybody buys into the place the way you'd buy into your own house or your own ... neighborhood, ... so I always feel there's a sense of sharing, a sense of trying to make everybody better. A lot of that, I think, stems from the mission, that it's not about the people who work here as much as it's about the mission.

Bert further noted that the focus for the teachers at Kelsey becomes the mission, not "doing your own thing." He added that Kelsey teachers share a common commitment to remediating students with language-based learning disabilities:

I'm sure somewhere in the mission statement, too, it talks about "to their full potential," extracting the full potential from kids who go here, who might otherwise not have a chance to show that.... It's a mission-focused environment; if you're not here because you want to remediate language-based learning disabilities, then you shouldn't be here.

Bert identified the mission as a reason for coming to Kelsey:

I was looking for a Peace Corps-like experience, something with a clear mission that I could buy into and get involved in. And that, combined with the literacy, was what attracted me to the place.

My interviews with staff supported Bert's description of the faculty. I found staff committed to seeing this population of struggling learners find success. For example, Patty Ryer described how working at Kelsey fit with one of her own core values:

One of my core values is I think that everyone has the right to ... be a literate member of society. Everybody has the right to read and write, and those who have trouble with that will be severely hampered.

Patty further explained her commitment to helping her students:

I take it on as a personal responsibility that I'm supposed to help them to advance to whatever their goal is for the following year in their IEP.... I make it really clear to them that we're *both* responsible for it, so the homework that they do at home and the planning that I do outside of class hopefully comes together and culminates in a really strong lesson.

In a classroom observation, I witnessed firsthand Patty's commitment to working with this population and her understanding of the children's needs. For example, I noted Patty's patience in class as she repeated directions over and over, without raising her voice or appearing frustrated, until one student, James, complied with her requests. In our interview, Patty explained that repeating directions does not bother her: "I have a lot of patience for things that are out of the student's control." From her observations of James, Patty was aware that others might interpret his learning style as rude or inappropriate:

Sometimes the visual piece confuses him, so sometimes if we're doing something and I say, "Eyes up here," or, "Eyes on the board," he may look and then glance away, and I'm OK with that, because I do think sometimes the visual input confuses him.... He learns through questioning. He loves to find the exceptions to the rule.... And if you don't know that that's the way he learns, it comes across as him just being bratty and trying to point out your mistakes.

Patty knows that students with dyslexia may need repeated cueing and more precise directions than other students require. She understands that these students' questions and comments may be misinterpreted, and she accepts responsibility for teaching them how to manage their disability: "Part of my job is to help [them] to figure out when [asking lots of questions is] appropriate to do, and [when it's] not appropriate to do." On multiple levels, it appears that Patty maintains a commitment to and an understanding of this student population and adapts her teaching to help them find success.

Maggie Wright, a first-year teacher, described the importance of presenting material so her students understand it. She believes it is her responsibility—not the students’—to ensure that they understand her teaching:

Three kids in my class don’t get it, it’s for three different reasons, and I have to figure that out, and solve it using as little language as possible, which is like the ultimate puzzle. It’s fascinating. They’re going to get it or they’re not going to get it, but that’s based on what I do, ’cause they’re doing the best they can, using what they’ve got to work with.

At times, Maggie explained, she feels like a failure—for example, when the students don’t understand even though they are working their hardest:

There’s some days, when it’s like, ... we have done this activity fifty times, and you can’t do it. And it’s like, “Oh, my God! I feel like such a failure. This kid cannot do this.” I mean, we have done it fifty times, every day for fifty days, and there’s certain days that they’re just not going to be able to do it. And then they come in the next day, and they’ve got it down! It’s like, that fluctuation in processing speed, that fluctuation in word-recall ability is *unbelievable* for some of them. Some are very consistent, but I’ve got one or two that are just like, they have on days and off days, and they’re trying equally hard, on both days....

Maggie’s commitment to this student population may come from her beliefs in the importance of learning to read:

And to think about these kids: How are they going to take their driver’s license test if they don’t get what they need to get here? If I don’t take this time ... and every second is *so* precious, because the older they come in, the harder it is, and if

I don't take every single second and make it as efficient as possible and teach them as much as I can, then that driver's license test, signing that cell phone contract, buying their first car ... they're going to depend on others; they're not going to be able to do it for themselves. And that's just crazy to me.... They're going to have to go out on dates and fake it. I mean, they're going to be 22, and they're going to go out to some fancy restaurant and have to order the special every time, because that is orally transmitted.... So that's my context within which I am teaching.

Maggie described the new appreciation she developed through working at Kelsey. For example, she is no longer critical of people who make spelling errors in e-mails, and she understands the types of questions people ask at the grocery store:

I used to be frustrated working in a grocery store when people would ask me what we have, when it was all written right in front of them. And now, I am *far* more forgiving of that. If somebody asks me about something, I don't assume that they can read, and I *never* would have felt like that before.

Claire Jenkins, one of the most veteran teachers, reveals her match with the mission statement when she recalls her response to an interview question posed by Kelsey's founder Dr. Black. Although this interview took place almost forty years ago, Claire remembered the specific question and her exact response. Dr. Black asked: "What is your philosophy about how children should be taught?" Claire responded: "Every child has the right to meet his potential academically, socially, emotionally, and physically." She believes her answer satisfied Dr. Black, because he offered her a position. Over her four-decade tenure at Kelsey, Claire's commitment to this population has not lessened:

The challenge to see students who struggle with writing has kept me at Kelsey these many years, especially those students who do not feel that they can write anything well or anything at all. Kids like James, for example, who are reluctant to express their ideas and have a lot of difficulty conforming to certain expectations and standards.

Claire described what she enjoys most about teaching at Kelsey:

It's seeing the kids who have been written off as hopeless, and knowing that they have the ability to do the work, it's just that the approaches that have been used haven't been correct, and that there's an approach here that will work.... Some kids start at a very low level, and then, given a year or two, the change is incredible. Seeing this change is a miracle because they've been written off as failures in other educational settings. I love the challenge of seeing kids achieve in this program and be able to move on with their lives and be successful.

Claire's commitment to teaching this population of students upholds Kelsey's mission to help these students reach their potential. Claire also conducts her own research and presents at many conferences. In this way, she further supports Kelsey's mission of research and outreach, to allow other teachers to learn how to work with this population.

Paul Stanford, the public school liaison, described how the common mission of Kelsey teachers creates a strong educational environment with every teacher working toward the same goal:

Being in a place where [helping all students work to their potential] is the goal for the students, that the teachers are committed to that and we're all working to that end ... is what makes this education powerful, this placement, powerful.... These

are bright kids that once they're given the skills, they should be not only knowledgeable about what they need, but be able to communicate that, and I think that's part of what we're all focused on here: helping them reach their potential....

Multiple veteran staff members, including the janitor, commented on their fulfillment in seeing students find success at Kelsey. This success becomes the sustaining power that has kept them at Kelsey for twenty, thirty, or forty years.

Ryan Colter provided a vivid description of what happens to students as they attend Kelsey:

I see kids come in like this [Assumes a slumped position, with his head down and shoulders curled forward]. After they have been here a while they look like this [Pulls his body up to a straight position]—they begin to blossom.

Veteran department head Patrick Steel, echoed Ryan's sentiment:

Just the fact that you take a kid when you see them come in and their head's drooping and they've obviously had a miserable time, and they walk out a couple of years later, you know, different ... different people. And to think that you had a part in that is ... it's awesome".

Bert Stack noted his sense of fulfillment over the years as he has watched students learn to read:

I think that's what people who stay here a long time get, is the sense that, yeah, you're really doing something worthwhile by being here.... You know that those lives have changed.... If they'd stayed in another setting, they would have been in bad shape and instead now, they can read, ... you see transformations here. You

definitely see lives changed. I know that sounds so cliché, but it's ... I absolutely believe that; I mean, where else could you come to work every day and you see kids who come in who can't read, they literally cannot read, and they're in despair over that, whether it's outward despair or whether they come in, you know, just feeling like ... "I'm stupid" or "I was in the wrong place in regular school"? But they come in here and that changes, ... sometimes from the first day they walk in, or sometimes it's many years in the making. Those are probably the most rewarding.

Veteran staff member Paul Stanford concurs with the meaning he finds in his work in helping students to find success:

You could really see a difference in people's lives, turning kids' lives around and families ... feeling like you were making a difference as a teacher and working with them close enough to see the progress incrementally but then stepping back and seeing the overall progress.

The staff's commitment to the mission of the school and their joy in working at Kelsey is not lost on the parents, who understand the dedication of the Kelsey staff as Donna described:

No amount of money could ever equate to what it's [Kelsey] done for my kids. [*Gets emotional.*] ... It's the people and the program ... they're totally different people than you come across in public school. They're just special people. They kind of think the same way I'm thinking about my kids.

The Kelsey staff's commitment to ensuring that each child finds the appropriate avenue that opens the gateway to reading aligns with the school's mission statement. Headmaster Matthew Kroft noted that the mission statement "has been and remains the centering and driving force underpinning all that Kelsey does," and my interviews with Kelsey staff confirmed the genuineness of this statement. The teachers shared common values. They understood the struggles the students had endured in their previous school placements, and they shared a commitment to finding the best teaching tool to unlock each student's learning potential. It is this kind of cohesive mission-driven environment that allows for a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Teachers in the school work together toward a common goal to teach students with language based learning disabilities to read. This binds them to the school mission to help every student reach his/her potential. In my years of working in schools, I have noted that the phrase "working to their potential" appears on many school mission statements. Yet, in my experiences, it is unusual to find a school in which so many staff have actually shown a commitment to this goal for all students. The marginalized students, in my experience, are often left behind, without the supports they need to reach their full potential. Eisner (1991) notes that often the intentions set up by a school do not match reality. He describes this as the "intentional dimension" (p.73). They are the goals that are espoused for a school that may or may not be followed. Kelsey appears exceptional in its mission-driven culture. From my interviews with some staff members, along with the documented success of the students in this study, Kelsey seems to have remained true to its mission statement.

5.3 Theme II: Structure of the Program

Kelsey has a purposeful structured program designed by its founder, Dr. Black, who has dyslexia. Academic Dean, Allison Tripp, described the imposed structure as a necessity because Kelsey students lack the internal structure of language. She noted that at the high school residential program, dorm life is “like military school. Everything is regimented and structured.” She explained that the student’s internal disorganization necessitates the school-structured program.

Based on my data analysis, I identified five distinct features of Kelsey’s structured program.

1. The “people method,” which Bert Stack described as the key to Kelsey’s success, allows for specific programming.
2. Teacher learning opportunities are institutionalized to provide ongoing teacher education.
3. The selected population created by the structured admissions process allows for a calculated makeup of each class and a selection process that is predicted to find students that will thrive in the Kelsey program.
4. The academic structure provides consistency in curriculum design, across the curricula, and in the classroom.
5. Communication at Kelsey is an institutionalize system that enables teachers, students, and parents to access each other in a consistent and reliable fashion.

a. The people method.

Bert Stack coined the term “the people method” to explain how Kelsey maintains many of its cornerstone programs, such as one-to-one tutorials, case managers, small

class size, and the staff training program. Bert suggested that the structure at Kelsey creates a unique educational environment:

We live in a dream world, educationally. I mean, look at the people here.... When [outsiders] come on professional visits and they say, “Well, it’s great! What’s your model? How do you make it work? What method are you using? Are you using Wilson?” I always say, “No, I’m using the people method.”... You’ve got so many people, and if they’re the right people, it’s going to work. That’s the key.... We have the luxury of having people who are willing to work for less because of whatever their situation is, and that allows us to employ more of them.... We have the one-to-one [tutorial class]... I think individual attention is absolutely the key to Kelsey, and every time the economy gets like it is now, that’s what the discussions are at the highest level: Can we do away with the daily one-to-one? What can we do? What’s the ... sustainability issue for Kelsey? If we stop the individualization, we won’t be Kelsey anymore.

Bert explained that although many other reading programs exist, he believes that Kelsey’s success can be attributed to the individualized one-to-one tutorial approach. From my observations, in addition to the tutorial program, the people method allows for additional programming such as the case manager, small class size, and an extensive administrative support structure.

1. Tutorial.

Kelsey personalizes each child’s learning program through the use of one-to-one tutorials, in which an educational program evolves around the child’s learning issues, both academic and emotional. Some of the unique aspects of this program include the

individualized curriculum, which is thoughtfully designed, monitored, and assessed throughout the year; the intimate relationship that develops between the student and the tutor, and the focused atmosphere provided by this learning environment.

A prescribed system of assessment is used to develop the individualized curriculum. As Patty Ryer explained:

[In] the beginning of the year every tutor is given a packet for each student, and it has the same diagnostic testing for all students.... When that's all done, I pass that off to the case manager, and then the case manager looks at that, identifies the errors and comes up with a weekly plan, and then they'll give me a plan that says, by week, what I should be working on for the whole year.... Then, by the first report cycle, the case manager will come up with a skills list that will be monitored throughout the year each report time.... And hopefully the goal is, by the end, that you've covered all the skills in it.

Patty noted that she refers to the skill checklist at the beginning of each quarter, checking off the skills accomplished as she goes. As Patty described it, the case manager designs the curriculum for each student and supervises the tutor, conducting classroom observations and discussing the student's progress. The frequency of supervision varies between case managers; some meet with tutors weekly, others less frequently. Similarly, case managers vary in how frequently they observe tutorial sessions. Based on the case manager's observations, each student's program is modified throughout the year as needed.

I observed a unique learning relationship in the small tutorial cubicle where teacher and student work together side by side. The match between the tutor and the

student is carefully designed; as a result, the relationship becomes meaningful for both participants. For example, Erin Stout noted how changing tutors benefited Frank:

Last year, he really had trouble with tutorial, he did not like being just one student—he didn't like doing the reading. And this year he's made huge gains; he's with a different tutor and he seems to be able to trust her, and he was working most of the time.

In fact, Patty Ryer explained that she had requested Frank as a tutee. Because she knew Frank from her science class the previous year, she felt she had an approach that might engage him. In one meeting with Frank's mother, Patty described why she had asked for the meeting and why she demanded so much from Frank. "I care so much about him. That is why I am pushing hard."

Mike's tutor tuned into Mike's anxiety and geared his instruction accordingly. During one tutorial, when Mike groaned with frustration at his mistakes, his tutor responded, "I understand you are not trying to do that [make mistakes]. That is frustrating. Are you feeling overwhelmed in the reading?" Toward the end of this session, the tutor and Mike played a game, tossing a ball back and forth while naming animals as fast as they could. When the class was over, the tutor explained that the game helps with word retrieval and can also relieve stress. He noted that Mike had worked really hard in tutorial and needed an enjoyable break.

Along with the teachers, students noted the special learning relationship that develops between tutor and tutee. Mike expressed his feelings about his tutor in our interview:

He's amazing.... In the beginning I didn't really know him, but now that I know him for more than a year, he's a really nice guy. When I graduate from this school, I'm going to be pretty disappointed that I won't be able to go to school with him anymore or see him. When we went to the tutorial session, you get to learn about each other, what he liked, what he didn't like, and pretty much our relationship extended from there and now we're really ... well, good. I don't know how to put it, student-teacher friends I should say, I guess.... I'm always excited to see him every day.

James described how he enjoyed the opportunity to discuss the books he read with his tutor, in contrast to his old school, where he just wrote about the books.

This intimate relationship builds trust and understanding between tutee and tutor that allows students to feel safe while being pushed hard in their work, even in the anxiety-provoking area of reading. In general, I observed tutors using compassion and understanding that appeared to help tutees feel safe and secure in their learning.

In this focused learning environment, no time is wasted. Tutors encouraged students with regular accolades—"Excellent job," "Nicely done," "You got it"—throughout the forty-five-minute tutorial session. But they also refocus students when necessary. In the majority of tutorials I observed, students remained focused on their work and tutors spoke positively of the students' effort. Tutors' voices were consistently calm, relaxed, and reassuring. In one session, for example, tutor Patty Ryer spoke to Frank about his attitude toward doing the requested work. In a calm, gentle voice, she confronted Frank at the end of one tutorial session:

I noticed this week that you are getting more comfortable. I am glad [you] are getting comfortable, but when I ask you to do something, I would like you to just do it without complaining. OK, that is all for this week.

In this environment, students are unable to avoid working. There are no interruptions. The time is used solely to teach the student to read, and any misdirection is confronted directly, maximizing the time spent on learning.

As I observed these tutorial sessions, I noted the contrast with other schools. Inclusion models necessitate one-to-one support in the classroom and involve numerous distractions. Pullout models pose other issues, as students working in small groups find themselves isolated and set apart from their peers. At Kelsey, in contrast, the tutorial structure is the norm. Every student has a tutorial class, so no student is pulled out or otherwise seen as different. Students develop a relationship with their tutor that facilitates their learning in an area—reading—that has been a source of anxiety and sometimes resistance. The tutorial exemplifies the value of the people method, which gives each student the luxury of a one-to-one tutorial session every day.

2. The case manager.

As an important aspect of the people method, Kelsey incorporates a cornerstone staff position—the case manager. Case managers play multiple roles: They design and supervise the tutorial, manage the paperwork and other responsibilities associated with the IEP, function as a liaison between the school and the parents, and oversee the student's entire school experience. The case manager plays a unique role in the school, that most public schools do not have the luxury of securing.

Academic dean Allison Tripp described the case manager position as “semi-administrative.” Requirements for this position, according to Allison, include having had a positive experience as a tutor, good diagnostic skills, and lesson-planning knowledge. The average caseload for full-time case managers ranges from nine to fourteen students, with a maximum of twenty-one; part-time case managers typically have a caseload of nine students, and those who also teach two periods typically have fourteen students.

i. Designing and supervising the tutorial.

According to case manager Anna Brush, the case manager’s main responsibility is to analyze the results of student testing, develop a tutorial curriculum, and supervise the tutor. Allison Tripp added that case managers meet with tutors to set goals for the year. They guide each tutor through the testing process and, along with the tutor, figure out what resources the tutor needs to achieve the established goals. Case managers provide either a written or an oral evaluation of each tutor. The frequencies of evaluations vary, depending on both the case manager’s time and the tutor’s experience. All case managers noted that they spend more time supervising first-year tutors than those with more experience. Maggie, a first-year teacher, described her experience with supervision by case managers:

I get observed by case managers, who give me feedback on ... not really my performance, so much as ... what skills I’m working on, how to work on them better, and what skills need to come next. So I’ve got guidance from case managers on all tutees. Some case managers show up *a lot*, some every once in a while, but ... it also has to do with how much guidance the tutee needs....

In addition to supervision, case managers provide support for the tutors. As Patty Ryer explained it:

[The case managers are] all very accessible.... Anna Brush is just here for half a day, ... but if something happens in the afternoon, or if I e-mail her in the afternoon, there's always a response there the next morning, or she comes to find me. So the ... support is there if you need it ...

ii. Managing the IEP.

The case manager performs all the duties related to the IEP, including filling out the paperwork required by the state and collecting any necessary information when a student's case is going to hearing. The case manager's position has changed since its original design by Dr. Black as a result of changes in special education legislation requiring the filing of numerous documentations to comply with the IEP. Allison Tripp noted that this increase in paperwork has transformed a once sought-after position into a less desirable job. Sally McKay, a case manager with more than twenty years' experience, also noted that the increased paperwork has changed the position. In the original design, she said, the case manager was the "one individual who really had a sense of the individual child." With the increased paperwork, she feels there is less time to closely monitor each student's progress. The case manager attends all IEP meetings, even those that are off campus. If teachers are not present at these meetings, the case manager presents the student's progress.

Many Kelsey parents pursue public funding to pay for Kelsey, a process that often requires them to provide evidence of the student's progress at the school. Sally McKay noted that if a child's case is going to hearing, to determine eligibility for funding, a case

manager must visit all of the student's classes, whereas for other students, the case manager might visit only the student's most challenging classes. Sally described the kind of questions she asks herself when observing a student:

Does she integrate with her peers? Does she seem to be shy and withdrawn? Or, again, engaging? Does she volunteer information? Does she seem to be making use of whatever ... templates being used, again, are they helpful to her? Is ... it a system that's working, and is she internalizing it? And again, at this point, what's her output? And is she making progress?

The case manager may be asked to attend a hearing to report on the student's progress at Kelsey—a task that can take a substantial amount of time from the case manager's other duties depending on the complexity of the case.

iii. Acting as liaison between the school and the parents.

In addition to their other responsibilities, case managers play the vital role of liaison between the parents and the school. All parents that I interviewed noted the crucial role played by the case manager in providing information about their child. They appreciated both hearing about issues of concern and having a person to contact with questions regarding their child. Teachers noted a sense of relief at not having the responsibility of maintaining contact with the parent in addition to their teaching load.

Maggie explained:

The case manager does everything, which is kind of nice.... A couple instances in the last few weeks, where I'm just like, "Oh, I'm so glad I'm a teacher, not a case manager!" I get to say, "This is what happened. Go deal with it." And they go deal with it.

Maggie described a situation in which Evette's case manager dealt with an issue involving language arts homework. The case manager and the mother worked together to come up with a solution so that Evette could manage her language arts homework in a reasonable amount of time. Maggie commented that the solution worked. Evette was getting her homework done.

Paul Standard noted that the case manager's role is to communicate "very clearly and very effectively with parents." I will explore this communication system further in the section titled "Communication."

Both Anna and Sally observed that parents are more demanding of their time now than in previous years. They see parents wanting more and more information about their child. Although this increases the demands on the case managers' time, many studies have indicated that this kind of parent involvement usually benefits the child (Davies, 2002; Mapp, 2003). Given the importance of parent involvement, both Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) and Sarason (1996) criticize teacher education programs for not educating teachers in effective communication with parents. Yet, the fault may lie not with the teacher education institutions but with the demands of the teaching job, which do not leave the teacher enough time to fully engage the parents. As noted, the structure of most schools does not include a dedicated case manager position, which relieves the teachers of this additional workload. To facilitate communication, case managers have specific periods during the day when they are available by phone or e-mail. Case managers coordinate the students' entire program—a job that individual teachers can rarely do for all of their students.

iv. Overseeing the student's school experience.

The case manager oversees the student's entire programming, addressing both academic and emotional concerns and supporting both the student and the tutors to foster the student's success. Anna Brush described the case manager as the "go-to person." Academically, case managers are in constant communication with teachers, providing information they need about each student and getting feedback about students from them. For students' emotional needs, case managers are available both to teachers who have concerns about a student and to students who need support. For discipline issues, the case manager is the second line of defense, after the teacher. Case managers also make referrals for school counseling. Paul Standard, public school liaison, described the importance of the case manager position in overseeing each student's entire program noting how the case manager works on, "Academic issues, on emotional issues, the self-confidence piece." He explained the vital role of the case manager and the importance of building this position into the school program.

Anna Brush described her role in supporting academics: "I read the file, disperse any information that's necessary to the teachers for them to know about whatever disability that child has, or whatever suggestions testers have had for things that work well." Academically, the case manager makes sure that teachers have all the information they need from the IEP for each student, and they monitor the student's progress in every class.

Case managers also serve as disciplinarians, after the teacher, helping students stay motivated and on task. When a teacher feels that a particular student needs more intervention, the teacher sends the student to the case manager, who assesses the situation and assigns a consequence or a "goal sheet" when necessary. A goal sheet, often

developed in response to a student's lack of motivation, lists three individualized goals toward which a student must work during each class. Many Kelsey students, as noted by Evette, Mike, and Frank, had lost motivation in their previous school. Claire, a veteran Kelsey teacher, explained that the majority of Kelsey's students had regularly experienced failure at their previous schools. She described it this way: "Programmed into your brain, 'You can't do it. You'll never learn to read or be a writer.'" Motivation is often hard to maintain in the face of these omnipresent feelings of failure.

At Kelsey, the work is challenging, demanding that students perform in their weakest areas. Motivation can be a contributing factor in the discipline issues that are brought to the case manager's attention. For example, Frank had difficulty completing his tutorial homework. After trying various incentive programs, the tutor asked the case manager to intervene. The case manager set up a meeting with Frank's mother to find a solution to the issue. Frank's mother felt that Frank was overwhelmed with all the homework, and Frank admitted that it would be easier for him to stay after school and get the homework done before going home. The meeting ended with the tutor agreeing to cut down on homework assigned and Frank agreeing to stay after school to do homework on the days his mother could pick him up. Along with motivation, students' self-efficacy—their feelings about their own abilities—play an important role in achievement (Bandura, 1997; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Wigfield, Eccles, & Rodriguez, 1998). The case manager position provides a designated person to monitor students' self-efficacy and motivation issues and to provide support when necessary.

Two veteran teachers, Claire Jenkins and Patrick Steel, talked about the role of the case manager in dealing with discipline issues. Claire noted that case managers help

teachers deal with discipline issues before they become larger issues. Patrick uses the case manager as a place to send a student when he needs to calm down. He described how he dealt with Frank, who had not done his homework:

I was frustrated, so I said, “You’ve got to go talk to your case manager and figure out a time for you to do your assignments ‘cause it’s not happening.” ‘Cause I was feeling frustrated, so I sent the kid out ... ‘cause I couldn’t send myself out, and I didn’t want to yell at Frank ‘cause I like Frank, and it’s like, “I’m really frustrated. Go talk to your case manager. Figure out a time that you can do your homework, ‘cause I’ve seen nothing.”

Case manager Kelly Dance noted that she makes a effort to form a relationship with all the students on her caseload so they don’t just see her as the disciplinarian but, instead, as someone to go to for help or support: “I really try hard ... at the beginning of the year, and ... *and* throughout the year, I try to eat lunch out, with the kids. Sit with them. Have conversations.” Kelly noted that her goal is for students to feel comfortable coming to talk with her about anything that is going on with them, “whether it’s about something that you’re [the student] struggling with, or you’ve had success, or whatever the case may be.”

v. The case manager’s unique role.

The case manager position, made possible by the people method, allows for comprehensive tracking of student progress. This tracking includes supervising the tutorial, monitoring and implementing all the demands of the IEP, and supporting both parents and teachers in their work with students. In many schools, guidance counselors and special education teachers serve a role similar to that of the case manager. But from

my own experience in middle school guidance, the size of the caseload—325 students, compared to 21 students for Kelsey staff—made it impossible for me to give all students the comprehensive attention offered by a case manager. Special education teachers typically had a smaller caseload than the counselors, but they were responsible only for academics, not for the social-emotional component of the student’s education. The case manager role enables one person to maintain a connection with the student while monitoring both academic and social-emotional concerns. The people method allows for this vital role to exist within the school, coordinating the student’s academic and social-emotional concerns with other staff members and with parents.

The case manager position appears to be distinctive to Kelsey. Garate-Serafini (n.d.) writes about a case manager position in a high school program for disabled students. The author cites the case manager position as one aspect of the program that makes it work. The case manager serves a similar function to the Kelsey case manager, although this case manager is more focused on teaching specific skills to prepare the student for the job market. Case management is commonly used in health care and perhaps provides a model that might inspire schools to develop a more comprehensive program for students.

3. Small class size.

The people method allows for small class size—an average of five students per class at the elementary level and six to eight in the middle school. Most teachers envy a small class size, which offers benefits to students, teachers, and parents. However, research on the benefits of small class size has been controversial. Most research studies conclude that small class size at the lower grades, with students attending these classes

over multiple years, benefits all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Finn, Gerber, Achilles, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2001). According to Biddle and Berliner (2002), however, studies supporting claims that small class size allows for more instructional time while reducing discipline issues and teacher stress are inconclusive. Studies of class size appear to focus solely on achievement scores as a measure of success, without taking note of students' feelings about small class size, teachers' reactions, parents' understanding of what environment works best for their child, or the teaching techniques that can be used with smaller classes.

As a teacher, I had rarely considered how small class sizes might feel to a student. According to the learning-disabled students at Kelsey, small class sizes made a difference to them. They expressed feeling more comfortable and focused. Mike described his feelings about Kelsey's small class sizes: "Four to eight kids is amazing. Twenty-two to thirty kids is overwhelming." Frank noted that small class size made it easier to learn because "it's less people and you get more attention." Evette noted that small class size meant that she got more attention, which decreased her frustration. She explained:

I'm not as frustrated [as in public school]. And I understand more, cause ... the maximum in my class is seven and so the teacher can go around to everyone. So, especially, like in LA [language arts], it makes it so much easier than before.

In a panel discussion for perspective parents, Evette was asked to identify the biggest difference between Kelsey and her old school. She noted:

There was a huge difference. They mainstreamed me into a class with twenty-eight other students. The assistant that was supposed to help me was never there.

Here, the teacher has time to help everyone. There are only seven kids in the class.

Students appear to feel strongly that class size affects their educational needs, enabling them to feel safe, get more attention, and remain more focused.

Case managers and teachers noted how small class size allows for flexibility in putting students with similar needs together. Frank's case manager, Erin Stout, suggested that both small class size and ability grouping (versus age grouping) provide Frank with the safety and focus he needs to advance in his learning. She noted: "He was in a four-person LA [language arts] class last year with boys who really had a lot of trouble writing. There were only four of them. So they plugged away at ... three-paragraph essays with Miss Plante last year and really got the structures down." Even at Kelsey, a class of four students is considered small, but Erin explained that these four boys were placed together with a very structured teacher due to their needs – both academic skill level and behavioral issues. She noted that, with a highly structured teacher, the boys made a marked improvement in writing that year.

Parents at Kelsey also noted the benefits of small class size for their child. Mike's mother, Evelyn, noted that her son needed the smaller setting because of his learning issues. She explained that she envisions Mike staying at Kelsey through high school: "I don't see how Mike could interact in a larger setting. I think he misses too much because of the deficits." Evette's mother, Barbara, noted how Kelsey's small class size helped Evette cope with her auditory processing issues. Barbara explained that the noise, in a classroom with larger numbers of students, impedes Evette's hearing. The smaller numbers in the classroom provide a quieter learning environment.

In my classroom observations, I noticed the teacher's attention to the students and ability to follow every student as one possible consequence of small class size. In every class I observed, I was impressed with the focused work time. Students appeared fully engaged with their work, and teachers maximized learning time by quickly redirecting students whose focus waned. In Patrick Steel's class, he sometimes redirected students to get them back on task by asking, "Are you with me?" Then he snapped his fingers two times: "Nigel, you got to look at it." "Nigel, are you with me? It does not look that way." "What did you get? Nigel, you are drawing pictures, my friend." Patrick frequently uses humor to get students' attention: "Ouch, ouch, look at my nose. Made you look!" He follows up with statements designed to make sure students are following him: "OK, stick it to the man, like they say in *School of Rock*. What are we doing now? Everyone point to it. Will you remember all this? No, so if you track along, you will understand better. Every one point to number 22." He says to Frank: "Do you have that written down? Write that bad boy down right now." In this classroom of eight students, Patrick is like a marathon runner, in constant motion, moving around the room to check each student's work. With Patrick's concentrated attention, students must remain focused and working. Patrick's students seem to be on task 100 percent of the time, as he does not let them lose focus. Achieving this level of attention would seem to be unrealistic with a class size of twenty.

In addition to paying attention to students' focus, Patrick, like other teachers I observed, encouraged students with positive comments designed to help them with their anxiety: "Gosh, you are so smart" "No fear, buddy, we can help you through it." "I want you to set this up so you are really going to do this bad boy." "Do not be afraid." "I am

going to make you do the next one, which is harder, because you can do it.” Patrick moves around the room, encouraging each student with positive phrases. Although there is no evidence that Patrick would not also use many positive comments in a larger class, it would be difficult to offer so many encouraging words to each individual student throughout the period in a class of twenty.

In many classes I observed, the teacher takes the time to check that students have written in their assignment notebooks. “I am going to give you a heads up,” Patty Ryer tells her students. “I am going to give you a random notebook check. Give me a thumbs up when you are done, and I will check that you have written your homework correctly.” A few minutes later in the same class, she again makes sure that everyone is with her: “Everyone look up here. I do not know if everyone is with me. Look at the top. Point to where it says *sentence*. Now point to where the equation is.” On Kelsey report cards, teachers frequently note a student’s need for teacher cueing to keep students on task. For example, Raya’s language arts teacher wrote: “On those occasions when she is distracted by a classmate, she is able to return to her work with reminders from her teacher.”

In both Patty’s and Patrick’s classes, the teacher constantly refocuses the students and makes sure they are following the lesson. Report cards highlight this need for many students. Between 12 and 24 percent of students with dyslexia also have attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and students with dyslexia may appear inattentive because deciphering reading requires inordinate amounts of attention (Shaywitz, 2003). Small class size makes it easier for teachers to notice students who are off task and to help refocus them. Erin Stout noted the advantage for Frank in being in small classes:

I think he is really getting excellent help. He could fall through the cracks in a bigger system 'cause I don't think he rocks the boat too much. He'd be quiet, but you really have to look at his written work. I really feel like the small classes and the one-to-one here is helping him.

Paul Stanford, noted another aspect of the small classes—the trust between teacher and student: “I think the fact that the classes are small enough and that the students build relationships with teachers, that there's a trust that builds up; but the teachers are really pushing the students to apply these skills, and hold high expectations.”

The people method allows for small class size, which from my interviews with students, parents, and teachers, along with my classroom observations, appears to create an environment conducive to learning for this group of learning-disabled students. Students' accounts of their feelings of safety, trust, and comfort in an environment that allows them to stay focused and closely directed speaks volumes about the benefits of these small classes.

4. Administrative support structure.

The people method allows Kelsey to maintain an unusually large administrative team. With 150 students on campus, the school has three administrators—Bert Stack, head of school, Dean Richner, dean of students, and Allison Tripp, academic dean—along with twenty semi-administrative positions: twelve part-time case managers (the equivalent of seven full-time positions) and eight department heads. (In contrast, when I worked in an elementary school with the same number of students, 150, it had just one part-time principal and no other administrators.)

Kelsey's department heads supervise teachers in their departments and ensure that the goals of each student are met within that department. They may also intervene if a student is struggling in a class. For example, if a student reports disliking a class, the department head will meet with the student and try to understand the concerns. The department head's role is distinct from that of the case manager, discussed in an earlier section as Allison explained:

If a student is not making progress, they can go to the case manager or the department head. If it is a discipline issue, they would see the case manager. If it is confusion in a class, they would see the department head.

Kelsey staff and parents mentioned the support they feel from the administrative team. Case manager Erin Stout noted how the administration worked well as a team, with individual administrators carving out their own niche and supporting one another. Erin, who had spent some time in a public school, noted the different feeling at Kelsey:

I really feel like Bert, Dean, and Allison are a very talented administrative team, and they complement themselves really well. And I missed that when I was at Callahan High School [local public school], I didn't feel the administrators supported each other the way that these do.

Anna Brush noted: "If I go talk to Bert about something, he's going to listen and try to fix it." Sally McKay described the support she feels from administration:

No matter what happens, Bert, Dean, and Allison and even Matthew Kroft [head of school] have your back, ... they support you. In private, you may be reprimanded, but they would never do it publicly.

And parents commented that Dean Richner was quick to deal with issues and to get back to them with any concerns.

The people method appears to be a key to the development of a structure that appears to be unique to Kelsey. Bert Stack attributes much of Kelsey's success to the people method because it is this method that allows for the tutorial program, the case manager role, the small class size, and the abundant administrative support.

b. Teacher learning opportunities.

Teacher learning opportunities adds another structural element to Kelsey's unique approach that perhaps also contributes to the success of the school. A variety of learning opportunities exist for both novice and veteran staff at Kelsey. Veteran staff train and mentor novice staff and are also encouraged to continue their own growth by designing and implementing original research. Veteran teachers support the novice teachers both formally, through the new-teacher training program and during supervision, as well as informally, functioning as a resource for newer teachers.

Kelsey's design for the success of its novice teachers starts with the hiring process. As Allison Tripp explained, Kelsey likes to hire people who are good with language. She noted:

The way we teach reading, you have to get excited that 'ed' can have different sounds. If you cannot hear the difference nor have aptitude in that area, you will hate working here. The people who are most successful are the staff that have just started teaching, who are bright people and like language.

1. Formal training program.

Veteran teachers coordinate, implement, and teach novice teachers in a specially designed training program coordinated by veteran teacher Fiona Manner. The training program begins in the summer with a one-week training in the LiPS reading program and three additional days that focus on spelling, writing, and learning the general structure of tutorial. After that, teachers work in the six-week summer school in the morning and receive a two-hour training every afternoon. Fiona Manner explained the training program:

What I did [in summer training] was either set somebody else up to come in and present a particular topic that they might be ... expert on, or I, myself, met with them to do just ongoing training.... The training covers many topics, such as how to teach cursive, how to use the pencil grips, and how is the profile of a Kelsey student different from an Asperger's student.

First-year teacher Maggie Wright described her experience with the summer training program. She noted both the camaraderie that developed with the other new teachers and the information she received:

We [the new teachers] all became a unit, because we got all our training together, getting LiPS training, getting general training, learning the campus, doing all kinds of stuff.... I was like, "Great job!" ... We'd get two ... or three hours of training in the afternoons. I couldn't *pay* for this kind of training. There is nowhere in the world that I could pay to get this much hands-on experience combined with training. It's ... the best program I have ever heard of in the world.

Maggie explained that the training included learning the mission and history of the school, the computer system, and how to access resources and teaching templates. She described some of what she learned:

Sam [a case manager] gave us a lecture on Topic–Focus–Details, which is where you take a paragraph and you divide it into a topic, a focus, and then two sets of details, and then orally present it back.... We had times to make manipulatives, learned different games you can use to teach the same boring thing over and over again and have it not be boring. Patty Ryer came and spoke about how to organize all of your materials, because you have all these huge resources available.

Fiona noted that veteran teachers who specialize in certain areas came to the trainings to teach the new teachers the various templates used at Kelsey. For example, Sam talked about Topic–Focus–Details, Claire described the templates used in language arts, and social studies and oral expression faculty presented their methodology and templates. Fiona, a math teacher, showed the students the horseshoe diagram template Kelsey uses in place of the traditional Venn diagram used in many other settings. The horseshoe template, Fiona noted, “shows the kids ... the connections—the similarities or the differences between something and the different visual representations.”

The training program continued into the school year. Teachers typically taught five tutorials and one class, leaving one period for continued staff training: “And if they weren’t meeting with me,” Fiona said, “then they were out observing veteran faculty to pull in some strategies.” As Fiona explained, the content of the training varied from understanding the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test to picking books to read in tutorial. Additional training might include learning behavior

management techniques, teaching study skills, and understanding strategies to present specific concepts.

We did things in training from, how does Kelsey handle the MCAS training, to how do you pick an outside reader in tutorial ... just anything that might make their adjustment to Kelsey easier ... behavior management, record keeping, ... strategies within the classroom for presenting different information; study skills.

Fiona added that topics often come from teachers' requests. She then finds the person on staff with the relevant expertise:

If they're in tutorial, and they're like, "I got a kid doing comprehension and I need more strategies to work with," then I'll know Sam's my comprehension guy and I'll go, bring those in. And then they're some standard ones like ... Social Studies, [the] department came in to do an overview of that department, just so they could experience all aspects of Kelsey, even if they weren't directly related to it.

Maggie concurred with Fiona that the training topics came from the teachers. She explained:

We would make requests: "I'm coming up to this in my lesson plans; I don't know how to do it. I probably have to start teaching it next week." Fiona would then find the person who's the expert here, have them come in and do a period of training on it. So we ... had full say on all of our training. We were constantly telling them what we needed, and they were providing it. And then they would provide things we didn't even *know* we needed, and we would go test it out, come back, do it again, until we got it.

Along with the formal training time coordinated by Fiona, the teachers receive supervision and ongoing training from the case managers and department heads. This becomes their main source of training in the second semester, when they add another tutorial or class to fill the previous seventh-period training session.

The department heads supervise teachers and provide ongoing training throughout the year by meeting with teachers regularly and also by modeling teaching in the classroom. For first-year teachers, both Claire Jenkins, head of the language arts department, and Patrick Steel, head of the math department, indicated that they meet weekly with teachers to provide advice, support, and supervision. For example, Patty Ryer explained how she got help from Patrick Steel:

My first years it was on a weekly basis, then I would have a time set aside for my prep period to go in and plan the week and say, “This is what we’re working on; the kids are having trouble with this. They’re good at this, I think they’re ready for this.” And during that meeting, he would point me to certain worksheets or other resources, like areas in the textbook. And he would model-teach, so he’d teach me.

Maggie also talked about the weekly support she received from Patrick Steel. She noted that he gave her the templates she needed to teach each class. Maggie explained that when she fell behind in her curriculum, she asked Patrick Steel to come into her class to help her get caught up with the curriculum. Maggie also meets with department head Claire Jenkins every week at 6:45 AM, before school, to talk about her language arts class.

Case managers provide supervision for teachers concerning tutorials. Case managers usually observe tutorials on an established schedule and are also available to consult with the new teachers. Many teachers mentioned how helpful the case managers were in providing resources whenever asked.

Bert Stack explains the support that both department heads and case managers provide for new teachers:

If you're teaching here, you know that you can go to your department head, and you can say, "Oh, I'm having a real hard time with this grouping. A: I don't know why you put these kids together." And they'll explain it. Or, "B: I'm clicking with these three, but these two aren't, ... what can you suggest?" And those people are going to give you a welter of suggestions ... you're not going to be left without suggestions, resources, lesson plans on computer.... The same way, with case managers, ... Those people are ones who—if you're a new teacher—they're going to meet with you at the beginning of the year and get you started on a program for that kid. And certainly if you need them, they're on campus, they're not in a central office somewhere ... you can drop in at their desk, you can e-mail them. And if you say, "I don't know what I'm doing with this kid," you're going to get back a lot of stuff to do with that kid.

2. Informal training.

Informal training occurs as novice teachers seek out veteran staff for help as needed. For example, veteran staff may find time to answer questions and provide resources to novice teachers or may model effective teaching for them. Allison Tripp explained that the goals of the formal training program include helping the teachers to

feel supported while introducing them to the various experts on staff. Veteran teachers understand their role in training new teachers. Veteran teacher Claire Jenkins, who is head of the language arts department, explained:

Another part of my job is teacher training and working closely with the language arts teachers. We share ideas and create or refine curriculum that meets the needs of their students. New teachers require a lot of guidance.

First year teacher Maggie Wright explained how the training succeeded in exposing her to veteran staff as a resource:

I know I can ask Sam about paragraph organization stuff; I know to ask Karen about any LiPS questions. I know to ask Fiona about math and study skills, and whenever I have certain questions, I just go to them. And they're always right there, willing to find me resources to teach it, ... doing half the prep work with me, and teaching me anything that I need to know. Sam will sit down for an entire period, anytime he has one free, and just go over it and go over it.

Maggie refers to the veteran teachers as “absolute geniuses” noting “these are some of the the brightest minds in education.” She marvels at her opportunity to learn one-on-one from these experts:

Anybody I ask a question to, either they know the answer, or they know exactly who to send you to if they don't. And they're willing to drop everything that they're doing right then and help you with it. And it's like, “Man! Where does that exist?”

For classroom discipline, Maggie notes, she draws on the more experienced teachers for ideas concerning specific topics she may be struggling with; when trying to find the best teaching methods, she seeks out teachers who teach the same students:

Patty Ryer is the most organized person I've ever met, so I always ask her when it comes to ... structure, consequence, consistency, she's the person I go to, and then I basically poll everyone. And everyone has slightly different ways of dealing with it, ... but often I'll poll based on my kids, so ... I'll find ... Roger's LA teacher will say, "Oh, well, in LA class, we're doing this system," and his OE [oral expression] teacher will say, "Oh, we're doing a similar one in OE," and so I'll say, "Oh, OK. I'm going to do the same thing that *he's* having in other classes.

In addition to functioning as resources, veteran teachers model-teach for novice teachers. Fiona explained that Patrick Steel, math department head, might suggest a novice teacher observe a veteran teacher who is teaching a similar lesson: "I'd teach it so that they could see it modeled ... so that they felt more comfortable when they went to do theirs."

Bert Stack noted that probably young teachers entering the profession get the best support and training. He highlighted the unique role of training coordinator:

They [new teachers] have a training coordinator/mentor.... It [the training coordinator] needs to be somebody who's welcoming, who remembers what it's like to come into not only a new school and possibly a new profession, but have this welter of new curriculum that you've got to assimilate and integrate....

Kelsey's extensive training program, built into the structure of the school, provides both formal and informal training while also allowing and expecting novice teachers to make mistakes and to ask questions. New teachers are given supervision,

support, and numerous resources to help them develop their teaching practice. Veteran teachers are used as resources to support the new teachers. In this culture, new teachers' "novice status" allows them to make mistakes while developing their practice (Moore-Johnson et al., p.161, 2004).

Bert Stack explained how he hires teachers he knows will work hard and take advantage of the supports and resources provided:

My job, is to try to hire someone who may feel bad that they're not perfect on day one, but we try to reassure them that ... even though you're a perfectionist, even though you know all these things that you don't know yet, that's OK, you're going to do a great job, just keep working hard.

The commitment to the novice teachers was evident in the way Bert Stack referred to the new group of teachers: "This entering class, they're great." In a sense the new teachers are viewed as students who have arrived at Kelsey to learn. Erin Stout further emphasized how the novice status supports teachers; she noted that teachers are helped to find their niche in teaching. According to Erin, once they arrive at Kelsey, very few teachers are asked to leave, but they are helped in directing their strengths:

When a teacher is struggling, the goal isn't to get them out of here; the goal is to get them to learn the skills they'll need so they will succeed, or help them find their niche, where they will be successful. And so maybe being an English teacher isn't the right path, you think math and the elective teacher, but ... the administration's goal is to help people find their niche. And I think when people are looked at in that light, it's very rare that someone has to be fired.

One teacher noted that he had been a case manager for a while, until Bert Stack counseled him to return to teaching. Maggie Wright reported that supervisors try to remain positive, providing both positive feedback and things to work on. Making mistakes is regarded as part of the learning process:

Here, [supervising teachers are] very positive. They're used to working with dyslexic kids. They always tell you the good stuff first. They always tell you what you're doing right. And then make suggestions that are very helpful for everything wrong.

Allowing teachers novice status is another way in which Kelsey supports a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture in which teachers support one another in their learning, allowing for mistakes and individual growth. The expertise comes from within the staff, with veteran teachers seen as resources. This culture supports young teachers, embracing and encouraging them.

3. Learning opportunities for veteran teachers.

Kelsey's veteran teachers learn from exposure to current research and from their own exploration. Veteran teachers expressed a feeling of being supported in learning while also struggling with the isolation of being pioneers.

Sally McKay, a veteran case manager, noted how the administration supported teacher growth by providing access to current research:

The exposure that we have to research such as what you are doing [referring to my research], other researchers that have come through the door from ... Harvard, et cetera, sharing that with us. Having speakers like Miriam Wolfe; even Jeff Prince has spoken here a couple of years ago. Again, having exposure to these

credentialed individuals that you just don't get in the public domain ... seeing what research is going on. So, you kind of have an opportunity to pick these people's brain, as well, and at least being on the cutting edge and knowing what's happening ... in the outside world.

Sally feels Kelsey is open to changing its program on the basis of new research. She has seen many new programs implemented in her twenty-plus years at the school. She noted that staff members are also encouraged to do their own research, which can influence curriculum. On a daily basis, she sees teachers having flexibility in how they run their classes, which allows for experimentation and growth:

The fact that we teach diagnostically across the curriculum and it's based on what ... the dynamic that happened in the classroom today, and you can take those teachable moments that occur with children and not worry about the fact that, again, you didn't get to page 52, and have somebody come in and say, you know, "Let's get back to this lesson plan and follow it." And I think the staff appreciate that, too.

Kelsey's veteran teachers enjoy having the autonomy to experiment and research, with their teaching providing a venue for learning. This autonomy seemed to emerge from necessity in Kelsey's early years, when the school lacked veteran teachers as well as research findings on effective curriculum for this student population. Claire describes herself as a pioneer both in the work she created and in her approach with using research to improve her practice. Dr. Black was supportive of her approach, even while other colleagues preferred to use the standard curricula. Claire described her early years as a

time of experimenting with curriculum in an effort to uncover the most effective teaching methods:

Dr. Black asked if I would teach a patterns class, which was Spelling Patterns. So, ... there was some sentence work that went with that, so it was up to me to do what I wanted, so I kind of was on my own to figure that out.... I ... got very creative with it because I wanted to make it appealing to the kids, but at the same time, they had to learn something. So I was allowed to do it the way I thought was best. And I work best that way, because other traditional methods had failed these students, and I need to think out of the box.

Claire noted that in the early years, without any mentors to guide her and with minimal information on dyslexia, she was on her own to try to figure out what worked. She resorted to popular literature such as *Psychology Today* to understand student behavior and motivation:

There was no one to guide me through the curriculum development of written expression. I had to mentor myself. I was in a new linguistic territory where spoken language provided the foundation for written expression. My thought was that if a student can't decode or read well, then he can rely on his background experience and cultural knowledge to learn sentence patterns and write.

With the support of Dr. Black, Claire designed a writing program that is universally used throughout the school today. Along with a co-worker, she published a handbook for teachers on written expression that Dr. Black, at the time, described as “a seminal piece of work.” Claire has presented her work at many national conferences as well.

Veteran teacher Patrick Steel also described how Kelsey gave him autonomy to develop math curriculum:

I have such license to go and try different things. I think that's basically Bert, giving me the ability to try different things and support me when it's working out. And if it isn't, I feel like I have to change things. He knows me, so he basically leaves me alone to my own devices and he also lets me engage in all these cool things, like I can go to give inservices all over the country.

With all the focus on reading at Kelsey, Patrick noted that at times he feels isolated, having no one with whom he can discuss math curriculum.

Both Patrick and Claire were given license to experiment and design their own curriculum based on their years of experimentation in the classroom, uncovering strategies that work with this population of students. Patrick and Claire developed the math and language arts curricula currently used by the school. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) suggest that typically teachers are not this involved in learning from their own practice: "Throughout their careers, teachers are expected to learn about their own profession not by studying their own experiences but by studying the findings of those who are not themselves school-based teachers" (p. 1). Countering this notion of how teachers learn, Claire and Patrick were fully supported in utilizing their own classroom experiences to inform their practice.

Claire and Patrick may not present the traditional models of teacher as researcher as described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993). It is clear, however, that they developed curriculum and grew their teaching practice on the basis of their own original research, and that Kelsey School's administration allowed and continues to encourage their

research by providing time for it in their teaching schedule. At the time of our interview, Claire taught two classes and shared the supervision of other classes with her co-department head. The rest of her time was devoted to research:

I do a lot of research and am constantly refining the language arts curriculum. I put a lot of effort into my work, and it's always in my head. I'm always thinking about how to improve what we do. I am always looking for what the research is saying.

The gift of time over a longer period to do research is one factor described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2008) that promotes and supports the teacher as researcher.

4. Summary of teacher learning opportunities.

Kelsey staff teach one another. The school's structured training program defies the assumptions of typical professional development programs for teachers, in which outside experts are hired to train teachers rather than relying on staff expertise (Barth, 1990; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Sergiovanni, 1994). Novice teachers at Kelsey receive formal training from veteran staff and then seek out veteran teachers to strengthen their own self-identified areas of weakness, rather than receiving inservice training from outside experts in areas identified by administration. Veteran teachers pursue their own areas of interest through research and experimentation, thereby strengthening their practice. Both novice and veteran teachers work together in an environment that promotes individual professional growth.

Kelsey leadership gives teachers the autonomy to experiment as a way of developing their teaching practice. By encouraging and supporting teacher autonomy, the school's leadership allows teachers the opportunity to grow and develop in their teaching

role. This sends a message of confidence in each teacher's ability to know what is best for student learning—what Lieberman and Miller (2008 a) have described with the term “teacher as knower” (p. 21). From the early years of the school, Dr. Black, according to Claire, supported her research and encouraged her experimentation.

The best professional development comes from teachers learning from one another. They do so when they are given opportunities to visit one another's classrooms and strengthen their own areas of weakness (Ayers, 2001). In contrast to the “infertile soil” described by Fullan and Hargreaves (1996), which precludes teachers from growing professionally, Kelsey provides a rich and fertile soil that promotes professional growth. Giving teachers license to experiment and learn from one another sends the message that teacher growth is valued, which in turn supports the development of a professional learning community (Barth, 1990).

Kelsey's model of teacher learning opportunities reflects a well-developed professional learning community in which both teachers and students learn together. Teacher learning communities strengthen school culture and support student engagement in school (Mclaughin & Talbert, 2001). In all professional learning community, staff education grows in tandem with student education. As teachers are given opportunities to learn, so too are the students (Barth, 1990; R. DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Rosenholtz, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1994). Kelsey's structured learning opportunities for teachers showcase a model of veteran and novice teachers learning in community together, supporting one another and creating a learning culture that encompasses the entire school.

c. Selected population.

Kelsey's selected student population adds another layer to the school's structure.

A lengthy admissions process chooses a specific population of students, allowing teachers to become experts in teaching this selected population, homing in on the most effective teaching strategies for these students.

Because Kelsey is a private school, its admissions staff chooses the students who attend, creating a population of students with common language-based learning disabilities as well as other specific qualities. Once students are enrolled, a structured sorting system places individual students in classes with others who have similar learning profiles.

Admissions director Lynn Kamer explained that Kelsey admits students who fit both the academic profile and specific personality characteristics. She described the kind of student they accept:

We want kids who remain motivated even though they have had years of frustration, kids who remain in the community, that shows a willingness to be part of a larger group, and then we are looking for basic character virtues around truth telling, kindness. We are looking for kind kids.

In addition to these characteristics, students must fit a specific learning profile that matches the teaching expertise of Kelsey staff. Kelsey admissions staff looks for students with a language-based learning disability in the presence of average to above-average reasoning and problem-solving skills. Weakness in working memory and processing speed are common in this profile; typically, these students struggle with reading and

writing. Lynn described the kind of disabilities they look for as well as others that they feel Kelsey cannot address well:

We do not turn away kids who cannot read. If cognitive ability is in the right place, we can take them. We are looking for expressive language issues. The verbal comprehension may be lower, but they cannot express it well. We are always looking for expressive language issues because we know we can address this. The only thing in [the] language realm that would cause us to deny a student is if the primary issues are around receptive language and comprehension. We do not target comprehension as we do decoding and fluency.

The admissions office receives over 1,000 applicants a year. They turn away those who do not fit their profile. Lynn explained that many parents who apply know that their child does not fit the profile but are desperate for a school that will work for their child. For the past few years, there has been a waiting list at both the elementary/middle school campus and the high school. Little financial aid is available, only small awards of between \$5,000 and \$10,000 are awarded to help offset the tuition of \$43,900 per year.

In addition to the sorting process that occurs at admissions, Kelsey also places students in classes based on each student's learning profile, thereby creating smaller, more selected groups of students. Lynn described the advantages of this sorting. "This creates a comfort level for kids when they are in classes with students that are [of] similar ability, and it is easier for teachers to teach to [the] same focused cluster of strengths and weaknesses." Allison Tripp explained the lengthy process by which students are sorted into classes. She noted that the sorting process varies according to subject:

The oral expression class looks at students' IQ, assessing the verbal score compared to the perceptual. They look for students with similar profiles to put in the same class. For language arts, they look to group students who have a similar pace on their written output. For social studies, they group by reading ability and comprehension. They assess age and maturity as well. Usually there is no more than a two-year spread in age, but there could be three.

Allison described a long, arduous process, taking up to a full week, whereby department heads spend hours sorting students into these selected groups. In my interviews with teachers, many noted that they teach to the profile of their class. Depending on the profile of the students, teachers may use different teaching materials and the pace of the class may vary. Math teacher Fiona Manner described how she teaches according to the leveling of the students in her class using different textbooks and varying her teaching approach dependent on the level of the class.

Selected grouping allows teachers to direct their teaching to students' specific learning needs and, according to Lynn, also creates a more comfortable environment for the students. In fact, many students reported feeling more comfortable at Kelsey than they did at their previous school. For example, Evette stated that she was less embarrassed when standing up in front of a group at Kelsey.

1. Development of expertise.

Kelsey's selected population means that both program design and faculty priorities are focused on meeting the needs of this specific population. Bert Stack and the Kelsey case managers noted that over time, as a result of this focus, Kelsey faculty members have developed expertise in serving this particular population. Common

phrases I heard from teachers and case managers were, “With this population, this strategy works best,” or, “With our population, we need to have templates.”

Many students commented favorably on the quality of the teaching at Kelsey compared to their previous school. They noted that for the first time, they understood what was presented in class. For example, Mike—exemplifying the way many Kelsey students experienced the expertise of their teachers—commented that he definitely noticed a difference between the way people teach at Kelsey and the way they taught at his old school:

I mean, the way they taught everything made so much more sense.... They didn’t just shove a textbook in front of me and say, “Learn this! And if you don’t, you’ve failed!” We talked about it, we actually learned it instead of [just] memorizing and looking at it. It was strange, because there was a higher level of difficulty in just about all my classes [at Kelsey], but everything I was being taught made more sense, so it was easier.

Teachers consistently expressed understanding of their students and expertise in how to best help them deal with their learning disability. Veteran teacher Claire described the issues common to this population of students—executive function issues, slow information retrieval and processing, ADD/ADHD, and, more recently, anxiety. In my classroom observation, I noticed how Claire repeatedly tried to get James to stop playing with his pencil. Later, she explained to me that James needed to learn ways to attend in class that were more socially acceptable and would not distract him or other students. Claire also explained how she helped James develop his writing by providing a specific

writing template. Claire speaks with authority when talking about her work and her understanding of this population.

In many classes that I visited, whether in math, science, language arts, or social studies, when students were asked to read aloud, the teacher supported their reading, giving them clues or suggestions if they got stuck. For example, in Mike's social studies class, the teacher asked Mike to read aloud. Mike began reading and then announced, "I cannot read."

The teacher responded: "Do you do the ending grid in tutorial?"

Mike said, "Yes."

The teacher asked, "Does that help?" Mike tried again but did not get the word. Then the teacher said, "I will give you the middle syllable. Does that help?" After receiving this structured help from the teacher, Mike read the word correctly. No other students in the class seemed to notice that Mike was struggling with this word. The teacher's knowledge of tutorial work and reading allowed him to reinforce Mike's understanding and help Mike read the word.

Kelsey's sorting process, both in admissions and at the class level, creates selected groupings that allow teachers to direct their teaching precisely to the student-specific learning profile in each class. Teachers noted that these groupings help them direct their teaching to students' particular learning needs. Although students did not specify how the class grouping affect them, they did mention their increased comfort level in being with other students with dyslexic. It is noteworthy that this kind of specific selected grouping counters recommendations from much of the literature on best practices for promoting student motivation and self-efficacy (Ames, 1992; Bandura,

1997; Maehr & Midgley, 1996). Due to social comparisons, research suggests that students perform better when they are not isolated into selected groups but instead placed in heterogeneous groups where students are able to learn from each other in a cooperative learning environment. However, much of the literature focuses on a general public school population, not specifically on students with dyslexia in a private school. In fact, my interviews with students revealed that in the selected setting provided at Kelsey they felt more highly motivated and more confident of their own abilities than they had in their previous experiences in a heterogeneous public school. Motivational theory mentions heterogeneous grouping as only one aspect of classroom structure that can promote student motivation and self-efficacy. At Kelsey, however, the selected environment appears to provide an atmosphere that sanctions mistakes and normalizes reading struggles, providing the necessary safeguards to allow struggling readers to succeed (Fink & Samuels, 2007). Many students stated they were more interested in school since attending Kelsey. In fact, Mike, Evette, Nancy, and Frank all commented how they had given up at their old school but at Kelsey they are motivated and interested in schoolwork.

Selected groupings are only one factor that may increase these students' motivation. A host of other aspects of the Kelsey program clearly contribute as well. For example, Fink and Samuels (2007) emphasize the importance of high-interest books for struggling readers. Kelsey's oral expression teachers make use of this motivational strategy, consciously choosing books that, from experience, they view as high-interest books for students.

Selected grouping appears to create an environment that makes it easier for teachers to teach while giving students a more comfortable place to make mistakes surrounded by similar students. As Evette put it, “At Kelsey you are no longer singled out. Every one has the same problem.”

d. Academic structure.

Kelsey maintains a consistently structured academic program for each subject, which is reflected in curriculum design, across the curricula, and in the classroom structure. According to Bert Stack, head of school, the curricular focus in every subject is skill-based and language-based. Teachers use a consistent language approach across all disciplines and classroom routines are uniform throughout the school.

1. Structure in curriculum design.

Every aspect of Kelsey’s academic structure is designed to provide remediation for students with language-based learning disabilities. The curriculum for each subject is carefully constructed using templates and specific learning strategies designed by department heads and teachers for students with dyslexia. Kelsey’s program maintains more classes specific to language than most schools. In contrast to a traditional school, in which students would take only one English language class, Kelsey students enroll in three language classes: tutorial, language arts, and oral expression. According to language arts department head Claire Jenkins, the oral expression class was created when staff realized that students would not make headway with written language until they made gains with oral language. The oral expression class is specifically designed to meet this need.

Although tutorials cater to student-specific learning needs, all are similar in many respects. The main programs used by tutorials are designed to address four areas of reading: *phonemic awareness* (same/different, number, and order of sounds), *linguistic patterns* (word families), *fluency* (appropriate rate and accuracy while reading orally), and *comprehension* (vocabulary, main ideas, and details). Programs used to address all of these areas include for phonemic awareness, LiPS (Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing Program for Reading, Spelling, and Speech), Linguistic Patterns, Let's Read, Merrill Linguistic Reading Program, and Read Naturally. For Fluency the programs used include, Read Naturally, Great Leaps Reading, and Reading Fluency. Comprehension uses a variety of resources to focus upon specific skills.

Among those available, many tutors find that the LiPS program is the key to helping many of these children to start learning how to read (Reading Tutorials at Landmark's Elementary/Middle School Campus, n.d.). Academic dean Allison Tripp explained that public schools often use programs other than LiPS because LiPS is a hard program to implement correctly. She noted that when Kelsey began using the LiPS program, the individual case managers all had different ideas about how to implement it. As a result, the school hired an outside expert to supervise the program. This supervisory position still exists today, held by a reading specialist who also works as a case manager for four students.

LiPS, as Allison explains it, is a pre-phonics program, designed to train students with dyslexia to hear differences in sounds that they do not naturally hear. LiPS adds a kinesthetic component: "When students make a sound, they have to connect a colored block with that sound. They also learn to pay attention to what is going on in their mouth,

categorizing each sound as a “popper,” a “smile,” or a “lifter,” according to the motion they feel.” The case manager designs the specific program for each student, addressing the four areas of reading.

Oral expression (OE) classes also maintain a highly structured design. For example, on Mondays, all OE teachers start their classes by having students take turns talking about their weekend. Case manager Erin Stout explains that this practice builds community and helps with public speaking:

They [OE department heads] feel like if people get to know each other ... on a friend level, you're more apt to have better discussions when you're talking about the academic stuff and the literature. Kids have to give presentations for public speaking, and so ... in elementary school, they get up there and they give a weekend speech.

Developed by veteran teacher Claire Jenkins, language arts classes maintain a structured approach to teaching writing now used by teachers at every grade level. In this approach, students use a template to organize their writing. Claire explained how this structure becomes internalized:

They [students] can recite the topic sentence pattern, write the pattern, and then write a topic sentence on demand. In other words, the students have internalized its structure ... [and] the students over-learn the sentence patterns.

Patrick Steel, head of the math department, described the structured math program he designed for this population after discovering there was no math program that matched the learning needs of the student with dyslexia:

Here's this brain, and we've got to figure out how to remediate within the language sphere, but no one's ever really thought about this in terms of math.... This is the machine you have to deal with..... This is the kind of material that they can take in, and this is what they can put out. So let's design the curriculum to meet that machine. And there wasn't one out there, so ... I had to make it up...

Patrick explained one of the unique aspects of the math program is that the approach helps students to see the overall structure (the whole) before they can understand the pieces (the part):

By giving them whole to part, you're giving them the overall structure, the Gestalt of what you're trying to build. They put the pieces in and then that drives the language. Because they don't... usually have the language skills to do that without it.

Patrick explained that he uses visual images that are familiar to students, such as a six pack or an animal's feet. For example, to introduce fractions, Patrick might provide this visual:

I want you to think of two hooves; what's that fraction? You'd say, "Oh, you're thinking four," because I said "hooves." Well, that's a half—that's a half of the horse. ... Right; now let's put it up on the board. So ... two fourths equals ... what did you do to both? Oh, we divided by two.

In addition to the "whole to part" approach, Patrick uses gross motor activities to demonstrate math concepts. For example, he took one class outside to plot x and y coordinates on a homemade oversized graph. Students placed themselves on the "graph

paper” according to the individual x and y coordinates that Patrick assigned. In another class, students stood on parallel lines. Patrick explained why he uses these gross motor activities:

The gross motor kind of thing gives them time for the language to come.... So, as soon as you give them a way *to* answer, then you’re trying to pull the language out of them. And then you can go toward the worksheets that everybody else uses—after they have the language—but until then, it won’t stick.

The consistently structured math program allows students to go from year to year hearing the same language used to describe the same approach. Math teacher Patty Ryer noted how this helps students as they move to different teachers each year:

We use that same language across the department, so that if next year Abby Gateway gets one of my students, then that ... foundation has already been laid and the kid’ll be able to connect back to that—“Oh, I’ve heard that before”—using that same kind of language.

The Kelsey curriculum is carefully crafted and designed to teach to the language-based learning-disabled student as evidenced in the tutorial, oral expression, language arts, and math programs. The math and writing curricula emerged from years of teacher experimentation with their practice to find the best strategies. Other subjects, such as tutorial, use research-based programs that Kelsey implements with high levels of expertise and supervision.

2. Structure across the curriculum.

Every Kelsey teacher is trained in the same reading program. Once trained, teachers are required to teach tutorial classes thereby practicing and perfecting their skill

in teaching the reading program. Paul Standard noted this commonality as one aspect of the Kelsey program that helps students find success. This common knowledge creates consistency across the curriculum as all students are helped in their reading skills in the same ways in every class. In fact, teacher Maggie Wright noted that in recent feedback from the state education department, they observed consistency in the curriculum at every level.

In my classroom observations, I witnessed that on more than one occasion, teachers addressed language issues with students using strategies I had seen in tutorial classes. For example, in Frank's science class, when a student had trouble reading a vocabulary word the teacher said, "Let's track with your fingers." The student was then able to read the word. In the same class, the teacher handed out a quiz and offered help reading the quiz for any student that needed it. In both social studies and science classes, I noted that vocabulary words were pronounced and defined before commencing a reading, similar to what I witnessed in tutorial classes.

Math teacher Fiona Manner noted her own growth and use of language teaching strategies. She taught reading during summer school so that she could incorporate these strategies into her science and math classes. As she explained it "I do ... syllabication exercises with those students that need it for vocabulary that's coming up in science—you know, dot-and-grab [a reading strategy]." Fiona went on to explain "A-to-Z" sheets - a teaching method created by the language arts department to introduce new vocabulary. Students are given the definition and syllables of each word and then are asked to alphabetize each word:

[I use] A-to-Z sheets in math, when I'm introducing new math vocabulary and within the science They're familiar; they know how they're going to go about doing an A-to-Z sheet; it's not just...this teacher introduces vocabulary this way ... or that way. And then, the templates, and things like that, so, as much of that language can get infused into all their aspects of their day.

In my classroom observations, I noted the use of A-to-Z sheets in social studies classes as well. In addition, I observed both social studies and oral expression teachers suggesting the "dot-and-grab" strategy for a student stuck on a word. Evette's social studies teacher incorporated instruction in reading into social studies, as noted on Evette's report card: "Evette benefits from semantic (meaning-related) and phonemic (sound-related) cueing to aid recall of information and specific vocabulary."

Parents and students also commented on how the consistent structure enables students to advance in their reading as well as clearly stating expectations. Barbara, Evette's mother, expressed a parent's perspective: "At Kelsey, *all* the teachers are trained in the different protocols and everything else, so that if they're in science class and they're having difficulty accessing some of the material ..." Evette interrupted: "Use dot-and-grab, use dot-and-grab. Sound it out." Barbara continued:

Exactly. So then it's across the entire curriculum, all the teachers have that base knowledge to know when the kid is getting in trouble, what props will help that child get back into focusing and working, whereas across the public school system, because there's been so many different things out there, it's going to take a long time before they can get all the teachers up to speed in using this, ...

speaking ... the same language, and I think that's the big problem with the ... public school systems right now, is that they don't coordinate with each other.

For students, the Kelsey structure organizes their learning, making expectations clear. Evette found the predictable structure of Kelsey classes less confusing than classes in public school. She explained:

[In public school] I was told ten to twelve sentences makes a paragraph; four to eight make a paragraph; three to four make a paragraph. And then how to do math is different every year. The teachers [at Kelsey] teach it different. The teachers have the same book, ... Like I got eight to ten words in my LA [language arts] class, and then in my tutorial it's still eight to ten words in a sentence. So it's like they're connecting.

Evette noticed that all teachers at Kelsey teach writing in the same way, eliminating some of her confusion about expectations. I also noticed this in my classroom observations. The same sentence construction template used in every language arts class was also used in every social studies class.

Teachers' common knowledge of how to teach reading strategies helps create the consistency across the curriculum, which gives Kelsey students reinforcement in developing their reading skills in all subjects. Students and parents notice this benefit as they see the reinforcement the child receives on a daily basis. With every teacher "on the same page," students are clear about expectations and do not have to understand multiple teaching strategies.

3. Classroom structure.

Every Kelsey teacher maintains a similar rhythm and organization in the classroom. In fact, the similarity between one class and the next can seem almost eerie. The consistent structure revolves around order, process, and routine. Math teacher and student trainer Fiona Manner explained that the consistent classroom structure helps facilitate learning for students with dyslexia. She explained:

They just tend to need so much in terms of consistency ... if they're going between six different teachers and each teacher runs the routine and the structure of the class differently, it's hard for them to figure out ... "Oh, wait. I'm in *this* class, *this* is what that person wants, so ..." The more consistent ... we can be, the easier it makes [it], for the child.

i. Classroom order.

I observed a very consistent order in classroom organization. In every class I visited, the agenda was on the board when I walked in, and homework was usually the first agenda item. Most classes started with the teacher going over the agenda and then giving out that night's homework. Case manager Erin Stout explained that in staff training all teachers are taught to start their class with the agenda on the board and to come into the class prepared with a lesson plan. Every class I visited, including tutorials, met this goal. Fiona Manner explained the importance and role of the agenda:

It just lets the kids know what's coming, what's our plan for the day, so any of those kids that have tough times with transitions, they can kind of see, like, "Oh, something's winding down." "We're going to be moving to the next ..." And ... for the kids that might have ADD, "OK, we're wrapping up with this note taking, so I can shift focus [to] something else."

Math teacher Patty Ryer concurred with this statement, saying that she loved how the agenda helped move students through the class material. Maggie Wright noted how students depend on the agenda:

If you're change the agenda, make it super-clear and announce it three times. Get questions about the agenda done at the beginning of the class; get the anxiety over with, then you can keep moving.

Just as the agenda helps students with expectations, giving out the homework at the beginning of the period alleviates anxiety, according to both Fiona and Maggie. Fiona noted that when homework is given out at the beginning of the period, students can write the assignment down without feeling rushed. Since they already have the assignment, they feel less anxiety throughout the class. Fiona explained:

If we didn't [assign homework] at the beginning, they'd be waiting all period: "What am I going to have for homework tonight?" Giving it to them at the beginning, ... answering their questions and kind of putting it out there so that they know what they're doing, allows them ... to focus on what we're doing in class.

As part of the classroom order, teachers usually asked for questions about the homework and often allowed the class to do the first homework problem together. Also as part of the classroom order, students write down their homework assignment in their assignment notebook. In one class, the teacher announced that homework would be given out at the end of the class because they would be working on it during the class. This

announcement emphasized the break from this usual routine of assigning homework at the start of the class.

ii. Classroom process.

I witnessed other consistencies in my classroom observations regarding classroom process. First, the teachers often presented material in a linear fashion. For example, in starting a worksheet, the teacher walked the students through a step-by-step process to start their work. In the first step, the teacher passed out a highlighter to each student. Next, each student highlighted the directions written at the top of the worksheet. Then one student read the directions out loud. Finally, the students began the work. At each step, the teacher made sure the students were following along. This step-by-step process appeared as a typical format for teaching. First-year teacher Maggie Wright spoke about the step-by-step systematic instruction that she feels benefits the students at Kelsey:

Here, it's Step A, good. Step A, Step B ... wait, go back to Step A. Step A, Step B, to Step C. OK, go back to A. Can you get to C from here? ... It is spiraling back.

In a language arts class, I witnessed how this step-by-step instruction worked for writing an essay. First, the teacher had students underline key words in the prompt. Then, step-by-step, as a class, they followed the writing template, developing one sentence at a time. In science and math classes, I observed step-by-step instruction in using a textbook. The teacher explained that higher-level classes include some students who will be returning to a general education classroom next year and, therefore, they need to learn how to use a textbook. Patty Ryer noted that for many of the students even a single page is overwhelming; they need to learn what to look for on each page. For example, Patty

asked students to look up the Pythagorean theorem in their textbook. After a few minutes, she asked: “Are we all on the same page? Thumbs up if you got the page.” In another class, Patty announced that the class would be working on “book skills” and asked students to “please find the polynomial section in your textbook.” In science, the teacher said: “We are studying the nervous system,” and then asked, “Where would we find the nervous system in this book?” Next she asked students where they would find information on neurons. The classes continued in this step-by-step fashion, to help facilitate student’s learning to use the textbook.

A second process I observed consistently among classes was repetition of the material. Fiona explained that for Kelsey’s population, repetition helps them retain the information:

We’ve just come to learn that with our students, the more repetition and review of something that they have, the more automatic it becomes, and that’s what we want for them to ... be able to pick up the routine and slide right into it.

A third consistent classroom process was seen in the ways in which teachers presented material to students. Typically, the teacher stood at the front of the room using a smart board or white board as students sat in rows at their desks. I never observed any group work among the students; instead, all classes were teacher-directed, with the teacher at the front of the room giving direct instruction.

A fourth type of classroom process was in the ways teachers dealt with focus and discipline issues. In many classes, I saw students “playing” with small toys or pieces of clay. One teacher explained that these items were provided to help the student focus. For example, in one social studies class the teacher read to the students while some students

chose to color as they listened. In Evette’s social studies class, one student’s leg kept shaking, which disturbed the other students. The teacher suggested that he rub his leg, saying that this might stop the shaking. The shaking stopped for a few minutes, then started again. The student asked, “Mr. Gotford do you have anything I could play with in my hand?” The teacher looked through his desk, found a small box, and gave it to the student. The student appeared pleased with this solution, and his leg stopped shaking.

Classroom discipline also appeared consistent from class to class. Teachers were diligent about curtailing side conversations and distracting behaviors. For example, in one class, a student blurted out, “I have sideburns.” Another responded, “I do not have sideburns.” The teacher immediately wrote both students’ initials on the board and said: “I am giving you both a warning. Do you know why? You are both having your own conversations.” Although I never heard a teacher raise his or her voice or show any frustration with the students, I rarely witnessed behavioral issues in the classroom.

iii. Classroom routine.

Classroom routine is the third aspect of the consistent classroom structure that I observed along with order and process. There are many structured routines that are seen in every classroom. First, students almost always have only one item on their desks at a time, such as a single sheet of paper or one book. Activities change multiple times during the class, and items are put away when finished or when the teacher suggests that it is time to move to the next item on the agenda. Whenever the teacher hands out a paper, students are asked to put their name, date, and day on the paper in the same location for every class. In most classrooms, I noticed a checklist of items students would need to be ready for class—often a poster displaying the message in both words and drawings.

Another consistent observation was that classes tended to do many short activities. In a forty-five-minute class, there might be as many as four activities. When I asked Patty Ryer, a fourth-year teacher, about this routine, she explained that short activities help students with attentional issues maintain their focus—another example of how Kelsey designs its curriculum around the needs of the students. Patty explained:

I feel a lot of our students have short attention spans ... and they get bored! And there's a lot to get through.... Frank's a great example: He's worked hard as a seventh grader, [but] he's reading at a third-grade level. We have a *lot* that we have to cover, and he *does* have a short attention span, so it helps to just keep things lively [by] moving, moving, moving through everything.

To maintain this highly consistent classroom structure, teachers must remain organized at all times. Maggie Wright describes how she learned the importance of organization and consistent structure through training and from her first months of teaching:

You have to ... be organized enough, even if you're faking it ... so that nothing changes from day to day for them. Because as soon as there's a change, that's something that they're taking in and having to deal with, and they're not focusing on what you want them to focus on.

As an example of the need for organization and structure, Maggie told a story about what happened when she made a small change in routine—assigning two pages of single-sided homework, rather than one double-sided page as she usually did:

It took fifteen minutes to get the anxiety down to the point where they could look through the package to understand what was being asked of them. I had one kid

just ... ready to cry, because he didn't understand how much homework he was supposed to do tonight. One homework is two pages. Couldn't figure that out. He was like, "So I do one page?"

"No, you do one *homework*, which is two pages."

"But ... wait, *how* many pages do I have to do? That's more homework than normal."

"No, it's *not* more homework than normal; it's the same amount of homework on two pieces of paper."

"But ... then what do I do tomorrow night?"

I had to go through the whole thing over and over again, because just that *one* simple change in format, and poof! Total anxiety.

The structured classroom environment is often noted on students' report cards, at IEP meetings, and by parents as a key element in helping students succeed at Kelsey. For example, Raya's social studies teacher wrote, "Raya benefited from a structured classroom setting where information was delivered at a pace which she could process and where the instructor could monitor her attention."

At Raya's IEP meeting, several teachers commented on how well Raya responded to structure. The math teacher said: "With structure she can do problems and be very successful.... The more concrete[ly] I present it, the more she understands it." The language arts teacher spoke even more forcefully:

Raya craves structure. When there is a sentence structure she does really well. In fourth quarter, I pull back on these structure[s], she experiences a lot of hesitancy. She is not sure how to start.

And the science teacher noted: “She needs templates. Without the template, she has a hard time.”

Parents also notice how the structure helps their child. Libby, Nancy’s mother, explained that the routines of Kelsey help Nancy stay on track:

I think they just keep on them, and that ... you know, making sure by the end of the class that they know they have this homework and what has to be done, and “Put it in your backpack.” And I think ... she needs a routine.

The Kelsey School maintains an academic structure that encompasses a consistent curriculum design, spans all subjects, and creates a regular classroom practice that is used throughout the school. Public school liaison, Paul Standard attributes much of student success at Kelsey to this consistently structured environment. Dr. Black described this structure as a necessity for students with dyslexia creating this foundation at the inception of the school.

e. Communication

Kelsey maintains a structured communication system for teachers, students, and parents. For teachers, the daily thirty-minute teacher meeting called “Milkbreak” provides a structure that helps promote a comprehensive, collaborative teacher culture. This structure allows for a professional learning community to emerge. For students, “morning meeting,” from 7:45 to 8:00 AM every day, gives them the information they

need to construct their day. For parents, the case manager serves as their contact with the school, allowing for consistent and reliable communication between home and school.

1. Milkbreak.

Milkbreak, a thirty-minute schoolwide break in the morning schedule, accomplishes a number of goals for increasing staff communication at Kelsey. For students, Milkbreak resembles the traditional recess time. For staff, Milkbreak allows for staff and student celebrations, continuous teacher learning, and teacher collaboration, all of which help to foster a comprehensive, collaborative teacher culture. This institutionalized structure prevents the isolated teacher culture common in many schools, which is well documented by educational researchers as a major barrier to teacher collaboration (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Lortie, 1975/2002; Moore Johnson, et al., 2004) Structuring Milkbreak into the school day ensures that teachers have meeting opportunities every day, except for the one day a week when the teachers rotate supervision of the students' Milkbreak.

A staff member might celebrate a student or a fellow staff member during Milkbreak. For example, at one Milkbreak, head of school Bert Stack noted that wristbands were given out to a number of students for self-advocacy and determination. He explained:

It is always nice to give out [recognition for] self-advocacy and determination. These are often the hardest to come up with. These were for a class that got approval for their own MCAS template. They sent it to DESE [Department of Elementary and Secondary Education], and it got approved.

During another Milkbreak, Bert congratulated the track team: “Congratulations to the track team. They did really well against five other schools, and it was great to see everyone participate.” Milkbreak is also a time when Bert acknowledges teachers’ work in putting together Kelsey’s annual Community Day—a day filled with workshops presented by students, staff, and parents on a wide range of topics:

Thank you all. It takes a village to pull off an event like that. It is a great tradition.

I am in awe of the day. Thanks to all the committee heads and workshop leaders.

It was a great day.

A teacher celebrated students’ donation of time and energy for a knitting project:

The students worked really hard at home and at school. I showed them how to knit and then they went on their own. They made Afghans for babies in Afghanistan.

Another teacher announced that he wanted to say a positive word about an individual student who had risen to a challenge and succeeded: “It was just great to see him making progress.” A case manager celebrated the work of multiple teachers in helping a child improve academically:

I was at Bill’s IEP meeting. Kudos to every one who worked with him. He was amazing in his IEP meeting, advocating for himself and expressing his desires for next year.

Commonly, at Milkbreak a staff member will celebrate former students who return to general education classes, find success in the workplace, or gain admission to college or another private school. Celebrations are usually connected to the school,

although there are times when staff members' personal accomplishments might be shared, such as participation in a marathon. Deal and Peterson (1999) suggest that celebrations help create a positive school culture.

A second aspect of Milkbreak that helps to promote a comprehensive, collaborative teacher culture is the structured time for ongoing teacher learning. Staff members may present a mini-lesson to their peers or may share reflections on their practice. Over two Milkbreaks, the director of counseling presented information on childhood anxiety. In the first meeting, she presented specific information, such as signs and symptoms of anxiety. In the second session, she facilitated a question-and-answer time on childhood anxiety. She noted: "Teaching the anxious student is not so different than teaching your other students. You just might need to add more strategies for managing anxiety." This particular discussion appeared to interest many teachers. As the bell rang, no one rose to leave the room; instead, teachers continued to listen to the questions and answers until the second bell rang. Even after the second bell, a few teachers stayed to talk with the presenter. One teacher explained to the presenter how she handled a student with anxiety:

I think teachers have forgotten that kids are different. When I started I had to watch *Fat City*. And I think teachers forget that "fair is fair" for each kid. I have anxiety, and I have gotten used to it. My friend said, "You have done this before. You can do it." That really helped me. So when I saw Alicia [a student] in the hall, I kept saying, "You are going to be OK." I think it helps them deescalate to just give them little reminders.

I witnessed other mini-training sessions during Milkbreak—lessons on computer technology, research on reading, teaching reading strategies, reading student testing, and understanding executive functioning disorder. The Kelsey administration acknowledges and promotes the expertise of its staff by utilizing staff members to present to their peers on various topics. This acknowledgment of staff expertise promotes a professional learning environment and a positive school culture. (Barth, 1990; Saphier & King, 1985; Sergiovanni, 1994).

During Milkbreak, teachers also shared information about their practice. One teacher presented student posters from a science project. At another Milkbreak, a teacher explained the technique she used in tutorial to encourage a student to perform at his best ability. Sometimes a teacher's practice is shown by a student presentation. Often an oral expression class will perform a poem at the beginning of Milkbreak. Providing opportunities for ongoing learning, using the expertise of the staff, sends a message of competence and confidence from the administration to the staff. This runs counter to the typical scenario seen in many schools, where the administration hires outside "experts," prompting the staff to question their own level of expertise (Sergiovanni, 1994). In addition, Rosenholtz (1990) suggests that when teachers are given more opportunities to learn, students will have increased opportunities as well. Ongoing teacher learning promotes a comprehensive, collaborative teacher culture that contributes to a professional learning environment (Barth, 1990).

Milkbreak also fosters a comprehensive, collaborative teacher culture by creating a time in which teachers can ask for help in their practice, engage in professional dialogue, and share in the teaching of all students. At one Milkbreak, a teacher expressed

concern about a student in her class who did not use his assignment notebook. Another teacher offered advice; she noted that she had witnessed another teacher writing a note in a student's assignment notebook. The note said, "If you read this note you do not have to do your homework." This, she added, seemed to solve the problem.

Milkbreak also provides an opportunity for teachers to participate in professional dialogue in small-group meetings. Typically, if teachers want to talk about an individual student, the case manager will arrange a small-group meeting for all the teachers who work with that student. For these teachers, the small-group meeting replaces the larger all-staff Milkbreak meeting that day. The ease of scheduling these meetings gives teachers the flexibility to get together within a day's notice if needed. These small-group meetings might include the student and/or the child's parents, or just the staff. When the staff meets alone, it is a time for professional dialogue and brainstorming to find the best strategies for promoting a child's success. Having this time to meet and talk about students is the norm at Kelsey. It is this norm that provides the structure and ease to create a comprehensive, collaborative teacher culture (Little, 1990a)

Milkbreak offers a venue in which all teachers can become invested in every child's welfare, as teachers are kept informed about all students, not just those they teach. During one Milkbreak, a case manager asked for help from the community for one of her students:

Bobbie is having a rough afternoon. He is feeling a lot of pressure on himself to get things right. He is becoming more emotional. Please keep an eye on him.

Please let me know if you see anything.

Often, case managers will announce that a student is out sick, a family dog died, or a grandparent is ill, as a way of letting the school community share in the caretaking of this child. At one Milkbreak, a case manager noted one student's successes and another's struggles:

John started his goal sheet. He is excited about how well he is doing. Peter had the same goal sheet but is not doing that well. He had a hard time in science and did not understand why his behavior was inappropriate.

In our interview, case manager Kelly Dance related how she appreciates the strong communication bonds between teachers at Kelsey. She noted, "I don't think it's very common in other schools that the teachers know as much ... about the student that they're working with, [as] we do here." Although Kelly did not enumerate the avenues that allow for so much communication about students, her reference to the unique quality of the ways in which Kelsey teachers know students speaks to the school's culture and the built-in structures in the Kelsey day that provide teachers with ample opportunities to talk about students.

While most teachers are attending Milkbreak, several teachers, on a rotating basis, are on recess duty. However, this time is also used to communicate information about students. Teacher Fiona Manner explains how teachers communicate with Dean Richner about issues that might arise during Milkbreak for students. When teachers are out on duty during Milkbreak, Fiona explained, they carry clipboards so they can write down any issues that arise:

There's a clipboard for people to jot down any issues, so if you don't have time to seek out Dean he can read it right there. And it's like a paper trail, so I could say,

“Oh, this kid, this is the third day in a row that somebody’s had to talk to him about such-and-such.”

Limited time for teachers to meet together contributes to the isolation characteristic of the typical teacher culture. This limited time is often listed as a barrier to teacher collaboration (Hargreaves, 1994; Shulman, 2004). In contrast, Milkbreak at Kelsey provides a reliable time when all teachers are available to meet and discuss both their students and their practice. Confining structures in schools are typically blamed for this lack of meeting time. (Hargreaves, 1994; Lortie, 1975/2002; Waller, 1932/1961). Yet, at Kelsey, it is the built-in structure of Milkbreak that provides opportunities for collaboration, which in turn nourishes the comprehensive, collaborative teacher culture. Schools that have restructured to create time for teacher collaboration have seen increases in student achievement (Ancess, 2001; Lipsitz, 1984). The benefit of the built-in structured communication provided by the Milkbreak meeting is not lost to outside observers. An advocate for Evette noted in a meeting that the daily communication on student progress helps make the Kelsey program successful.

2. Boards and morning meeting.

Dry-erase boards strategically located in well-trafficked areas serve to communicate important events to both student and parents. The daily fifteen-minute student morning meeting builds community and reinforces the information on the dry-erase boards. This simple form of communication enables students to take responsibility and maintain independence, which builds a sense of ownership and commitment to the school community (Wood, 1992). Information on the dry-erase boards might include an upcoming dance, a parent–teacher association (PTA) meeting, or a reminder (in winter)

that the walkways are slippery. In my interview with Libby, she explained the importance of knowing what is going on:

You [parents] always know what's going on and what's coming up. And she [Nancy] knows, too, and they put it right on the board as you're dropping them off.... She always knows when there's a half-day, she knows when it's jean day. She knows there's a play coming up. Why does she read these and know that there's all this coming up and know when to tell us, when all the other years in public school, she'd never tell me anything?

Libby explained that when Nancy was in public school, she had to get information from other parents. Libby surmised that at Kelsey:

[Nancy] feels responsible to do this.... She has so much trust in herself.... [She] always knows what's going on. And they make her responsible for her things in a nice way.

In addition to the dry-erase boards, students obtain information about events happening at the school through morning meeting. Bert Stack explains the purpose of morning meeting:

Morning meeting has several purposes, based around community and communication. It's a natural way to bring the student body together before they head off for the day, so that all the constituencies—elementary, middle—visually acknowledge each other before they are divided into so many smaller groups.... It's good to have the whole school together to start the day.... It's also a time to make whole-school announcements about signups for sports, activities, etc. It's also where more seasonal announcements take place: dances, new library arrivals,

news of one kind or another, reminders about dress code or other policies. Finally, it's a time where special presentations happen: student council presentations, book reviews, wristbands, etc.

During morning meeting, Dean Richner presents information students need for the day and sometimes for the next few days. Teacher absences are noted and ski trips announced. Half-days and changes in schedule are discussed a few days before the change takes place. Dean Richner reviews behavioral expectations for all the students in a respectful tone using the word "please" in almost every sentence.

Meeting time, meeting time, please. Hats off today, please. No talking to neighbors, please. You are responsible for all the information. Please listen.

This structured communication system allows students to obtain information they need to conduct their day independently. They are reminded what day it is, which teachers are absent, and any expectations of their behavior. The structure gives students the message that they are capable and responsible. Morning meeting, a time when all Kelsey students are together, gives students a sense of connection and belonging that helps build community. According to Wood (1992), building community allows learning to take place. He explains that as students develop more control over their lives in school, they become more active in the school and also in their own learning. Morning meeting serves as one opportunity in the school day to help build community.

3. Case manager.

The institutionalized case manager system facilitates communication between parents and Kelsey staff. In my interviews with parents, many noted the ease of communicating with Kelsey staff. Parents felt well informed about their child's academic

and social/emotional issues. For example, Mary noted how she felt heard as a parent at Kelsey:

They [people at the school] listen. They believe you. If you go in and say, “You know, I was wondering about this,” you hear from them again. They answer you. If you send them an e-mail, they’ll answer you. You come in to see the case manager ... the case manager thing, I think is great. It’s someone who coordinates the whole thing, so you go to her and say, “I always wonder about this, how about that?”

Ella noted how the case manager keeps the link between teacher and parent open and informative. She explained that the teachers inform the case manager, Ronda, and then Ronda contacts her:

If he’s [Frank] not doing something he’s supposed to be doing, like his work isn’t done, they let Ronda know, and Ronda lets *me* know, they don’t just ... blow it off.

Barbara, Evette’s mother also appreciated the effective communication system at Kelsey:

They give you a lot of reports, regular reports. If there’s an issue, Sally McKay [Evette’s case manager] will call and ask a question or something. If I have a question, I can ask. I’m there picking her up a few times a week, so that I feel like I’m keeping in touch. They send out a lot of information either via email or ... that’s where I’ve been finding the most, is that you can [e-mail the case manager as well]. So I think that’s the key thing, is that Kelsey really does well with communicating, not only with the student but with the parents to make sure that the parents are aware of what’s going on with the student.

Libby noted the volume of communication and the connection with parents at Kelsey:

“There’s always ... a lot of communication, and it’s very family-oriented here, they *want* the parents involved.”

Parents often identified ease of communication as a marked difference between Kelsey and their experience with the public schools. At Kelsey, parents mentioned feeling supported and informed by the case manager’s attention to their child and to themselves. In contrast, their experience in communicating with personnel in the public school system had left them disappointed and sometimes even deceived. Some parents described their frustrations, during their years in the public school system, in trying to get a true read on their child’s academic status. Others believed that school personnel preferred not to hear from them. Libby noted how the principal had interfered with her attempts to communicate with Nancy’s math teacher. Mary, Ella, Debbie, and Evelyn all believed they were viewed as an unwelcome presence in the school. Olson (2009) concurs, suggesting that school administrators can function as barriers to protect teachers from parents and that maintaining the teacher as authority has excluded parents from educational decision making.

The importance of parent involvement has been well documented as vital to student success in school (Davies, 2002; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007; Epstein, 1987; Mapp, 2003) For special education students, Lavoie (2008) notes that the student’s’ success is dependent on frequent communication between the home and school. Yet, the parents recalled that when their child had attended the public school system, communication with school personnel often became strained.

How parents get involved, why some parents don't get involved, and what constitutes involvement are all questions that have surfaced in many research studies on parent involvement (DePlanty, et al., 2007; Mapp, 2003; Olson, 2009). DePlanty et al. (2007) note the mismatch between what teachers perceive as parent involvement and what parents think of as involvement. Epstein (1987) also describes differences in teachers' and parents' perceptions about communication: Teachers may feel that they communicate frequently, while parents feel that communication is lacking. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) acknowledges the tensions that can occur in parent-teacher conferences, reflecting broader societal issues relating to race and class along with personal autobiographies. Olson (2009) notes that parents often need to deal with their own school wounds before they can support their child in school. Waller (1932/1961) describes teachers and parents as natural enemies.

In my experience as a school counselor, I have witnessed all of these issues regarding parent involvement. Some parents had gone to the same school and even had the same teachers as their child. In dealing with their child's teacher, they felt the stress they had experienced as a child; therefore, they avoided parent-teacher conferences. Other parents indicated that although they tried to help out, the teacher did not want their help. Teachers, from their perspective, complained that parents are not involved.

Strategies that have been identified to help parents get involved typically revolve around parent, teacher, and principal all changing their approach to one another, along with adapting a school culture that promotes the parent-teacher partnership (Davies, 2002; Mapp, 2003; Olson, 2009). Davies (2002) suggests that conversation about parent partnership floods most schools, but without substantial change in parent involvement.

With volumes of research on the importance of parent–school partnerships, along with a lack of progress in this area, it would seem logical to look at an institutionalized system to help facilitate the parent–school connection.

The case manager system practiced at Kelsey provides just that. The same parents who felt frustrated and pushed away by the public school system found a haven in the case manager, who facilitated communication between home and school. The case manager position, dedicated to maintaining parent–school connection, allows this vital partnership to flourish. Although introducing a new staff position requires increased funding, one must ask: If the home–school connection improved, would that save money in the end, with less resources and time spent on individual children needing supports?

4. Report cards.

Report cards serve as another means of communication, giving parents detailed information about their child’s progress in school. Report cards at Kelsey are standards-based and comprehensive, identifying specific skills that the student has mastered and those that need work. The report card, which has no grades, includes a narrative section; it is a booklet, approximately five pages long. As Allison Tripp explained, the first report card, in October, is diagnostic, reflecting the results of testing and placement decisions made in the first six weeks of school. This report card, tailored to each individual child’s learning needs, lists the specific skills that will be taught in each subject for the year. Subsequent report cards measure how students have met their goals. For example, under the topic of spelling, Evette’s report card listed thirty goals. Evette’s tutorial teacher wrote: “Evette is continuing intensive phonological training for the purpose of stabilizing firm sound–symbol relationship as they relate to decoding.”

Allsion Tripp noted that teachers receive training in report card writing. If they comment on an issue, they must propose a solution. Focus appears as a common problem for many students. On the report card, teachers explain how they work with the student to refocus them. Evette's tutorial teacher noted: "Evette also benefits from cues to refrain from extraneous conversation and to remain focused on the topic in an effort to accomplish the entire daily agenda" Evette's oral language teacher wrote: "In an effort to help her focus, Evette currently holds a small object in her hand (e.g., rock, play dough)." James's teacher noted: "Although James occasionally requires reminders to stay on topic, he responds well to redirection." Frank's teacher wrote: "Frank benefits from close teacher proximity in order to ensure he stays on task while working independently." Lack of focus is not identified as the child's fault but, instead, a problem that the teacher needs to address. The teacher states the problem along with the strategies that were used to help the student find success.

The Kelsey report contains tremendous detail about specific skills, as well as teacher comments that explain how the student's learning issues, such as focus, are addressed within the classroom. The Kelsey report card would be daunting for a teacher with twenty or thirty students in a classroom. But for Kelsey teachers, who have six to eight students in a classroom, preparing this detailed report card twice a year seems feasible.

Communication between staff, parents, and students lies at the heart of any successful school. Kelsey's structured systems—the Milkbreak meeting, the dry-erase boards, morning meeting, the case manager, and the detailed report card—come together in a system of communication that is noticed by parents, teachers, and students as an

asset to the school's functioning. To some extent, these systems are possible at Kelsey because of the high teacher–student ratio (1:3). The benefits of this high level of structured communication may be a factor in the success stories of the nine students in this study. The Milkbreak meeting supports a comprehensive, collaborative teacher culture that promotes a professional learning community. The morning meeting and dry-erase board keep students informed of current issues in the school, encouraging a sense of belonging and responsibility. The case manager facilitates the parent–school partnership. Finally, the detailed report card allows academic communication with the parents.

5.4 Theme III: Supportive and Safe Learning Environment

A supportive and safe learning environment emerged as a third theme that contributed to the success of the nine student participants in this study, as viewed by the students themselves, their parents, and the staff. This learning environment permeated the school on many levels from administration, to teacher, and then to student. I noted five distinct aspects of the learning environment:

1. Administration supported teachers and promoted collaboration.
2. Teachers worked in collaboration encouraging and supporting one another in their practice.
3. Students felt supported by teachers and teachers adapted to children's learning issues.
4. Students felt safe at Kelsey.
5. Teachers, parents, and students described a close caring community.

a. Administration supported the teachers and promoted collaboration.

In my interviews with teachers, they consistently mentioned that they felt supported by administration. They also noted that the administrative team modeled collaboration. This supportive/collaborative environment goes back to Kelsey's origins, but it is noteworthy that many teachers felt an increase in administrative support over time. This support took many forms: encouraging a teacher to develop his or her teaching practice, helping a teacher deal with personal issues, counseling a teacher in his or her work with a parent, or helping a teacher deal with a student's emotional issues or academic concerns. Anyone on the administrative team might help facilitate support.

This supportive learning environment is part of the fabric of the school, according to Bert Stack. He noted that much of the support structure in place today dates back to the beginning: "I think the model that he [Dr. Black] set up, the philosophy, the idea of supervisors and case managers, the idea of ... you know ... training, training, training ... Milkbreaks, ... that's all original to Kelsey." Bert also noted that administration has gotten more supportive since his early days at the school and that he always felt supported by his co-workers: "Everybody here wanted to make you the best you could be at what you were doing, so ... I always experienced supervisory support, sharing of materials, tons of training, tons of in-service."

In contrast, veteran teacher Claire Jenkins recalled that in the early years of the school, only Dr. Black and one other colleague, speech pathologist Tara Kempt, supported her. As a result, as Claire described it, she became a loner, following a teaching methodology that she developed on the basis of her experiences. She described how she met resistance from the head of the language arts department, who told Claire, "You have to teach the curriculum the way we're doing it here." But Claire refused to

comply. She asked, "Why are you imposing a curriculum and expectations on kids who can't learn that way?" She continued to use the methodology she had developed, which she knew was effective. If not for the support of Dr. Black and Tara Kempt, Claire noted, "I probably would have left the school."

Claire's early experience contradicts the omnipresent support teachers currently describe that they receive from administration. Since this research is not a longitudinal study, it is impossible to determine what events or conditions evolved to transform the administration from unsupportive to supportive. Perhaps this change occurred over time or with the leadership of Bert Stack. Bert, an administrator for twenty years, described his purposeful modeling of support by being available to staff and by creating an administrative structure that allows for multiple people to provide support. He tries to place people in positions of leadership based on both their skill in a specific area and on "whom other people are going to want to report to, and to have as leaders." He described an administrative team consisting of an academic dean, training coordinator, dean of student affairs, and department heads for every department—science, math, language arts, oral expression, and social studies—for a school of 150 students. "It has to be a team," he noted. "It can't depend on one person." All these administrators are available to staff. Bert created most of these positions to increase the support opportunities for staff.

Bert noted that teachers come to him "for a welter of stuff from personal things to students' issues to whether they're going to continue in their job at the same level or not or whether they want to try something different." He emphasized his availability to teachers ranging from a drop-in policy to e-mail noting that he makes time to meet with teachers at their request.

Support at the administrative level may take different forms. Bert differentiated his support for teachers from Dean Richner's approach, noting that Dean meets with teachers specifically around student concerns. Dean makes himself available by observing students in classes at a teacher's request, meeting with teachers to discuss both the student's learning profile and history at the school, and by orchestrating meetings as necessary between teacher and student or groups of students. In Bert's view, Dean's availability provides "a layer of support" for teachers and staff, who know that "issues won't be left unaddressed."

Bert articulated an open-door policy that allowed teachers to access him and other administrators easily, and the teachers I interviewed concurred. Case manager Kelly Dance noted that when she goes to administrators with a concern about a student or parent, they, "don't just listen to it [the problem], they look for solutions to it. And completely look for solutions" She also described how Bert "goes out of his way" to support teachers with either personal issues or work-related issues. She noted that whether it is a divorce or a break up with a loved one, Bert helps that teacher find solutions:

They [the teacher] would go in and talk to him and he would be like, 'okay, so let's go to the basics: Do you have a place to stay? Do you have money for food? ... 'take as much time as you need to take care of those things, and then we'll get you back here and' ... just things like that, to the point of offering to sub for somebody? Those are just the things that he doesn't even think twice about.

Case manager Sally McKay explained that she has remained at Kelsey for over twenty years because of the supportive environment: "No matter what happens, you

know that Bert and Alison and even Dean have your back, again, that they'll support you. In private, you may be reprimanded, but they would never do it publicly" Teacher Anna Brush noted: "I know if I go and talk to Bert about something, he's going to listen and try to fix it." Teacher and case manager Erin Stout described how she uses the multiple layers of support when she has concerns about a student: "I would talk to the student's case manager or my department head. And then, if it's sort of continuous behavioral things, you sort of go to Bert and Dean; if it's more academic, Allison, and the counseling department."

Support from the administrative team was mentioned as a common theme among the faculty I interviewed as a reason for staying at Kelsey. Bert emphasized his commitment to creating a supportive environment based on both what initially attracted him to Kelsey and on his beliefs in a supportive administration to enhance a strong school culture.

b. Teachers worked in collaboration encouraging and supporting one another in their practice.

Teachers and case manager often spoke in our interviews about an omnipresent support/collaboration at the school. Teachers, both novice and veteran, described a collaborative teacher culture that includes the sharing of resources, lesson plans, ideas, student homework, as well as problem-solving about student behavior and student learning. Structures in place that help facilitate this collaboration include a computer system that allows teachers to share files and Milkbreak, which creates a meeting opportunity every day to discuss student issues and teacher concerns. However, beyond these structures, the culture of Kelsey appears to enlist teachers to support one another.

This teacher collaboration appears embedded in the very fabric of the school. Patty Ryer described this collaboration:

I love the collaboration that we have. I wish that it was more, but I love how open everyone is.... I think that one of the big strengths here is that people share a lot of materials and ideas ... and will bend over backwards to help you.

Patty noted that case managers go out of their way to help teachers find teaching resources without delay. As an example, she noted how one case manager responded immediately to her request for resources:

[The case manager] got up, walked with me into the room, pulled down all of these different things like, “Well, you can try this one or this one or this one or this one,” and popped them all next to the copier. So instead of me wading through all that, she was just [snaps finger] right there ... ready to help.... That’s not unusual. Everyone is like that here. If they can help, they will help.

Patty found collaboration particularly strong in her departments, science and math:

If somebody makes a homework sheet and they think it’s good, they’ll just Xerox it and put it in your box so that you can use it with your students.... I love that, I love the sense of community among the faculty and staff, it’s very supportive, very strong.

First-year teacher Maggie talked about the ways teachers use the file-sharing system on the computer to collaborate in sharing homework assignments. She described how she cuts and paste from numerous teachers to develop her own homework assignment noting how helpful teachers are to each other: “We are creating our own

worksheets constantly and sharing them with each other.” Maggie also talked about how she polls a variety of teachers to help her with discipline issues in the classroom. From talking with other teachers, she accumulates a wealth of ideas and then picks the ones she feels work best for her:

It’s kind of like you just poll everyone and get as much information as you can ... from everyone, and then you figure out which teachers are most familiar with your situation, and you kind of ... put it together from that.

Maggie commented how veteran teachers help her using a positive tone: “Here [Kelsey], they’re [teachers] very positive; they’re used to working with dyslexic kids. They always tell you the good stuff first; they always tell you what you’re doing right. And then make suggestions that are very helpful for everything wrong.”

Fiona described her comfort in seeking help from fellow teachers as well as administration:

I feel like I can open the door and ask Holly a question in the middle of ... class ... I feel like I could turn to anybody, from ... a peer who might have that same student in their class, to the case managers, even up to Bert . I feel like I could go into his office and ... say, you know, “I’m having trouble with *this*,” or whatever, and that ... there’s open doors everywhere and people willing to stop and listen.

Fiona also noted how she shares homework with other teachers without being asked. She commented on the strength of her department in collaboration and saw room for growth within the elementary grades.

Teachers may share their teaching strategies in more formal ways in an “in-service” opportunity for the whole school or as Fiona described, within a single department:

I had a pre-reading worksheet that I’d use with my kids when we’re starting a new ... section of the text. So ... at our department meeting, I shared that and gave [a] hard copy, as well as told them where the computer copy was so that if they wanted to ... utilize that.

When teachers are encouraged to teach their peers during “in-service” times, it sends a message to the teacher that the administration values their expertise and knowledge. It also empowers teachers to identify areas of need rather than have these identified by administration and handed down to teachers (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Sergiovanni, 1994).

Collaboration permeates the experience of the case managers along with the teachers. Case manager Sally McKay, described how the veteran staff seek and gain collaboration on a regular basis. She noted her comfort in asking another case manager to look over a report or comment on her writing:

We’ll be drafting something and we’ll [ask], “Does this sentence sound right?” ... I supervise Sam [veteran case manager and teacher] for... another student, and ... he’ll come and say, “what do you think about this book?” ... No matter how many years any of us have been here, there’s always something new you can learn from somebody.

As an experienced teacher and case manager, Sally continues to grow as a learner using her peers as a resource. In a professional learning community, learning is a continuous

process for all staff (Barth, 1990; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Sally described how she and Sam, a long-time case manager, collaborated to develop a workshop requested by some of the novice faculty:

Sam got information from me in terms of how to access certain things on the Internet, in terms of reading level, et cetera. And he had a couple of ideas in terms of fluency... that I hadn't heard him say before, so, again, it's give and take all the time.

According to Sally, the collaboration at Kelsey helps ensure the success of the LiPS reading program, a complex program that demands multiple levels of support: In contrast to public school systems where they may be no one who has really mastered the LiPS program, at Kelsey she can always find someone to “bounce ideas off,” whether it's Caitlin Snow, the reading specialist, or other colleagues. For example, Sally described the difficulty in knowing when to transition a child to the next level in the LiPS reading program. Since all teachers are trained in the LiPS program, there is a plethora of staff available for consultation to “weigh in on” this complex decision. In addition, when a teacher has a question about the LiPs program, it is easy to find help. Sally explained “If you're in the faculty lounge and they throw out, ‘I have a question about such and such’, there's usually somebody there that can say, ‘oh, yeah, I had that with so-and-so and this worked.’”

Case manager Erin Stout reported that the culture of the school supports asking for help:

Asking for help isn't threatening here. You're encouraged to do that as part of the culture, and it's not viewed negatively, even when you're very experienced... so

I've been here 14 years, and I was having behavior management problems, I asked Meg [oral expression department head] to come in 'cause all of a sudden, you can have it down for a few years, but then feel like you're not.

Teachers at Kelsey appear to appreciate the collaboration that exists in the school. They know colleagues are available to help, they are confident they can get this help, and they feel encouraged to ask for help. This comprehensive teacher culture improves the quality of student learning as teachers are able to draw on multiple resources rather than relying only on their own knowledge (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Shulman, 2004). In contrast to the isolated teacher culture, this culture allows for multiple opportunities for teachers to engage and learn from each other. Sally McKay noted that programs taught at other schools may not succeed simply because they do not have the necessary support that comes from working with other teachers: "I am concerned about a teacher, no matter how skilled, working alone in a vacuum without having others who are trained in the program to bounce ideas off of."

Another less discussed aspect of a comprehensive teacher culture is that all teachers take responsibility for all students. This is in fact part of the collaboration. Two parents noted this aspect of the Kelsey school culture. James's mother, Mia, described a conversation with a teacher who had never taught her son but still noticed and appreciated him: "Is he happy here?" this teacher asked. When Mia responded, "Yes, I think he loves it here," the teacher continued: "We love having him. He's just such a character ... I loved his speech for student council; I wish the teachers could vote, 'cause I would have voted for him."

Mia commented:

He's here with people who are actually looking out for him, that don't even have to *have* a vested interest in him, but do.... The people who work with him on a day-to-day basis really get the type of student that he is, and like him *because* of it, not *in spite of* it.

Ella related the difference she felt between public school and Kelsey noting that Kelsey teachers care for the student year after year:

If someone has a learning disability, they just can't wait for the year to be ... through so it's somebody else's problem next year [as happens in public school]. Where here [at Kelsey], I feel like even though they have a learning disability, they still know that it's their problem from year to year to year ... they're not just pushing them through the system, and I felt that's what was happening with Frank.

The teachers described the support they provide one another as part of the culture of the school. Novice teachers emphasized the ease in which they gain support from their fellow teachers while veteran teachers spoke of their commitment to support and teach the novice teachers and at the same time help each other. All teachers commented on their comfort in asking for help and the speed in which they can access that help. Teacher support and collaboration appears embedded in this school culture.

c. Students felt supported by teachers.

I observed teachers encouraging students and students noticed this help. Teachers spoke with me regarding ways in which they understood and assisted their students and parents saw this support. In addition, interviews, classroom observations, and report cards

showed the teachers' commitment to adapt their teaching to match the needs of the child rather than blame the student for his/her struggles.

I witnessed teachers supporting students during my classroom observations. In all the classes I visited, I encountered teachers who consistently used supportive and encouraging phrases with students such as “nicely done,” “way to go,” “we can wait for you.” I never observed any teacher using harsh words or discouraging phrases. When students were off task, teachers used a gentle reminder—tapping on the desk or saying quietly, “You need to pay attention.” I noted that teachers appeared calm and relaxed during most of my classroom observations. However, it is important to note that not all teachers allowed me into their classrooms. Two teachers had an open-door policy allowing me to drop in at any time. Others requested that I ask for permission for specific days, and still others let me know that they preferred that I not visit their classroom. In addition, I have no way of knowing how a teacher may behave differently when I am present versus a time when no one is watching. However, students' comments about their teachers seemed to corroborate my observations.

Through my interviews with both students and teachers, I noted many examples of ways in which students found support and teachers provided it. For example, Evette described how she felt encouragement from the teachers, which she noted, helped build her confidence: “The teachers support you ...and they do it with a smile on their face.” She described how she was encouraged to participate in after school sports and to run for student council. She explained that her tutorial teacher helped her write her speech for student council. She exclaimed: “For everything the teachers are there, they're so happy that you're doing it, and they're so really happy.”

Evette's mother, Barbara, noted that the teachers seemed to have a unique understanding of Evette allowing a deeper level of assistance: "It's like a different world, because they're attentive to her. This is how I say it: They speak her language, so that she understands what they're trying to get, and if she doesn't, she's able to ask questions more freely."

Mike observed that he could ask questions whenever he needs and teachers will help him. He did not have this feeling at his old school:

When I have a question at the very end of school, at my old school, you'd get like, "I don't have time for this." And they walk out of the room without me even saying I have a question. Right now, I tell them, "I have a question," like, "ok", and sit down and talk about it, and writes out the pass, like if I'm late for class or something: He explains it, or she explains it all the way through until I understand it and, I can do it, which is very...which is a good feeling.

I witnessed teacher, Patty Ryer, announcing a help schedule before and after class as well as after school on Mondays and Tuesdays. While I did not observe other teachers announcing specific help times, Mike's comments reflected a sense of ease in getting help from teachers.

Teachers Maggie Wright and Patrick Steel both noted how they supported students. Maggie described her understanding of Raya's anxiety issues: "Her anxiety comes in when ... she comes into, like, word problems: "What's that? There's *so* many words on that page! I have no idea what I'm supposed to do." She just is blinded by the anxiety." Maggie noted that by using a systematic approach, Raya can make sense of the

information and not get overwhelmed: “If everything is in its place, there’s a box for this and there’s a circle for that ... she’s *great*, she’s good to go.”

Department head and math teacher Patrick Steel explained that he tries to create an environment that encourages students to gain confidence in their ability to solve math problems:

I drive ... as hard as I can, and I also send a clear message that if I didn’t think they could do it, they wouldn’t be in my class. I said, “You’re going to make two years of growth this year; it’s going to happen.” And they do! It’s a rare occasion when they don’t make two years of growth on the Stanford [standardized test].

Patrick noted that in class he tries to focus on what students did right rather than what they got wrong. When he sees a correct answer, he asks the student to write the problem on the board. At the same time, he makes sure that those who got the problem wrong are paying attention:

So if you don’t give them a way to get it wrong, but you keep ... focusing on “*This* is right; show me how you did it.” It builds up their confidence, they’re not afraid to try things. So ... when they’re wrong, you ... find somebody that got it right and say, “That’s right, get it up there. And *you* guys, pay attention, ’cause I didn’t pick you.”

Patrick described a specific example of supporting Frank. He noted that he does not give Frank “homework make-up” (the standard consequence when homework is not done) because he wants to focus on what Frank is doing well, not on what he struggles with:

I’d rather make a big deal out of the fact that when he *does* do it, it’s a big deal— than to constantly bemoan the fact that he didn’t get everything done. So I kind of

down-play it [homework], 'cause I don't see it improving...he *wants* it to happen, but it doesn't happen, ... a kid like that, do you ... just scream at him and make him feel bad 'cause he ... screwed up? He's already doing that himself.

Language arts teacher Claire Jenkins described how she helped James work through anxiety issues. James, who had trouble with time management, experienced serious anxiety over a lengthy weekend writing assignment. But, Claire said, "We figured out a way for him to deal with that." She described how she helped James break down the assignment into smaller units so that it felt less overwhelming. She also noted that James had a hard time completing the narrative writing assignment without the predictable structure provided in the essay. James asked Claire if he could use the structure of the essay in the narrative. Despite Claire's initial concern with this approach, she allowed James to adapt the essay structure for his narrative. With this adaptation, she noted his anxiety decreased and his ability increased:

In early April I told James just to try writing the personal sequenced narrative without the predictable sentence set—and he did. It was no problem.... He scored a Needs Improvement on the MCAS in seventh grade. He would score proficient if he'd taken the test this year.

I witnessed academic support in many of the classes that I visited. For example, in Evette's social studies class, each student took a turn answering questions from a four-paragraph reading. When one student did not get the right answer the teacher would go back over the question until the student understood. With only six students in the class, the students move at the same pace with complete support for every child to gain understanding.

On the report cards, teachers frequently described ways they had supported students. For example, Raya's language arts teacher noted:

Close teacher monitoring and immediate feedback on Raya's work benefits the outcome of her assignments. In order for Raya to achieve success on independent homework assignments, all tasks assigned were familiar to her because they were repeated as in-class assignments with teacher assistance before being sent home.

Mel, Raya's mother, expressed her appreciation for this type of support, noting that Raya's teachers have the "expertise" to know "what tools to give her so she can ... move forward."

Kelsey teachers support students with positive and encouraging comments during class time. They provide individual help as needed, and the students' report cards note specific strategies used by the teacher to help students find success. Students and parents noticed and appreciated this support. Raider-Roth (2005) suggests that supportive classroom environments that include everyday interactions that help build a positive relationship between teacher and student are instrumental to student success in school.

1. Teachers adapted to children's learning issues.

Teachers demonstrated support for students in the ways they taught to match the learning needs of individual children. In my interviews with teachers, many cited their responsibility to find ways to teach the student that jibe with the students' disability. For example, Maggie, noting how her tendency to talk rapidly complicates learning for children with dyslexia explained that it was *her* responsibility to work on slowing down her language so students understood:

... And Jacob, I ask him a question, he responds thirty to sixty seconds after I ask the question. So if I'm going faster than that, he is just not getting it, so I have to ... remind myself of that, and go slower.

Later Maggie described the complexity of working with students who have different learning issues even though they may be at the same ability level overall. Again, she takes responsibility for making sure that students understand the lesson:

It's like conducting an orchestra. You always got one section that's moving a little slower than the rest, and you're trying to keep them going without motioning too quickly to everybody else, and keep everybody's attention right there.... They have *no* idea what we did for the period if I don't check in with them, if I don't keep the subject changing.... When we're switching from something as subtle as from a "why" sentence to a fact sentence, if I am not *really* slow and clear: "OK, we are transitioning to fact sentences. What is the point of fact sentences? What is the difference between fact sentences and a 'why' sentence?" If I don't do that, then they have no idea what the difference is, and it's all [just] language to them.

In one classroom observation, I observed firsthand the teacher taking responsibility for a student's confusion on an assignment. The teacher gave directions about a lesson the students needed to complete on the computers. As the students began the assignment, Mike appeared to be doing something else. The teacher came over to Mike, who explained: "Oh, I didn't understand." The teacher replied: "It was probably my fault. I probably gave too much verbal direction."

Veteran teacher Claire Jenkins described how she supported James to control his "fidgety behavior and high verbal stance." She explained that she teaches students to

fidget in ways that are respectful and acceptable, such as playing with a rock in their pocket, so that when they are older their fidgeting habits will be better disguised. She noted how she tells the students about the importance of discreet fidgeting behavior: “Adults have ways of compensating, ways of accommodating to being fidgety. You’ve got to learn what distraction is because the real world is going to look at you as kind of odd. You don’t want that.”

Students’ report cards also reflect the teacher’s willingness to adapt to the child’s needs. For example, Frank’s social studies teacher wrote: “It is important for the teacher to check Frank’s assignment notebook on a daily basis to make sure that he has recorded his assignment correctly.” It becomes the teacher’s responsibility to check Frank’s notebook rather than blame Frank for neglecting to write in his assignment notebook. Frank’s math teacher wrote: “Frank benefits from activities that require movement. The structure and consistency of math class has allowed Frank to make progress in math this semester.” The teacher in this case creates a structure that will help Frank find success. Similarly, on James’s report card the teacher notes how reminders help James: “Although James occasionally requires reminders to stay on topic, he responds well to redirection.” The teacher took responsibility for redirecting James and reminding him to stay on topic, rather than blaming James for his struggles with focus. Another teacher commented on the strategy she uses to refocus James: “Positive reinforcement and a sense of humor have proved to be a successful means to refocus him to the tasks at hand.”

Kelsey teachers adapt their teaching to the needs of the student. They understand their responsibility to structure their teaching methodology so the student understands. If

the student is not learning, then the teachers look to themselves, not to the child, to make corrections. As Bert Stack explained, this is his expectation of teachers he hires:

If your kids are doing better, as a teacher, then you're doing a good job. It isn't about how much you know, or what advanced degrees you have or your professional credentials, how well you know your subject, as much as it is, do you recognize what you have to do to communicate the information that the kids need? That's why they're here, so if they're not getting it, you've got to do it a different way, and if you don't get that, then you're probably teaching in the wrong place.

The many ways in which teachers supported their students were evident from my classroom observations, from students' comments, and as recorded on report cards. Students felt their teachers' support, and their parents noticed it as well. By adapting their teaching to accommodate students rather than asking students to change, teachers took responsibility for each student's ability to learn the material, rather than placing that responsibility solely on the student.

d. Safety at Kelsey.

The students and parents I interviewed described multiple ways in which the students noted feeling safe at Kelsey. This feeling of safety appeared to stem from a forgiving classroom environment, a feeling of commonality with other students, a sense of connection with their teachers, a trusting relationship that developed between the students and their teachers, and by encouragement received from their teachers. Feeling safe allowed students to take academic risks, such as participating in class. All students

reported a difference in their level of participation when they compared Kelsey to their former school.

Claire Jenkins noted the special importance of establishing a safe learning environment for students who come to this school. The majority of the students have experienced failure at previous schools. As a result, they have internalized the idea that they simply “can’t do it.” To overcome this sense of failure, Kelsey staff provide a structured safe learning environment, in which they demand mutual respect for all members of the community at all times and create rules around appropriate behavior:

For the new kids coming into the program, it is a culture shock. Suddenly, they’re very relieved to know that they’re not the only ones who learn differently. First of all, they learn that the class is a respectful and safe community where teasing and inappropriate language and behavior will not be tolerated. We have to take that programmed sense of failure away and rebuild both the social-psycho[psychological] structure and the academic structure. We begin to do that from day one. We establish a community of learners and a safe environment. There are simple class rules that, if broken, will have consequences, which are thoughtfully explained.

1. Forgiving classroom environment.

Specific aspects of the classroom environment help create a safe learning atmosphere. These include the small class size and the acceptance of mistakes, both academic and structural, such as forgetting a book or assignment. As a result, some students felt safe enough to find humor in their dyslexia.

In the small classes at Kelsey, Mike felt safe enough to ask questions because “no one really laughs at us.” In his old school, with twenty-three students in a class, he felt embarrassed: “Everyone [else] understands, you feel kind of odd and awkward [when you ask a question].” As a result of the small class size, Mike finds that he is no longer embarrassed in front of his peers.

In my classroom observations, I noted times when teachers normalized student mistakes, thereby avoiding potentially embarrassing moments. One day, in Mike’s social studies class, the teacher asked students to take a sheet of paper from their notebook. When Mike looked around and noticed that his notebook was missing, the teacher gave him a blank sheet of paper to use. “Sorry,” Mike said, lowering his head. “Not to worry,” the teacher responded: “It happens. I sometimes think we should not have notebooks.” By giving Mike a sheet of paper and letting him know that notebooks were not that important, the teacher attempted to remove Mike’s shame and stress.

As another example, while reading a homework assignment aloud in his language arts class, Mike stopped and corrected some of his writing. Flustered, Mike asked the teacher: “Can you just skip me?” The teacher responded: “We are going to wait for you. Why doesn’t everyone read through their paper and make corrections?” In this way, the teacher normalized rereading and correcting, giving Mike the time to make corrections and encouraging him to feel at ease with that task. In contrast to her old school, where she struggled and got embarrassed when reading in front of the whole class, Evette found that Kelsey provided a safe classroom environment in which, as she put it, “You have an option to read, and no one laughs.” As a result, she often volunteered to read.

I witnessed another example of a forgiving classroom. In Patty Ryer's classroom, she asked the students to open their textbooks to a certain page. As one student looked through his backpack rather than opening the textbook, Patty went over to him and asked, "Everything OK over there?" The student replied: "Ms. Ryer, I brought my OE [oral expression] folder instead of math." Patty responded: "No worries. When that happens, just go get it. You do not need to ask." Instead of reprimanding the student for getting the wrong folder, Patty simply gave him a way to correct the mistake.

In a few classes, students acknowledged their dyslexia publicly and sometimes with humor in a way that seemed to suggest that the classroom was a safe learning environment. In math class, James asked the teacher a question but, before the teacher could answer, he realized his mistake: "When they say what polynomial has a greater value than ... oh, wait, I get it. Dyslexic reading problem—never mind." No one in the class said anything or even seemed to notice this event. The class moved on to the next topic. In another class, when Patty Ryer announced the wrong page number in the book and then said, "You will have to excuse me today—my brain is not plugged in correctly," James again felt safe enough to laugh about his own dyslexia. "I have that all the time," he responded.

During another one of James's math classes, I witnessed a different student joking about his dyslexia. The students were playing a math game involving cards with math symbols and letters. A student looked at one card but was unsure what it said and questioned Patty: "Ms. Ryer is a dyslexic's nightmare—'m,' 'w,' or '3'?" Laughing, the student held up the card, and Patty laughed as well.

In another math class, James exchanged jokes with another student. James said: “Everyone makes mistakes.” “Especially dyslexics,” responded another student. “Just dyslexics tend to make more mistakes,” James replied. This playful banter about having dyslexia appeared possible within a safe learning environment.

Parents also noted this unique classroom atmosphere that allowed children to make mistakes. Mel explained that when Raya started at Kelsey, she struggled to get her to school. As the year progressed Raya became more willing to attend school: “It just got better and better and better as she got used to the new environment and knew that she was safe. I think that she knew that everyone was there to help her.” Raya’s need for a safe learning environment appeared on her report card as well. Her teacher wrote: “[Raya] has been an active participant in discussions and activities. She benefits from a classroom environment in which she feels comfortable to participate and share her thoughts and ideas.”

Mike’s mother, Evelyn, also noted how the safe environment at Kelsey, allowed Mike to take academic risks without losing face:

Kelsey has provided a safe environment for him.... He can take risks in this environment. And when he falls, he’s not falling on his face. He might stumble, but he’s not falling on his face. He’s willing to read, even though his fluency is not very good. He’s willing to give it a shot, because now he knows that he can decode most things and he knows that Mr. Marks can help him decode, and he knows that nobody’s going to laugh at him.

Evelyn further explained that feeling safe enabled Mike to take more control of his learning and come to school willingly:

He wants to come here, he's not afraid to come here. He was afraid to go to school; he was afraid of "oh, my God! What if they ask me to do this? What if they ask me to do that? What if ...? What happens here?" He's not afraid to come; he's quite happy to ... come to school.

The small class size, the permission to make mistakes, and the comfort in laughing about ones own dyslexia all contribute to a forgiving classroom that promotes a safe learning environment. This increased sense of safety helps students take risks and participate more in the classroom without the worry of embarrassing themselves.

2 Commonality with other students.

In my interviews, the students overwhelmingly spoke about their ease, comfort, and joy in attending a school with students similar to themselves. The commonality they felt with other students helped create a safe learning environment. Parents spoke of relief that their child finally fit in. The commonality with similar students is not a common topic entering the debate on inclusion versus out-of-district special education placement. The discourse around special education inclusion spans a diverse range of views over many decades. But, this debate is largely held at the theoretical level with little input from students, parents, or teachers –the ones most affected by this debate (Winzer, 2002).

Mike described feeling a sense of safety because every one at Kelsey learns the same way. He stated: "I know everyone here learns the same way I do so I don't feel left out, I don't feel like the only one, like I did in my old school." James appreciated the similar learning levels of the peers in his class: "I wasn't the worst one in the class, either, 'cause we all were, like, kind of even. So it was nice, rather than being with people who were so much better than you. But no, we were all, like, at the same level, which

was really nice.” These feelings of James’s counter educational researchers belief that students benefit from heterogeneous ability grouped classrooms (Bandura, 1997; Renchler, 1992).

Frank explained that the students are nicer at Kelsey. When I asked why he stated: “‘cause... we’re all the same... We all have basically the same learning disability, and it’s easier to get along you know they won’t bother you if you can’t read something.” Frank further explained that he no longer got into fights with his peers that at his old school, resulted in being sent to the principals office: “Everyone is like the same, so it’s not really.... People yelling at you and saying you’re different.”

Along the same lines as Frank, James, and Mike, Raya noted that students at Kelsey understood each other in ways that others do not:

I like that people, understand, what’s, like, going on around them and, it’s different sort of, like, the way our minds work [students who are dyslexic] ; we, like, attack problems differently. And ... it makes it a lot easier to actually, talk to somebody about something.

Evette related how she felt singled out in her self-contained classroom in public school. She noted the increased comfort she feels at Kelsey with students similar to herself: “Every one has the same problem. It makes everything easier, ’cause everyone understands especially because people have the same problem.” When I asked Evette to explain how every one understands she explained: “When you’re frustrated with homework, your parents do your homework. Everyone has been there....It makes you feel more comfortable. Because you are not crazy..... a lot of people didn’t talk to me ’cause I was in the special class [in her old school].”

Similar to other students, Nancy described feeling more accepted at Kelsey and more comfortable asking questions: “And then it’s kind of easier [than in the old school], because they would, like, understand and accept your question. And they wouldn’t like, say, “oh, that’s a stupid question.”...And at Kelsey, I can... if I have trouble, I can always ask and ...I know that I can keep up with everything,”

In addition to the students, parents also noted the ways in which this school environment created a safe place for their child to learn. They commented how their child no longer stood out from the norm but in fact resembled the norm. Parents observed the social benefits as well as the academic normalcy of a peer group that matched their child’s. They also appreciated the support they received from other parents in understanding the nuances of raising a child with dyslexia.

Socially, James’s parents observed the ease in which students at Kelsey communicate with each other because of their commonality. They provided the example of spelling and Facebook noting that students from Kelsey understand each other’s writing on Facebook despite tremendous spelling errors that others might not understand:

So when he posts something to, you know, Colleen, [his sister] who’s away at college in Tennessee, and she’ll say something like, “James, what were those words? I couldn’t even read it, he’s like, “hey, I’m dyslexic. And all my friends can read it fine.”

Mia, James’s mother, anticipated social difficulty for James if he attended school with non-dyslexic students:

Imagine being *the* kid in high school ... you’d never *be* on Facebook if everyone else was spelling and couldn’t read your stuff. ...If every time you were ‘tired’,

you were ‘tierd’ or ‘tried’. ‘He’s tierd and he’s going to bed.’...But it makes sense to them. ‘Ti-erd.’ Most of the kids [at Kelsey]... post videos ’cause there’s no written word.

In addition to the social comforts in being surrounded by peers with similar communication style, Mia related how good it felt to see her son as a “normal” student in the Kelsey environment compared to her experience with him in public school:

He doesn’t have to cover the fact that he learns the way he learns... because there are enough people here that that’s normalized in his sort of realm of the universe ...To see him just be one of the kids, not *the* kid, not the kid in the corner, not the kid that the teachers roll their eyes at, but just one of the kids, was just so ... *new* ... and just ... like, basking in this normalcy of, you know, the type of student that he was... He fits in so well here.

Frank’s mother Ella concurred with her sons need to feel like a “normal kid” and even equated that privilege with that bestowed on non-learning disabled students who attend the public school. “I felt if he went here, he would feel like he belonged, like a normal learning person that doesn’t have dyslexic, feels they belong in a regular public school system.”

Raya’s mother, Mel, noted how safe Raya felt being part of a community with students similar to herself along with the fact that she no longer needed to leave the classroom:

What is *so* fantastic about Kelsey is she is a part of a community: she isn’t a kid being pulled out of a class, sitting in the hall or sitting with five kids and missing

part of *her* sense of school because she can't *be* part of school Everyone's in the same boat, and I think that ... there's a sense of comfort for that.

As an example, Mel related a story during Raya's first year when she started crying because the class was going to the library and Raya did not like going to the library. A boy in her class asked her why. She replied: "well I can't read, I don't ... why would I want to go to the library?" Her mother explained: "And a little boy looked at her and said, "none of us can. What's the problem? Let's go to the library!" In the telling of that story, Mel, noted that Raya fit into this community in a way that seemed impossible in her old school. She described how Raya related fitting in:

"Everyone gets that we're all here for the same reason. No one makes fun of me, no one, points me out. The teachers aren't, giving me different papers from everyone else. They're not giving me accommodations in front of my friends that don't need them. They're not" I mean, and so *socially* it's become a much safer place for her.

Mel felt a commonality and support from other parents in understanding her own daughter. She noted that parents can "tell silly stories" about their child's persnickety behavior that other parents relate to in ways she did not experience when her daughter was in public school. For example, she might say to another parent, "Raya hates to be late." Mel related that "four of her friends' mothers will tell me the same thing."

Evette's mother, Barbara, noted that when Evette was placed in a mainstream class, she became "disheartened" about her ability rather than inspired by her mainstream peers. She expressed that children at Kelsey had empathy for each other because of their

similar struggles in public school. Barbara suggested that less bullying occurred at Kelsey due to the student's similar understandings of each other.

Mary, Beth's mother, commented on the commonality Beth feels at Kelsey because all the students are working on similar issues:

It was important for her to see that 'I'm not the only one in the world like this', and she came to this school and everyone here is like this. No one is going to make fun of you for having trouble reading because they're *all* having trouble reading, and they're all working on it.

Lynn Kamer, admissions director, confirmed much of what parents and students reported. She noted that, in the admission process, she observes that: "Most kids get pretty excited about coming here thinking that they can come to a school with kids like me and look normal."

Consistently, the students in this study described feeling safer going to school with other students similar to themselves than students in their general education public school. They made jokes about their disability and relished in the normalcy of their disability in this more restrictive environment. I use the term "more restrictive environment" in contrast to the term "least restrictive environment" described by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as the preferred setting for students with disabilities. The least restrictive environment is considered the general education environment and other settings outside of this are considered more restrictive (Rozalski, et al., 2010). For the publicly funded students who attend Kelsey, the school is considered an out-of-district placement where the child is completely removed from the regular education environment to attend a separate school. This environment is

considered more restrictive and, therefore, less preferred under IDEA, which aims to keep students integrated with their regular education peers. The impetus for this aspect of the law originated in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court decision that established the inequality of separate educational institutions. This court ruling allowed advocates for children with disabilities to pursue the integration of special education students into general education schools, replacing the previous practice of placing special education students in separate facilities (Rozalski, et al., 2010).

Yet, according to these students and their parents, an environment that removes them from the judgment, embarrassment, and isolation of a regular education classroom and provides them with the safety and comfort of being with similar peers benefits the student both socially and academically. These students overcame many struggles to get to Kelsey as the school district tried to maintain the principle of “least restrictive environment.” Although the rationale for IDEA’s “least restrictive environment” requirement follows logical reasoning for many disabled students perhaps those that create these laws should consult with the students that are affected by these laws. The students themselves may reflect a different perspective on what type of educational environment is “best” for their own learning. Nugent (2008) found similar responses in her research on children with dyslexia in Ireland, in which she compared children attending special education schools with others in a mainstream setting. Based on interviews with children and parents, she found that the children were happier in the separate special education schools, where they felt less stigmatized and more comfortable.

3. Connections with teachers.

The connections formed between students and teachers may be another factor that helps student's feel safe in school. Case managers and teachers spoke of their commitment to connect with their students and students and parents noticed the benefits of these efforts.

Patty Ryer, Frank's tutor, described her efforts to engage and connect with Frank. She first met Frank in his first year at Kelsey when she taught him science: "I tried to build a rapport with all of them, but especially with Frank because he was very ... very tough kid, definitely had a chip on his shoulder. And bit by bit, over time, we got to have a better relationship." Patty noted how she worked with Frank over the year trying to win him over. She observed that when she complimented him, the next day he would act out. One day she took a chance and confronted him on his behavior:

I said, "I would like to tell you that you did a really good job today, but I'm nervous to tell you that 'cause I've noticed this pattern, that if I tell you you did great, then the next day, you have to prove that you're a bad-ass to me." He kind of had a smile on the corner of his mouth. So I was like, "So I'm kind of taking a chance here, but I'm going to tell you, I think you did a really good job today, and it's up to you whether you can just take that and appreciate it, and just have a good day tomorrow, or if you're going to take it and then, tomorrow, really misbehave to show me that you're a tough kid." And he kind of smiled, and ... that was *it*, like, tough guy was *gone*.

With all her effort to connect with Frank, Patty wanted to continue working him next year. She was aware of his struggles with a previous tutor and felt she might move him

forward. She talked with Frank's case manager and "the stars aligned and I got him this year." Despite her good rapport with Frank, Patty described a frustrating year trying to get Frank to complete his tutorial homework. After employing a plethora of tricks without success, Patty finally invited Frank to order his own agenda if he completed his homework. This incentive proved successful, and Frank became more consistent in getting homework done.

Case manager Sally McKay highlighted the efforts to foster connections between tutors and students. For example, she noted resistance from Evette in tutorial when she started in the summer program. As a result, Sally described how they chose a fall tutor for Evette: "So moving ahead to the fall, we were very careful in terms of picking the tutor, someone again that we thought that, hopefully, she'd be able to connect with." In fact, Sally noted that Evette improved with the new tutor.

Case manager Kelly Dance noted her efforts early in the year to know all of the middle school students by name, so that she can say, "Hey, so-and-so, how's it going?" In addition, she tries to take notice of any students on her caseload that she has not talked to in a while: "I have all my kids' names, and their schedule on a wall in front of me. And a lot of times I'll just look ... through names, and I'll think: "OK, who haven't I talked to in a while?" Kelly described her commitment to connecting with students so that all students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns about school, whether positive or negative.

The teachers and case managers appear to make an effort to connect with their students. Some of the students described how they felt about this connection. For

example, Mike talked about his close relationship with his tutorial teacher Mr. Howe that began in the summer program:

We [Mr. Howe and myself] enjoyed ourselves, we ... worked on my reading skills, and my decoding skills, which has improved so much. From my tutorial teacher, Mr. Howe, he's amazing when I graduate from this school, I'm going to be pretty disappointed that I won't be able to ... go to school with him anymore, or see him.... when we went to the tutorial session, you get to learn about each other, what he liked, what he didn't like, and pretty much our relationship extended from there and now we're really ... well, good. I don't know how to put it; student-teacher friends I should say, I guess.

James contrasted the sense of safety he felt with his teachers at Kelsey to his fears of teachers at his old school. He also noted that he could joke with teachers at Kelsey in ways that he did not feel comfortable with at his old school. While he was at his old school he had woken up in tears from a nightmare about a teacher running toward him and screaming at him. In contrast, he recounted a more recent dream about a Kelsey teacher: "Last year I had a dream about Mr. Smith handing me my college degree, and I'm like, 'Dude! I'm 13!' And he's like, 'Here's your college degree.'" James talked about how he jokes with the teachers and makes fun of them in a good-humored way. He noted that when teachers hear him imitating them they laugh as well. This speaks to his comfort and connection with the teachers at Kelsey. In agreement, James's mother noted the importance of the teacher-student connection for her son: "I think with James, if he's with teachers ... who he can ... establish a rapport and learn from, he really flourishes."

Teachers and case manager put effort into establishing and building a close teacher-student connection. Students noticed this effort. They reported feeling a close connection with their teachers and their parents commented as well. This close relationship added to the safe feelings students reported when attending Kelsey. A close connection with a teacher can benefit a student's academic success by providing an encouraging and safe environment where students are more likely to take risks and share ideas (Mendler, 2001; Raider-Roth, 2005).

4. Trust of teachers.

Trust of the teachers is another factor that may have contributed to students' feelings of safety. Both students and parents described a trusting relationship with Kelsey teachers. This trust contradicts the students' previous school experience where parents and students both lost trust in teachers and in the institution of schooling. At Kelsey, they were able to restore that trust. Meier (2002) and Raider-Roth (2005) describe a systemic loss in the trust of public schooling from the trust of teachers, principals, and local school boards. Meier (2002) suggests schools can thrive when trust is restored. Trust helps promote learning in a safe and supportive environment. Meier (2002) describes this connection: "Learning happens fastest when the novices trust the setting so much that they aren't afraid to take risks, make mistakes, or do something dumb. Learning works best, in fact, when the very idea that it's risky hasn't occurred to kids" (Meier, 2002, p.18). Many parents and students spoke about how their trust in the teachers motivated their child to attend school, created a safe place to ask questions, and allowed students to say when they were unsure.

Debbie noted the change in her son, Tim, at Kelsey. Given his trust in the teachers, she said, “Tim wants to go to school.” Previously, in his old school, she resorted to bribing and otherwise cajoling Tim to get him to school. Debbie feels he now looks forward to going to school and the trust with his teachers is a distinguishing factor from his old school: “The trust that he has with all the people here ... you just don’t get that in public school, no matter how much you try.” Debbie also noted the trust she has in the Kelsey teachers’ knowledge: “I know she knows her stuff [referring to a Kelsey teacher]. And that’s, I think, is something that’s different. In public school, I’d say, ‘maybe she doesn’t know her stuff.’” Debbie explained that Kelsey teachers try different strategies and admit when they do not know something. She found the public school teachers more doctrine in their approach unwilling to try different strategies.

Nancy related how she felt safe to ask Kelsey teachers’ questions in contrast to her public school that felt unsafe. Asking questions, helped increase her understanding of what she needed to do: “The teachers help me to understand. And when I have a problem, I’d always ask, but...at my old school I wouldn’t ask, because I’d be too afraid..., like the kids, teasing me, or...judging me.”

Evette also noted her comfort in asking questions at Kelsey: “I feel more comfortable asking question here [at Kelsey] than at my old school, because at my old school they do not answer your questions.” Evette described the differences between the two schools explaining that she felt at Kelsey teachers would make sure she understood before moving on. At her old school, when the teacher’s answered her question, it sounded like, “[bluh bluh bluh bluh! And I’m like ‘what?’ They’re ‘I just told you!’” At Kelsey she noted that teachers, “stay with you till you get it.” At Kelsey, she explained,

she knows she will get the help she needs. Evette believed that teachers at Kelsey were committed to helping her. This level of trust helped create a safe environment for learning where she was no longer worried about a teacher yelling at her or being so lost in the class she did not know what was going on.

From my observations of Evette's classes, it appeared that she felt comfortable asking questions and participating in all her classes. In one social studies class, the teacher asked students to put their "scale of numbers" on their paper. Evette said: "Scale of what? I forget how to do this." The teacher then walked over to Evette's desk and explained how to do it. I also noted in class that Evette is quick to raise her hand to answer a teacher's question. She appears comfortable and confident in all her classes.

Frank's case manager, Erin Stout, noted that for both Frank and his mother, Ella, trust in Kelsey staff developed over time. At first Ella felt teachers were picking on her son. In time, she established trust with the teachers. Erin observed Frank becoming more trusting of the teachers as he talked more about both home and school.

Ella described her trust for the teachers knowing they care about Frank:

I just think all the teachers care here, 'cause they don't make much money to be here, and they're here because they want to be here. It's not just a job ... I think they really care about what happens to these kids, where a public school, I think, they just want to get through the year.

Paul Stanford, public school liaison, believes that the high level of trust between teacher and students creates an atmosphere whereby student self-esteem increases.

Watson (2003) noted the importance of building a trusting teacher-student relationship in

order to establish a learning community. Raider-Roth (2005) suggests that “resilient, trustworthy relationships in school are the bedrock of learning” (p.18).

5. Encouragement of teachers.

By observing classrooms, reading report cards, and listening to parents, I witnessed a variety of ways in which teachers encourage students. This encouragement appeared to help create a safe and supportive learning environment that may have been a factor in enabling students to grow academically.

In my classroom observations, I noted countless examples of teachers encouraging students. Encouragement appeared in a variety of ways in different teacher classrooms. Most often it appeared as a phrase of support, patience in allowing a child to ask questions or in giving a child wait-time to answer a question. Department math head, Patrick Steel, used encouraging language in most every sentence he spoke during his class. The most common phrase I heard was, “you can do this.” One time he said to a student: “I am going to make you do the next one which is harder because you can do it.” Sometimes he said: “Yes, yes, yes” then gave the student a high five. As one student was working on the board in front of the room another student was raising her hand. Patrick said: “give her some time, she will get it.” Encouragement in Patrick’s class is not always positive words. To one student he said: “No, I do not want it like that.” However, I view this as encouraging as he stayed with the student until the student understood the problem. He set parameters that students must follow and then made sure they were successful. Patrick’s on going monologue of encouraging words were directed both to the class and individual students. To the class he commented: “We are cooking now” and “do not wimp out you guys can do this. It will make you stronger. It is like eating spinach. It

will do like it did for Popeye.” To Frank who appeared to be working slowly he said: “You are doing it. He just needs gas in the pencil.”

In our interview Patrick explained how he tried to encourage students to believe they are capable:

So it’s instilling that belief that, ‘if you try, you’re going to succeed, but there’s going to be a lot of failures along the way, but if you try, it’s going to work out’, and it does ... I think the easiest way is, you show up on time, you say, [*claps hands*] “I’m ready to go, are you ready to go? Let’s do this thing! No fear. This is right; show me.”

I saw other words of encouragement in different classes that seemed to keep the students’ engaged even when they struggled with the work. Patty Ryer noted in one class: “You guys are used to having a lot of success with your homework. These are hard. If you do not get them right do not worry about it. Do not get down on yourself.” Claire Jenkins, in her language arts class encouraged a student with both a positive comment and something that needed work: “Your vocabulary is excellent, you need to work on your handwriting. I know I keep telling you that. I know you are doing your best.”

Encouraging words permeated all the tutorial classes I visited. I consistently heard such words as, “Nice,” “excellent,” “nicely done” following the student’s completion of an assignment. If a student got something wrong, the teacher encouraged a second try: “Let’s try that again.” Tutorial can be an intimidating environment as there is no place for a student to hide or avoid work in this one-to-one classroom. In addition, teachers informed me that tutorial works on the student’s weakest areas. Therefore, the constant encouragement seems particularly important in this often-stressful environment.

In Mike's social studies class, his teacher gave students the choice of taking an alternative test if the test he had given out "proves too frustrating. I do want to challenge you but I do not want to frustrate you too much. But I want you to challenge yourselves." Mike decided to take the challenge. This form of encouragement empowers students to gain ownership of their own learning.

In Mike's Oral Expression class, I witnessed encouragement from the teacher that took a form unlike I had seen in other classes. This teacher's style appeared more aggressive. The teacher asked if Mike could remember a scene from the book they had been reading. Mike responded: "I'm clueless." Teacher: "I do not accept that as a good answer." The teacher then said a few words that he suggested might help Mike remember. A student said: "He [referring to Mike] can not get it." "Mike responded: "Thanks a lot." In fact, with a few more clues from the teacher Mike was able to provide the correct answer. The teacher stuck with Mike encouraging him by refusing to accept Mike's lack of effort. The teacher pursued offering hints until Mike found the answer.

In reading the student's report cards, I noted an encouraging tone as teachers listed strategies they used to help the student deal with learning obstacles. Students were never blamed for their weaknesses. In fact the Dean of Academics noted a requirement in report card writing to give solutions: "If you say there is an issue than you need to say what you are doing to help it. Teachers are trained in writing report cards but it is also part of the philosophy. Anything you describe as a problem you need to state what you are doing about it." In Frank's case there is acknowledgement that Frank needs help with motivation. One of his teachers writes: "Frank is typically prepared for daily class activities and benefits from an incentive program that motivates him to complete tasks at

a more diligent pace. Overall, Frank is an enthusiastic and cooperative learner.” Another teacher states: “ Frank was successful when tasks were broken down into small, manageable steps, and the classroom agenda was displayed on the board. Frank also benefited from instruction which included spiraling back using many different modalities.” A third teacher said: “Frank benefits from activities that require movement. The structure and consistency of math class has allowed Frank to make progress in math this semester.” On Raya’s report card, her science/social studies teacher reported: “Although Raya has appeared overwhelmed by some new or unfamiliar activities, when given one-to-one teacher encouragement, she has responded positively.” Report cards clearly state what the issues of concern are regarding the child and what the teacher has discovered helps that issue. The student is not expected to find the solution.

Parents noted the positive encouragement from the teachers. James’s parents described a teacher conference that differed from their experiences in James’s previous school. Instead of the litany of negative comments they reported as the norm for teacher conferences at the old school, at Kelsey, they heard many ways in which James found success. The first conference was a little “rough” according to James’s Mother as they heard some struggles with classroom behavior: “He’s sort of silly, he’s off-topic a lot, he’s, you know, he doesn’t know when to stop talking in the classes.” However, James’s father recalled many positive statements at this first conference. He recalled the teacher’s comments: “But, you know, he’s doing great. We have to pull him back, we have to re-direct him all the time, but when he has been re-directed, he’s doing great.” In subsequent conferences, the parents heard many positive and encouraging statements. The math

teacher noted: “I just want to tell you how absolutely wonderful, it’s night and day, it’s fantastic, he’s great, he’s wonderful!”

James’s parents also observed how teachers who may not even be teaching her son, supported and encouraged him. James’s parents related a story that happened on the first day of school:

Somebody [a teacher] said, “hey, you’re new here, right?” He [James] goes, “yeah, I’ve got this thing called dyslexia, I don’t know if you know anything about it, but I’ve heard this is the place to be, so I’m hoping you can help me.” Then the teacher’s like, “yeah! It’s good that you’re here, and it’s good that you understand that. And I think we can do a lot to work with you”, and he’s like, “well, okay, fine.” Before, he would say things like, you know, “this is really hard for me ’cause I’m dyslexic”, and the teachers would say “don’t use that as an excuse.”

Barbara, Evette’s mother noted how the teachers encouraged her daughter by, “emphasizing positive things that they can do.” She sites this positive encouragement as a difference she noted between Kelsey and Evette’s previous school experience.

Ella described how even the baseball coach encouraged Frank. During our interview, Ella cried as she related how supportive teachers were at Kelsey compared to her son’s previous school where she felt teachers hated her son:

Mr. Cally [the gym teacher] the way he coached baseball, ... whether you could hit or not, he made all those kids feel good about themselves, and I even told him that. [*Voice cracking Crying.*] I don’t find people like that...you should feel good about yourself no matter what, and ... in today’s society, I just don’t feel like

teachers give the kids the encouragement to feel good about themselves. And I feel like when Frank's here, he gets that encouragement. They [his teachers] encourage him to want to be a better person, to want to learn and ... do things. And I just don't feel like he ever got that at his old school, I just don't.

Phrases and actions of encouragement were omnipresent in classes I observed and felt by both students and their parents. This encouragement resembles the encouragement staff described about their own interactions with each other. Novice teachers described encouragement they received from the veteran teachers. Veteran teachers reported receiving encouragement from administration. When teachers are encouraging and supportive to each other it becomes engrained into the very fabric of the school creating an encouraging cultural climate. The behavior and modeling of administration and teachers reflect the ways in which teachers will treat the children. As the teachers feel encouragement from administration and other staff, they essentially pass that encouragement on to students (Rutter, et al., 1979).

When students feel safe in their school or classroom environment they are more willing and able to participate in the lessons of the classroom (Rathyen, 2004). Reiff and Ballin (2010) noted that adult students cited feeling safe in the classroom as one of the important factors for their learning. Many factors contributed to the safe learning environment at the Kelsey school including: A forgiving classroom climate, students feeling commonality with their peers, students feeling strong connections with their teachers, students trusting their teachers, and students feeling encouragement from their teachers.

e. A close community.

Many teachers described a strong sense of community among the teachers as a reason for staying at Kelsey. Yet, beyond the teachers, the administrators, the students, and the parents also experienced a strong sense of community. A sense of belonging and participation in a community allows students to increase their learning potential (Wenger, 1998).

For teachers, the strong community engendered a caring environment, helped teachers develop friendships, and kept them from leaving the school. Patty Ryer, described her experience of community among the staff highlighting the support given by staff members for someone in need: “If somebody is ever struggling, everybody else kicks in to hold them up ... it’s like you have a safety net under you.” Patty noted that last year she grappled with personal issues. She found tremendous support from both the staff and administration. She received support to leave the school whenever she needed to deal with her issues. She noted the attitude was: “Do what you need to do and we’ll take care of the rest.”

Maggie described the friendships she enjoys from the community of teachers:

I’ve never worked with people that I’m like, “I really want to go have *dinner* with you after work! I want to hang out with you!” I really want to hang out with the staff; I’m, making friends.

Fiona started at Kelsey after graduation from college. She owes some of her longevity at the school to the strong sense of community. She noted what has kept her at Kelsey is, “the community, the communication, the camaraderie between the faculty, and

just the openness... There's *so* much communication, and it's just ... it's like another family."

Head of elementary and middle school, Bert Stack, concord with the teachers that what has kept him at Kelsey for some many years is the strong community and collegial culture: "I always feel like coming to work and ... this is my family, I care about everybody here."

Students and parents also commented on the strong community feeling at the school. James compared this small community with larger ones where students tend to group more by interests:

Everyone knows everyone. It's such a small community... there isn't like huge classes, like jocks hang out with jocks, musicians hang out with musicians, and smart kids hang out with smart kids, and nobodies hang out with nobodies.

Evelyn, Mike's mother, noted how Mike's feelings of connection to this community allowed him to feel more relaxed. She compared this to his previous school experience: "He was like rigid. ...They couldn't find a reflex...from him, 'cause he was so rigid. 'cause he was so stressed, ...so uptight."

Debbie, Kyle's mother, also noted the close community at Kelsey: "This is like a community, you belong to the community, you're part of a family at Kelsey and the respect is mutual." Debbie compared her experience at Kelsey to her children's previous public school:

We did not experience that [sense of community] in public school, at all. It was more like, "we are the people that are licensed, you just listen to us, it doesn't matter whether we know what we're doing. We just have that... little certificate

and you're nothing, you're just the mother, you're just the student and you just listen."

For the students, building community is structured into some classes. Case manager Erin Stout described how building community plays a part in the oral expression (OE) classroom. She explained that in OE class, every Monday morning students talk about their weekends. This, she explained, allows students to get to know each other on a more personal level beyond what they observe of each other during the school day. She noted: "If they get to know each other, ... on a friend level, you're more apt to have better discussions when you're talking about the academic stuff and the literature."

Wenger (1998) describes "communities of practice" (p.6) where students develop learning, meaning, and identity within this practice. He emphasizes the importance of participation in enhancing learning. Wenger states that deep learning takes place as students experiment with identity within various communities of practice. The OE department creates a community of practice allowing students to share their weekend experience. Existing in groups helps us define who we are according to Wenger. The safety of this community of dyslexic students allows the student to fully participate where in other settings the student's discomfort of the learning community compromised the student's participation and therefore the learning.

This bringing together of parents, teachers, and students under the roof of one community helps support student academic success in school (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Heller writes about a community of women writers in the Tenderloin area in San Francisco. She observed how the strong community enabled the writers to take risks, experiment, and to grow as writers in the safety of their community. The students at

Kelsey along with their parents all noted the comfort they experienced at Kelsey compared to their old school. They participated more in class, did their homework on their own, and some were able to find humor in their disability in this safe environment.

5.5 Measures of Success

This study relied on the information provided by the parents, staff and the students regarding what they felt determined a successful educational experience. This study did not attempt to measure success through quantitative means using analysis of test scores or utilizing rating scales that measure such things as self-efficacy.

Overwhelmingly parents noted dramatic changes in their children. Students noted it in themselves: Improvement in self-efficacy, self- advocacy, academic independence and abilities, social growth, behavior, and participation in outside activities.

a. Self-efficacy.

Self –efficacy describes people’s belief in their own ability. A strong sense of self-efficacy has been tied to higher levels of motivation and academic accomplishments (Bandura, 1997). Consistently, parents observed and students described feeling more confident in their abilities and having more motivation to learn since attending Kelsey.

1. Frank.

Ella, Frank’s mother, described Frank as a more confident child since attending Kelsey. She noted: “He’s got more confidence. He feels good about himself; he’s not afraid to pat himself on the back, where before he just felt like he ... never fit in.” Ella explained Frank’s transformation to a different person when he started Kelsey. She remembered similar stories from other parents toward the beginning of Frank’s first year. She recalled:

I remember the first meeting; 'cause there was a couple of other parents that, you know, their kids were first year, and we were all like, "who took our kid? Who is this person?" "'Cause my kid was just like... He went from being such a ...disruptive, angry person to... a very happy child.... Totally, like, flip. Like, flipped... was a different child.

Ella related how Frank's self-efficacy seemed to build as his academic ability grew. She noted: "He knows that he can write a sentence; he knows he can write a paragraph, where... at [his old school] he didn't know where to begin." She explained further that in contrast to his previous schooling, he now does his homework on his own: "He knows what to do... All his homework, he does, I don't help him with any of his homework, ... I know that they don't send home any homework that he can't do on his own." Ella added that Frank's confidence grew in both academics and in sports.

Frank also noted his academic success at Kelsey:

I went to Kelsey and felt like I was learning a lot more... There was a lot more reading, and tutorial was all about work, and you could do stuff... Like, there's papers that you can actually do... like, learn on. You can learn different rules about spelling and reading...

Once Frank found academic success, his belief in his ability to learn increased along with his motivation for school. Frank described his pleasure in learning: "You can learn a lot more. Instead of sitting there, doing nothing, you actually can do something." He explained that he had no interest in learning at his old school but at Kelsey he wants to learn. He admitted to giving up at his old school. He noted that there is "a lot more things to learn about [at Kelsey]."

Frank's teacher Fiona, noted his participation in science:

For the most part, he's been pretty consistent with ... his effort and his output.

There've been [a] few little dips here or there, if something's going on at home that ... he might not put the top quality into his homework, but he's a great ... participant. Usually, he's volunteering to read or answer questions, and depending on the topic.

This positive comment from Frank's teacher draws sharp contrast to the litany of negative reports from his previous school that described Frank as lacking effort and interest in learning.

2. Evette.

Barbara, Evette's mother, and Evette's teachers noted marked changes in Evette's self-efficacy since attending Kelsey. Barbara described Evette's newfound confidence in her academic ability:

I think that's one of the things that she never felt until she got to Kelsey, that she was truly a smart kid...She knows that she can get it done [her work]. And she's actually being more helpful around the house now, and everything else, because I think she has more confidence in herself.

Barbara noted that Evette's fifth grade teacher described her as: "Lazy and doesn't try hard, and easily gives up." She said that has changed since Evette attended Kelsey: "So to me, that ... the child that would easily give up is gone because now there's a child that wants to learn, and that's the huge ... that's the difference between the public and Kelsey."

Along with her mother, Evette noticed her change in confidence. She attributed her participation in numerous events at Kelsey to her new sense of confidence: “I would have never done a panel. I would have never ran for Student Council. I would have never done a play, would have never become a cheerleader or anything.”

Evette noted her change in attitude about learning after attending Kelsey. She explained that before arriving at Kelsey she did not care about learning or school.

“I don’t care. I don’t plan on doing anything.” [This is what she said to herself before attending Kelsey]. But now, I plan on doing stuff with my life.... ’cause now ... everything got so easy and everything got so smooth and ... better.

Evette’s case manager, Sally McKay, noted that Evette ran for student council, participated in the Kelsey plays, and helped out with student council activities. She described Evette as fitting in with Kelsey compared to her experience at her old school: “You know, things at home in Rogersville [home town district] were difficult for her; that she always felt the odd man out, that she really didn’t feel that she was making progress, and she feels now that, Kelsey is the place for her, and she feels that she can thrive here.” Evette’s advocate described Evette’s emotional growth. “When I first met her she was a battered child. When I saw her here [at Kelsey] she was glowing.”

Teacher Fiona commented on the dramatic change she observed in Evette since the beginning of the year:

She ’s *very* eager to please; wants to learn, wants to do the right thing. ... One thing that kind of struck me at the beginning of the year was, ... if she made a ... mistake on her homework or classwork, ... *or* if I was giving a suggestion on an easier way to do it, she’d get a little defensive and ... almost try to make excuses

for *why* it was wrong,... I felt like her defenses were really up, and I'm sure it was probably due to past experiences, ... that's really changed dramatically.

Since the beginning of the year, Fionna observed that Evette has become more willing to accept feedback and she described Evette as: "Soaking up any strategy that she can." She relayed a story about Evette's enthusiasm with new learning strategies in the way she told a neighbor about solving division problems using the "Steel ladder." Fionna sites Evette's increased confidence by her enthusiasm to perform for the class and the whole school:

She loves to be at the front of the room explaining a problem and showing, her skills and stuff like that...I *love* the strength and courage she has for doing the things that she does, 'cause she doesn't always seem the most secure, but she's not afraid to take a risk, like getting up in front of the entire school.

Maggie Wright, Evette's language arts teacher, shared the contents of Evette's writing noting that Evette often wrote about her academic and social struggles in her old school in contrast to the success she feels at Kelsey:

She had anxiety about *everything* [at her old school]. And here, she feels successful and she gets yelled at for going *ahead* in math, instead of falling behind, and she feels ... I mean, she still struggles socially and stuff, like every middle school kid does, but she's ... like, "hey, I'm successful! You know, look at all these things I've done: I'm ... I have stage-fright, and I was in a play.

From multiple teachers perspectives along with her mother and her own accounts, Evette demonstrated dramatic changes in her feelings about her ability as a learner. This increased sense of positive self-efficacy appeared to influence her motivation to learn.

3. Nancy.

Libby, Nancy's mother, noted the dramatic changes in Nancy since attending Kelsey with a decrease in her anxiety and an increase in her confidence. Nancy went from not wanting to go to school to now, "she can't wait to go to school." Libby explained, "She's just more relaxed; she has her confidence that she can do it."

4. Cally and Tim.

Debbie described the importance of her child, Cally, developing a strong self-efficacy so that she can perform in the world. She believes this would not have developed in public school:

I think the most important thing is ... the insecurities, the self-esteem and self-worth, that's something that... no matter how much I could have loved them at home and done the right things on weekends and that ... if they stayed in public school, all the negativeness would have taken away the goodness, so it would have been, like, neutral. So now, they're going to be a positive member of society; happy in their own skin.

Debbie noted how Kelsey helped Tim with his self-esteem: "The self-esteem! I just can't say enough about that...Kelsey saved him, for sure.... We [case manager, Paul and herself] just can't believe the difference between last year and this year; it's almost like the magic."

5. James.

James's parents reported an increased level of confidence and self-efficacy that James developed while at Kelsey. With James's new sense of confidence they can now imagine him going to college and having a meaningful career:

It's almost like there's a different, prism through which he sees himself, because so many of the things that are hard for him are still hard; they're not *as* hard, and the failures aren't as great and the gaps aren't as great, but he's still, he's still very dyslexic.

James's mother added: "He still has those problems [being dyslexic] but those problems aren't important any more. They don't *define* him." James's father added: "He's not going to be the world's best reader, but now he knows how smart he is." James's parents also noted that James's new level of confidence allowed him to think about getting a summer job without worrying about his capability:

He's going to be 14 in April, and he wants to get a job over the summer.... There's nothing about any of the jobs that are worrisome, in terms of what he can and can't do. I think that sort of self-confidence is from being here [Kelsey].

6. Mike.

Evelyn noticed a dramatic change in Mike's self-efficacy after attending Kelsey: He *feels* successful. When he sits down and he talks to you, he is confident about the information that he's telling you. 'cause he's learned something I don't have ... anything to do with school; the back-pack, his t-shirt, nothing; snack to have on the way home, his work, nothing. That's totally his.

Evelyn, reported Mike's confidence in his ability grew as he completed homework on his own. He felt empowered by his independence that he no longer relied on his mother to get his work done.

Mike talked about his own success at Kelsey. In comparison to his old school, he noted that lunch was his favorite subject but at Kelsey he enjoyed all his academic subjects and he marveled at his ability to do the work on his own:

It's been a complete change to my life. Back at my elementary school, torture, I had to always depend on my mom to help me do my homework. ..It's complete... it's different, it's amazing, it's the best school I've ever been to in my life."

7. Raya.

Mel, Raya's mother, described Raya's increased self-efficacy since attending Kelsey as she comments on Raya's beliefs in her own abilities:

She knows she can. She never thought she could, and I think *that's* what they [Kelsey School] do: "you can." They empower them. And she's like, "yes, I can. I can." For her to get a hundred on her quiz ... I mean, she's just like, "well, I'm just like my brother and sister now. ... I'm as smart as you.

Mel emphasizes Raya's confidence in her abilities as one of the most remarkable aspects of Raya's experience at Kelsey:

And they just really, embrace them with such confidence here, like she'll say: "yes, I am dyslexic, but that doesn't mean that I'm not smart and that doesn't mean I can't learn."

Raya noted her increased sense of her ability now that she can read:

In first grade people were reading, Harry Potter books because they were so smart and I'd be reading, those cardboard ones with three words on each page, and now that I can read, Twilight [book series] it makes me feel *so* much better about myself....I know things now and I'm not, shy like I used to be and so I can say stuff more, like I can share what I'm thinking and I feel really good about myself.

8. Beth.

Mary, Beth's mother, reported that Beth's: "Confidence has blossomed" since attending Kelsey.

The students in this study noted their own marked changes in their attitudes and thoughts about their academic ability. Their parents and teachers noted these changes as well. Students no longer viewed themselves as incompetent learners. They found success at Kelsey in their ability to do homework and understand the material. They came to realize that having dyslexia did not correlated with an inability to perform academically. Their newfound confidence in their ability increased their motivation and interest in learning. These drastic changes highlight the role of student self-efficacy when understanding student motivation.

b. Self-advocacy.

Parents, students, and teachers observed an increase in the students' ability to self-advocate since attending Kelsey. Students learned to ask questions and to express their learning needs as dictated by their disabilities. Paul Stanford, public school liaison, noted that students that attend Kelsey gain tremendous academic skills but also self-esteem and confidence "shoots up." He described self-advocacy as a major part of the Kelsey

program. My interviews with teacher also highlighted the importance of teaching and encouraging self-advocacy.

Consistently, the parents all commented on a marked shift in their child's ability to self-advocate since their child began attending Kelsey. They described changes in class participation, particularly the children's willingness to ask questions as well as to answer questions. Parents also noted a sense of security and comfort in the classroom that was previously lacking. For example, Mel noted that Raya now has the confidence to ask questions when she needs help. Prior to Kelsey, she avoided questioning:

She is not afraid to ask, and I think she was always afraid to ask questions, like "I can't read this, can you read this word to me?" or "I don't understand this", because in her eyes that was admitting that she was stupid or she didn't understand it, where now she's so confident, she'll be like, "well, Mom, can you read this word?" or "I can't understand.

Students exercised their self-advocacy in the way they described their learning needs. For example, Evelyn commented how Mike now understands that he needs to focus more and pay attention in class. Evelyn attributes this understanding to the "environment" at Kelsey that has encouraged him to develop his self-advocacy skills.

As students advance in school, they must rely on themselves to make sure their educational needs are met. In her research, Olson (2009) interviews a college graduate with dyslexia who attributed his academic success to his ability to understand his learning needs and then advocate for accommodations.

c. Academic independence and abilities.

For so many students, teachers, and parents the child's improved reading level and writing skills became the obvious marker of success at Kelsey. In addition, parents noted their child's newly acquired independence in doing their own work as an additional measure of success: For example, Anna Brush, spoke about Raya's improved reading while at Kelsey:

She's certainly gained in skills; her reading has made gigantic gains. I mean, last year she was reading at probably ... a mid-second grade level for fluency, and this year, she's up ... she's just about the sixth grade, and she's in the sixth grade ... she's really closed the gap.

Anna also observed an increase in Raya's academic risk taking compared to the previous year when Raya often cried when the teacher introduced new work.

Patty Ryer, Frank's tutorial teacher, noted that Frank began Kelsey as a sixth grader, at a "high second grade to low third grade reading level." She observed that in two years he had advanced to a fifth grade reading level. Frank's case manager, Erin Stout, reported that Frank improved in writing as well. She noted that in a small structured writing class, Frank's mechanics of writing improved along with his attitude about schoolwork. For Frank, this was a point of success given his previous apathetic attitude toward learning at his old school.

Lesley, Polly's mother, described her transition to borrowing library books instead of buying books for Polly since Polly was now going through books at a rapid pace:

It's the first time I got her a library book instead of bought it for her, she is reading them so fast... And the copy they gave me of the book she wanted for today was kind of all ratty at the corners, I'm like, "do you have a better copy? This is the first time I'm getting her a library book..." Her reading has come leaps and bounds, her silent reading and her reading comprehension.

Polly's reading and comprehension improved tremendously to the point that she will attend public school next year.

James observed his own change as a learner. He described his increased interest in writing that he previously "hated" and a willingness to read in school. He even said when he wrote his Personal Sequence Narrative (PSN):

I have the greatest story in the world for this!" I came in with three and a half pages; everyone else has one and a half. ...I used to hate reading, and I still don't read, like "oh, look, a book. Mom, can I get it on tape 'cause I don't want to read it", so I'll be lazy like that, but it's also because, like, traumas from ... in my past teachers ... weird. But, I'm not reluctant to read with teachers it's like "OK, reading homework." OK, I'll read it.

James sees a change in himself and his case manager, Kelly, concurs. She noted that James has: "Really taken off in terms of applying the strategies that he's learned." James's parents reflected that by learning to read, James now participates in daily activities like other people. He is able to read menus at restaurants and look up numbers in the phone book. All these skills emerged with James's newly found literacy.

Nancy's mother reported that Nancy loved to come to school, which was a major shift from her last year in public school. Nancy described her joy in learning how to write

since attending Kelsey. Nancy noted she was able to write longer paragraphs adding description as well.

Debbie remembers the first indications that her son, Tim, was starting to find success at Kelsey:

I'll never forget the first year we were here, and we were here about six weeks and we were driving back and he read a sign. He would *never* read out loud to us, and he read the sign to us, just because he wanted to show us: "look, I'm starting to be able to read."

Evette's mother, Barbara, along with Evette saw tremendous changes in Evette's reading ability since attending only one year at Kelsey. Her case manager and language arts teacher also saw improvements but noted that Evette still has a ways to go in order to read at grade level. In our interview both Barbara and Evette described Evette's reading progress:

I am just amazed how much better she is able to read. Very few hesitations, much clearer with how she pronounces her words, ... that's just been huge. And I told you that ... this is the chair that we brought down when the Christmas tree was there. She wanted the chair put there so that she could sit and read.

Evette interrupted with: "That I'm reading in my car rides home...okay, I have a book, let's sit and do some of my homework!" Barbara responded: "I've been a reader all my life; I love to read, and that now she has access to reading, and gets enjoyment from reading is amazing." Evette chimed in: "This is my second book this year."

Sally, Evette's case manager, noted Evette's improvement after just six weeks in the summer program: "We tested her using the Wilcox before the summer and she was

reading at the 1% the equivalent of grade 1.3. By the end of the summer we tested her again and she was 22%. So there was improvement and it was an indicator that the LiPS program was for her.” Sally, acknowledged Evette’s new found joy in reading and her progress this year but cautioned that she is significantly below grade level and has ”a lot of catching up to do.”

Mike noted his own increased interest in learning since attending Kelsey. He enjoys school now instead of dreading school:

I think my first chapter at Kelsey, is just phenomenal. I learned so much. I was not depressed anymore. I’m very excited to learn, which is a surprise now. ’cause at my old school, I’m like Mom, she’s like “come on, Michael, it’s time for school.” I was like “I went there last week. Like, do I have to go?... Even though Kelsey is an extra hour of school....the time doesn’t really matter here [at Kelsey]. You always can enjoy yourself on homework, playing chess.

Mary, Beth’s mother, explained how she showed Beth’s improved reading at the hearing with her town, to exemplify the drastic changes that resulted when her daughter attended Kelsey. Beth learned to read after only seventh months at Kelsey during the academic year plus six weeks in the summer program. This time framed compared to the six years in the public school system, where she did not learn to read convinced Mary that the Kelsey school had the program her child needed:

I’m whipping out the Kelsey papers going, “my child can read now. I don’t have to go to a restaurant and read the menu to her. She can read it for herself. If we’re going down the street, she points at a street sign, she can read it for herself, she doesn’t have to ask me what it says.” I said, “maybe that’s not data, but that’s

tangible things that happen to us everyday now that never happened before. I mean, it was like a miracle, her coming to school here. We went from ... despair to ... she can read now.

Beyond learning to read, another measure of success was the children's independence in doing homework. Through years in public school, many of the parents either did the homework for their child or provided numerous hours of help. At Kelsey, students found success in completing homework on their own which played a role in building their self-confidence. Mary, Beth's mother explained that at Kelsey, they assign homework the students will be able to do. In fact, Kelsey's literature espouses six teaching principals with the first one being to provide opportunities for success. This literature emphasizes that teachers give assignments that are aimed at building confidence and keeping students from feeling overwhelmed (*Spotlight on language-based learning*, 2010) Mary commented about the relief she and other Kelsey parents feel now that their child does homework independently. She described the new parents orientation noting the anxiety on parent's faces when the headmaster mentioned homework and then the relief when he said:

We don't want you helping them with their homework, because we don't care what you know. We don't care! You let them do their homework," and there was a guy in the back going, yes! Yes!" [*Laughing.*] ...It was such a relief to know you're not going to have two hours of crying and fighting and going, like, "yes, you have to do this...None of that happens anymore.

All the parents commented about how their child felt better about themselves now that they were able to do their own homework. Mel noted Raya's previous devastation

that her younger brother was able to do her homework when she could not do it on her own. Now at Kelsey, Raya happily completes all homework without assistance. Evette and Tim's mother noted that at times their child might ask questions about a word or spelling on their homework but that is rare and mostly they do it all on their own—a major shift from their previous schooling experience.

Mike reported a major sense of accomplishment at Kelsey now that he completed his homework independent of his mother:

She [his mother] doesn't even know what's going on, she doesn't know if I have a test anymore, when I do pretty well, I'm like, "Mom, look at my science test, I got 95, she's like "nice." ...And I was very impressed with myself, and I did it all by myself.

Mike and his mother both described numerous hours that Mike's mother spent working on homework before Mike attended Kelsey. They both acknowledged their excitement over Mike's independence since coming to Kelsey.

Teacher Maggie Wright, observed that all students at Kelsey take pride in their ability to do homework on their own. This, she noted, is a new phenomenon for most students since coming to Kelsey. Maggie made a mistake on a homework assignment and was concerned that parents might contact her but then she realized that Kelsey students are so proud of their independence that they do not involve their parents:

The kids here are very determined to do their homework with zero help, so the chances that a parent looked at it are pretty slim, because they're very proud of the fact that they can do their homework on their own. And for a lot of these kids, this is the first time they've ever, *ever* experienced that.

Parents, students, and teachers noted vast increases in the students reading and writing abilities since attending Kelsey. They also described the pride and success students' felt in completing homework independently. Increased reading and writing ability and academic independence comprise another measure of success for Kelsey students.

d. Social growth.

Parents and teachers observed social changes in students while attending Kelsey. Teachers observed how students learned needed social skills, parents noted an increase in friendships, and students commented on the ease in which they made friends at Kelsey.

Patty Ryer explained how James, "learned to be a student." Many students new to Kelsey, according to Patty, need to learn how to sit quietly, listen to the teacher, take out belongings, and stay in their chair. Some also need lessons in social pragmatics such as using tissues and understanding personal space. Kelsey teachers help students improve in these areas through reminders and modeling.

Mike, Raya, Nancy, Frank, and Evette all reported having an easier time making friends at Kelsey compared to their old school. They suggested that students at Kelsey understood them better because they all shared a common learning disability. Raya explained: "People understand what's going on around them and it's different sort of the way our minds work: We attack problems differently." She noted that conversations with students at Kelsey are easier and are less confusing. Nancy described cliques in her old school that made social interactions stressful. In comparison she feels it is easier to make friends at Kelsey: "And then at Kelsey, they don't have cliques and everybody kind of fits in, so... it's like a big, big family." Frank explained that he no longer got into fights

with other students at school. Like Raya, he felt that students at Kelsey understood him better. Evette felt a connection to the students at Kelsey that she lacked at her old school. Due to the isolation many students felt at their old schools either from daily pull-out special education session or from being a child with a learning disability, these students and parents noted the ease in which the children fit in socially at Kelsey and that became a marker of success.

e. Participation in outside activities.

For many students in this study, Kelsey offers a safe place to participate in extra curricular activities such as sports and drama. In addition, students found participation in town sports teams easier with the more manageable homework load.

James's parents noted how James benefited from the extra curricular programming at Kelsey:

From a social standpoint ... he can be on a team; he's never going to be the first person to cross the finish line in a cross-country track meet. He knows that, but he also knows that showing up and competing and trying his hardest, is going to get rewarded here. He'd get cut in a week, in those places [public schools]. He *knows* that he can learn to read a script here and perform on-stage here. He wouldn't even make it through an audition if it was a cold-read of a script at a high school audition. There's the academic piece where he needs to be here, but even for the extra-curricular activities, he couldn't fully participate ...in *that* part of school life, without the sort of accommodations that they have here.

James is able to participate in both drama and cross-country at Kelsey. Drama students get help reading and memorizing their lines and every one makes the cross-country team.

Evelyn explained how Mike regained a life outside of school once he started Kelsey. As a family, they now have time to go out to dinner, bowling, or visit the Science Museum. He is able to participate in the town soccer program and a Sunday school church group. The reasonable workload at Kelsey allows Mike time to maintain interests outside of Kelsey. This was not an option for him before attending Kelsey

The ability to participate in extra-curricular activities provides students with an enriching environment. Drama and some sports may prove too difficult to the child with dyslexia without the support of Kelsey staff. Ella, Frank's mother, related Frank's difficulties playing football on the town team because he could not understand the plays. At Kelsey, Frank successfully participated in sports. Kelsey provides a safe and forgiving atmosphere where students feel comfortable participating in extra curricular activities. In addition, the workload, tailored to the child's ability, gives the child the time to participate in activities after school. Children's ability and time to participate in outside activities proved to be another area to measure the child's success at Kelsey.

f. Improved behavior.

A consistent measure of success reported by many parents was an improvement in behavior once their child started at Kelsey. This included changes in moods along with a decrease in depression and anxiety. Raya's mother noted an observable decrease in Raya's moods with less crying and fewer breakdowns. Frank's ,Mike's and Tim's mother's observed similar changes noting the absence of "meltdowns" or "shut-downs" that had occurred when the child attended public school. Barbara, Evette's mother noted that Evette now helped out more around the house. Mike's pediatrician and therapist noted dramatic changes. On October 18, 2007, Mike's pediatrician's wrote: "I think it's

clear that now that he's in a better school environment the depression and anxiety issues will gradually fade in importance. It's possible we may discover the ADD was mostly secondary to the Dyslexia as well." Mike's therapist wrote, in a letter dated October 23, 2007, to Mike's pediatrician:

Mike is doing very well. His depression symptoms have resolved and he has not experienced any anxiety in the past few months. As you may know Mike is attending Kelsey School and doing quite well academically and socially. ...His sense of humor has blossomed making him quiet fun to spend time with.

Evelyn also noted her joy in discovering Mike's sense of humor:

We never saw that sense of humor before. ... It wasn't there; it would be there occasionally, but ... it would be more of like a dry thing, but he'll say things now, and ... he knows he's pulling your chain, he knows that he's going to get a crack out of you.

James's parents explained that James tried a three-month trial of attention disorder medication as the school professionals continually suggested that James suffered from attentional issues. The parents found the change in school more beneficial than any medication to address his focus: "Since he's been here, [Kelsey] there's been nothing about, you know, *yes*, there are focusing issues, *yes*, there are attending issues, but they can be managed and he can be re-directed." James's parents also noted that counseling services were no longer needed. They relayed that the counselor reported she was really just, "helping him survive in a bad situation." She noted that: "There wasn't anything inherently wrong with him; he really needed help coping with a bad situation." The counselor suggested he no longer needed counseling. At Kelsey, James functioned

without medication and without counseling. His parents acknowledge that James's issues have not vanished but that the environment of Kelsey has helped transform him into the student he wants to be:

James has changed in a lot of ways, but he hasn't gone from, you know, *here* to *here*. He hasn't transformed into a completely different kid; James is just more of the person that he always was, because he's able to thrive by being that person here. He was never going to thrive as the person that he is in that other school; ... in order for him to succeed at a public school, he would have to be on Ritalin, he would have to be the automaton kid, and he wouldn't be James anymore.

Parents noted marked changes in their child's behavior after attending Kelsey. "Shut-downs," melt-downs," and "breakdowns" dissipated. Depression and anxiety as well as other conditions that in the previous environments required medication, no longer needed this prescription. This change in behavior marked another measure of success for Kelsey students and their families.

Multiple measures served to identify the children's success at Kelsey. Parents, teachers, students noted marked changes in self-efficacy, self-advocacy, academic independence and ability, social growth, participation in extra curricular activities, and improved behavior, such as showing a desire to attend school. These measures clearly resonated with parents, students, and teachers as important markers that indicated that the Kelsey school had altered the course of education for each child in a life changing way.

g. A culture that sustains a professional learning environment

The Kelsey School culture seems to contain many characteristics that allow for the development and sustainability of a comprehensive teacher culture that supports a

professional learning community. These characteristics include: (1) The staff maintain a common focus as noted by their dedication to the mission of the school. (2) Teacher collaboration is omnipresent appearing both organically and through the intentional structure of the program. (3) The administration and school culture support teachers' professional growth. (4) The administration promotes a shared leadership model.

Because of Kelsey's unique population, resources, and status, the school should not be viewed as an ideal model of a professional learning community. Nevertheless, I believe there are characteristics of the Kelsey School that can contribute to a broader conversation about the value of teacher collaboration and professional learning communities.

Lieberman and Miller (*Curriculum*, 2008) define a "professional learning community" as "ongoing groups of teachers who meet regularly for the purpose of increasing their own learning and that of their students" (p. 2). Lewis (2002) notes the importance to a professional learning community of shared norms and teacher collaboration. A school culture that sustains a professional learning community allows both teachers and students to excel academically and to work at their maximum potential (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Lipsitz, 1984; Shulman, 2004; Wehlage, 1986). Although Kelsey does not espouse any literature or generate any artifacts that promote a professional learning community as the intent and purpose of the program, the school culture appears to maintain many of the characteristics of a professional learning community that perhaps develop organically.

Kelsey's teachers share a common vision and support for the mission of the school. In my interviews with teachers and administrators, I witnessed teachers'

commitment to educating this population of students with language-based learning disabilities. Many teachers spoke of their beliefs in the importance of teaching all students to read and their understanding that these students needed a different approach than was offered in the typical public school setting. Teachers empathized with the plight of children who cannot read and saw it as their responsibility to open the door to literacy for all children. Some teachers verbalized this commitment, while others simply described their long hours of work. Fiona related that she is at work 6:45 a.m. every day and spends two to five hours on the weekend working on her teaching. Due to the constantly changing student levels in her classes from year to year, she must create new homework and adapt her class teaching every year, which explains her countless hours of work even as a veteran teacher.

Kelsey teachers consistently described a teacher culture that thrives and, in fact, depends on collaboration. Veteran teachers expect that they will support novice teachers, and all teachers expect to support one another. They share homework assignments, at times even putting assignments in one another's mailboxes without being asked. They observe one another's classes, and department heads model teach when asked. Teachers discuss student progress in small scheduled groups and also in informal conversations as they pass in the hallways. Teachers described a strong sense of collegiality, knowing there is always a fellow teacher available to help. This culture of teacher collaboration runs counter to the more common isolated teacher culture that has been described for generations as the norm for teachers (Moore Johnson, et al., 2004). Kelsey's school teacher culture, provides an example of a culture devoid of the isolated teacher culture commonly observed in schools and described as immovable by Lortie (1975/2002).

Much of the collaboration among Kelsey teachers relies on two structured programs: the Milkbreak meeting time and the case manager position. Milkbreak is designed to give teachers an opportunity to talk about students. The luxury of providing thirty minutes a day of structured time for this purpose is unique, in contrast to most schools. In fact, it is this very lack of time to meet that is often cited as the reason for teachers' inability to collaborate. However, Hargreaves (1994) suggests that mandated meeting time could lead to a teacher culture of contrived collegiality in which the collaborative nature of the school is artificial rather than organic. At Kelsey, my observations and interviews with teachers suggest that a true collaboration exists and that perhaps the Milkbreak structure simply allows and encourages this collaboration.

Kelsey teachers work in a culture that supports their professional growth and trusts in their ability to learn as well as teach. Kelsey's veteran teachers are expected to provide both informal and formal professional training for novice teachers. Professional training occurs both at the request of the novice teachers and when veteran staff may choose to share strategies that work. For example, at one Milkbreak meeting, Patty Ryer presented her work with a student in tutorial who was struggling with completing tasks. Patty designed an incentive program that proved successful that she shared with the staff during a Milkbreak meeting.

Like many other schools, Kelsey enlists outside professionals to provide inservice training, but this is not the school's exclusive training model. Instead, a large percentage of training appears informally as teachers work collaboratively, learning from each other. In addition, veteran teachers run the formal training program for the novice teachers.

Another characteristic embraced by the Kelsey administration is a shared leadership model. Bert Stack, head of school, described a leadership team that consists of himself, the dean of students, and the dean of academic affairs. He also noted that he creates new leadership positions as he sees both talent on the staff that he wants to maintain at Kelsey and an interest and skill level conducive to leadership. For example, he created the training coordinator position and the reading specialist position to promote these teachers and to increase leadership positions. Bert perceives his job to work in a team. The staff noticed this commitment as they commented on the teaming approach used by administration.

For decades, educational researchers such as Waller (1932/1961), Lortie (1975/2002), Sizer (1996), and Moore Johnson et al. (2004) have described the tenacity of schools to resist change maintaining the isolated teacher culture prevalent in many schools today. These isolated teacher cultures maintain their strength through school structures that prevent or inhibit teacher collaboration, reform efforts that neglect to focus on teacher collaboration, and systemic distrust in teachers and leadership. Kelsey offers an alternative model. It is a model that appears to help students find success as defined by their teachers, parents, and the students themselves. While it is out of the scope of this research to suggest that professional learning communities that support a comprehensive teacher culture promote student success, there is literature that supports this concept. For example, McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) through their research noted that the strength of the school culture or department culture in a high school affects both teaching and learning. In comparing two high school departments within one high school, they noted that in one math class failing students were viewed as unable to handle the program. In

another math class: “Student difficulties are considered to be a problem for content pedagogy, rather than a problem of student deficiencies” (p.64). They also stated that some departments may operate within their department as a community of learners and that these departments have strong teacher cultures. However, students more consistently succeed when a strong teacher culture permeates the whole school. In their research, they discovered that departments that meet more and worked collaboratively had stronger communities that supported student success and teacher learning.

Since there was more consistency of student success with culturally stronger departments, McLaughin and Talbert (2001) suggest that school culture must change to support learning communities: “Reculturing the profession—changing the ethos of teaching from individualism to collaboration, from conservatism to innovation.” (McLaughin & Talbert, 2001, p.125). They suggest that more school cultural shifts are occurring in the 21st century as school reformers watch the norms of the business world shifting toward a collaborative model.

Since Kelsey’s inception the founder of Kelsey, Dr. Black, had in place some structures that naturally led to teacher collaboration such as the Milkbreak meeting and the case manager role. Other characteristics of a teacher comprehensive culture developed over time, such as the veteran teachers training the novice teachers. Therefore, Kelsey never worked toward a cultural shift to develop the comprehensive teacher culture but it appeared to evolve organically from structures in place at the school’s origins and through time as the school grew.

While the Kelsey School appears as a perfect replica of a professional learning community with a comprehensive teacher culture, there are many factors that put Kelsey

in a unique position. Kelsey's unique population, resources, and status perhaps contribute to its ease in both maintaining and sustaining a professional learning environment as well as the success of its' students. Kelsey maintains a selected student population. This allows for teachers to home in on specific strategies that pertain only to this population allowing for much commonality amongst the staff in their work. Kelsey has enough resources to have a three to one student to teacher ratio. The volume of staff available allows for multiple layers of support for teachers. It also allows for small class sizes, perhaps easing the ways in which teachers keep track and have the time to invest in individual students. Finally, Kelsey is a private school. In this status, the Kelsey administration may accept or reject any student. They are not bound by the confines of a public education that accepts all students. This again allows for a focused teaching population and removes students with behavior issues that can detract or absorb much of a teacher's time and energy.

It is not the intent of this analysis of Kelsey's inner workings to link Kelsey students self-described success to the model of a professional learning community. The research does not look at multiple additional factors, such as a curriculum and pedagogy that might be equally important in determining student success. This research merely aims to uncover the persistent themes that emerged in my analysis and draw attention to the similarities to and differences with a larger model that predominates much of the literature on student success.

I choose to examine the alignment of Kelsey's inner workings to that of a professional learning community due to the robust research that concludes that

professional learning communities contribute to student success (Barth, 1990; R. DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

h. Summary of Measures of Success

I interpreted three consistent themes emerging from the data as parents, teachers, and students identified characteristics of Kelsey that contribute to the successful learning environment. These themes, dedication to the mission, a structured program, and a safe and supportive learning environment also share common components with a professional learning community as identified by Barth(1990) and DuFour and Eaker (1998). These components include a comprehensive teacher collaborative culture, a supportive leadership, shared norms, and reflective dialog (Lewis, 2002). Schools that maintain professional learning communities have been associated with an increase in student success (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). For this study, the Kelsey students' success is not based in test scores but instead on changes in attitude, behavior, social abilities, academic independence, and ability as identified by students, parents, and teachers.

5.6 Drawbacks

The Kelsey School presents as a school with many strengths: The teachers support the mission and vision, the school structure allows for numerous systems that aid student success, and participants of the school describe a safe and supportive learning environment. In addition, the students, parents, and teachers noted positive changes in the students' sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy since attending Kelsey. All these characteristics appear to describe a near perfect school. However, Kelsey has drawbacks. These drawbacks reflect some consistent problems in many schools, while others are unique to Kelsey. I categorized these drawbacks as ones that relate to the staff and ones

that relate to students. The topic of drawbacks at Kelsey bares some explanation as I only solicited students for this research whose parents and teachers defined the student as successful. I did not interview families who left the school nor did I seek out struggling students. My interest stemmed from what I perceived as working. So, one might expect minimal drawbacks to surface from the participants given the population that I drew from.

a. Drawbacks regarding teachers.

The list of drawbacks found at Kelsey comes largely from individual responses compared to themes that emerged. Individual responses included concerns about teacher turnover rate, teacher isolation, the absence of a case manager training, a lack of up-to-date research information, a privileged and embattled educational environment, and space shortage. Two themes found among the teachers reflected the low salaries and the lack of constructive feedback for teachers.

Kelsey's turnover rate for young teachers impacts veteran teachers as they play a vital role in the training and development of the novice teacher. For veteran language arts teacher, Claire Jenkins, the teacher turnover rate is frustrating. She prides herself in the effort she pours into the young teachers only to see many of them leave after a few years:

It's hard for me to see talented teachers leave. You work hard to train them. They leave for a variety of good reasons, but you put a lot of effort into training them. We meet with each teacher every week to plan short and long-term goals and to work on curriculum and classroom management. That continues the whole time that they are working here.

Claire attempts to see the positive in losing talented teachers knowing the training they received will benefit other students and other school systems. However, she also laments the time needed to train teachers and the benefit students gain from learning from a more experienced teacher:

When a teacher announces she is leaving, I have to look at it as if she is a missionary. This teacher is going to share this training in other places that could benefit from some of these strategies she learned in this program.... Breaking in new teachers is very time-intensive, and you know that the kids are not going to be at a pace and flow that they would be with a more experienced person.

According to Bert Stack, since the 95-96 school year on average seven teachers leave a year with a low of two and a high of fourteen. The average staff member remains at Kelsey for thirteen years with a low of one to a high of thirty-eight. In exit interviews, conducted by Stack, he noted the reasons that teachers leave Kelsey: "Maternity and relocation are probably the two biggest; followed by salary and change of career path."

Isolation rarely arose as a theme for teachers in at Kelsey. In fact only one teacher mentioned isolation. Patrick Steel, head of the math department, noted his isolation as the only one working on a math curriculum for language based learning disabled students: "You find yourself on an island a lot: you're the only person saying something, and even though it's right, it can feel really lonely when you're doing that. And there's nobody else here that does Math." Patrick noted that he sought out support at conferences and other institutions but rarely finds any one who works on math curriculum in the way that he does.

Anna Brush described the “learn as you go” model of training for case managers noting that while the school puts tremendous support into teacher training, there is no training for case managers. She described each case manager finding his or her own style based on trial and error. She explained that every year training for case managers gets “put on the back burner” despite numerous discussions of this need.

Case manager, Erin Stout, noted the limited space in the case managers office area. There are four case managers in one room. The room holds their four desks along with a copy machine. Erin stated that she found it difficult to work without privacy. She noted that conversations with students and parents were in earshot of all case managers. In addition, she commented about her distraction when other case managers were on the phone. Erin felt each case manager needed his or her own space.

Patty Ryer felt that teachers are not held accountable for high standards and she perceived this as a weakness of the school structure. She also noted that the school could do a better job in keeping current on new research:

Staying abreast with new technology and new research...I think we're kind of slow to go to the whatever the cutting edge stuff is. And I feel like, as a school that focuses on dyslexia, we should be at the forefront...if there is something that's scientifically validated, we should be doing it.

While Patty views the connections to new research as a weakness both Claire Jenkins and Sally McKay suggest the opposite noting the privilege they feel obtaining up-to-date research information through efforts of the administration.

Case manager Kelly Dance noted her struggles working with students and parents from “privileged backgrounds” and her distress witnessing the embattled environment where the district schools and the parents fight over services and money:

The sense of entitlement ... more and more students walk in here with, and parents, too ... the money... I'd rather on a number of days work somewhere where ... kids know what it's like to struggle ... *Really* struggle, And sometimes ... the whole bureaucracy that's ... continuing to grow and grow and grow between school systems and what we do here, and how they battle with each other....

Approximately fifty per cent of the students at Kelsey are publicly funded the rest are privately funded. Kelly did not elaborate on her terminology of “struggle” but I interpreted her comment to suggest that she refers to economic struggle, as these students are already noted for their academic struggles. Patty, in a similar fashion, suggested that she hoped to put her energies into the students who are not able to get to Kelsey. She explained: “I think I'm supposed to be somewhere else helping kids that aren't able to get here.”

Many teachers' referenced low salaries at Kelsey and retention of teachers that under perform as problems at Kelsey. Kelly Dance noted that public school teachers make 25% more than Kelsey teachers. First year teacher, Maggie, expressed interest in staying at Kelsey forever, but she indicated the low salary may make that impossible. However, she did acknowledge the masters degree paid for by Kelsey and her desire to stay despite the low salary: “The *only* thing I would complain about here is ... the pay,

that's it! And it's a sacrifice that, if I can make that, I'm going to ... you know, stay here as long as I can."

Numerous teachers also commented on the ways in which the administration at Kelsey retains teachers without constructive feedback. Patty Ryer noted that teacher feedback becomes an issue the longer teachers stay:

I don't think that we do a good job in giving constructive criticism and feedback to faculty and staff, that helps them to improve. The longer people are here, they grow stronger in their strengths, and more entrenched in their weaknesses.... and therefore some problems become big, ugly problems over time, and we don't have a way of dealing with that.

Teacher Erin Stout concurs stating discontent for some teachers who do not uphold the mission and vision:

I feel like there *have* been some faculty that have ... not necessarily ... carried on the mission of Kelsey ... or haven't ... shown that they're doing their job. And I feel like Kelsey just carries them along, and doesn't ... like step in and say, 'you need to change these ways or be gone.'

Kelly Dance also noted the trend in keeping teachers that under perform: "We seem to be very satisfied with hanging on to, forever ... staff members that ... I don't think ... work hard enough at their jobs."

b. Drawbacks regarding students.

Parents and case managers noted drawbacks in the social environment as well as slow academic progress and limited student engagement for some students attending Kelsey. Socially, the environment at Kelsey can be challenging. Students leave their

hometowns and in some cases travel over an hour to attend Kelsey. This makes maintaining friendships outside of school difficult. In addition, the relatively small size of Kelsey and the selected population can challenge social interactions. Mentioned most by students and parents was the social climate for middle school girls. One case manager reported slow academic progress by one student and homework struggles with another student as the affect of social interactions.

Case manager, Anna Brush, noted that Raya's social concerns interfered with her learning last year. She said: "The social stuff had such a difficult impact on her last year, in particular, ...it probably hindered some progress she could have made 'cause she was preoccupied with some of that other stuff going on." As a small school Mel, Raya's mother, explained that the middle school girl issues could be more difficult with the small circle of friendship:

A lot of drama with ... girls at that age, and I think it just tripled because it's such small environment; there's nowhere for them to go and to get away. And so it just keeps coming back, full circle, where maybe if it was a little bit bigger and they could have a little more breathing room, things might settle down.

Mel also noted that students at Kelsey might struggle more than students at other schools due to the social impact of their learning disability:

I'm sure, Raya is like all the other girls here that their filter system is not quite clarified. There *is* no filter a lot of times, they say things that ... is inappropriate, it *is* what they really feel, but they've ... haven't quite gauged that social ... filter yet: what is appropriate? What is hurtful? What do I keep to myself?

Lesley, Polly's mother, acknowledged some of the struggles with the girls but reported that her daughter has made friends at Kelsey. However, given the distance that students live from each other getting together outside of school poses difficulties.

James commented on the difficulty he had in both leaving friends at his old school and trying to make new friends at Kelsey: "I didn't make tons of friends my first year, I didn't make tons of friends my second year, I didn't make tons of friends last year." As he talked, he recalled a few friends he made at Kelsey and noted that by eighth grade he really knew most of the students in the school.

Academically not all students progress as quickly or efficiently as the staff wishes. Sally, Evette's case manager, noted that although Evette has made some progress, she still has a long way to go. Frank's case manager reported that Frank struggled with completing homework for the first semester of this year, although he has made progress. Evette reported that despite the small class sizes, she is easily distracted by the poor behavior of some students in her class although she clarified that Kelsey classrooms are much less distracting than her public school classrooms.

The drawbacks of Kelsey as reported by the staff, parents, and students interviewed represent some common complaints in schools such as retaining teachers that under perform. Menuey (2005) reports a large discrepancy between the number of teachers reported as incompetent and the number of teachers that are dismissed making retention of under performing teachers a concern in education. Other drawbacks appear unique to Kelsey and primarily the concern of one person.

5.7 Conclusion of inner workings of Kelsey School

In my research of the Kelsey School culture, I identified some consistent themes that, together, define the ways in which the school operates. The culmination of themes are unique to Kelsey and are repeatedly offered by teachers, parents, and students as some of the aspects of the school that help make students successful. It is beyond the scope of this research to draw any conclusions about the precise characteristics of the Kelsey School that promote student success. This research reports the data from artifacts, observations, and interviews of what members of the Kelsey community suggest helps students find success.

The Kelsey School maintains specific attributes that most schools do not share in its private school status, high teacher–student ratio, and teacher dedication to the mission. As a private school, the Kelsey admissions staff chooses who gains admission to the school. They admit only students who meet a specific learning profile. The staff has spent almost forty years researching the best teaching methodology for this specific population of students with language-based learning disabilities. This narrow focus and commitment to research allows the staff to specialize and to develop a consistent structure aimed at this population that permeates the school. Teachers also enjoy a high teacher–student ratio that allows for small class size and individualized attention. This cornerstone program, of a 1 to 3 teacher—student ratio, allows multiple levels of support for teachers and students. The Kelsey School’s mission is the common focus for all staff. It provides the glue that binds teachers around a common ’cause building a sense of purpose and community within the staff and the school.

Although many aspects of Kelsey’s model appear unique to the situation of a small private school, lessons for administrators can be learned from the Kelsey approach.

For example, at Kelsey, teacher collaboration is part of the fabric. It describes the ways in which teachers operate on a daily basis. Collaboration is ubiquitous leaving teachers feeling supported by fellow teachers and administration. Moreover, Kelsey's teachers enjoy ongoing educational opportunities. The veteran teachers support and teach the novice teachers providing an environment that allows for teachers to make mistakes, to get advice, and to develop their teaching practice. Veteran teachers are supported in pursuing their own research and taking on new roles within the school. Veteran teachers also support one another, learning and growing their teaching practice together.

Next, the structure of the Kelsey School provides for multiple layers of communication and support among all staff and between staff and parents. This carefully crafted communication system provides staff with opportunities to discuss student issues on a regular basis with ease. The tutorial program allows students to work on specific learning struggles in a safe, supportive environment designed for their specific learning needs. Finally, Kelsey's myriad people, structures, and systems supports a professional learning community that research suggests promotes student success in school (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

This research presents a school with many virtues that could be viewed as a model for public education. However, it is important to note that the school also has its drawbacks and that it serves only a limited population. The admissions staff defines the student population by admitting a prescribed population and maintaining the right to ask students to leave. In addition, this research deliberately focused only on students who found success at Kelsey; it did not include students who may have left the school or did not excel there. However, I suggest that given the problems of the special education

programs in public school systems (Harry & Klingner, 2006) as well as the struggles of special education students reported in this research and by Olson (2009) and Shaywitz (2003), and the prison population that contains a high percentage of inmates with literacy issues (Kirk & Reid, 2001; Moody, et al., 2000; Snowling, et al., 2000), attention to a program for special education students that works makes perfect sense. In addition, providing enough funding for public schools to implement a program such as Kelsey's makes perfect sense for it would allow more students access to a Kelsey type of education.

Chapter 6: Discussion of the Findings

This study highlights the journeys of nine students with learning disabilities, who, with luck and their parent's advocacy, found their way to a school that specializes in teaching to them inclusive of their disabilities. These students went from feeling levels of despair about themselves and their academic ability to finding confidence, support, belief in their ability, and the satisfaction of learning to read once they went to the Kelsey School. The Kelsey School's structure, its supportive learning environment, and a staff who are dedicated to the mission of the school combine to create a collaborative school culture that supports a professional learning environment. This study draws no conclusions about the effect of the overall school culture or the teacher culture on these students' success at Kelsey but merely describes this model and highlights the ways in which staff, students, and parents all speak to the success of this model for these nine students. This study does not prove that a specific method of educating special education students is most effective, nor does this conclusion aim to give suggestions based on this research. What is clear from this research is that once the nine children in this study began attending the Kelsey School, they experienced an education that match their learning needs allowing them to progress both academically and emotionally. This was a new experience for these nine children.

From this study, three concepts emerge that may help special education directors, principals, and superintendents shape the ways that they think about their "special needs" students and the structure of schools. These three concepts are *redefining access to*

education, overcoming deficit thinking, and shifting traditional thinking about the ways in which schools operate.

6.1. Redefining Access to Education

The words *access* and *accessibility* are commonly associated with people with disabilities. For example, we hear about handicapped-accessible bathrooms, buildings, and walkways. In education, *accessible* and *accessibility* are sometimes used in conjunction with assistive technology. White, Wepner, and Wetzel (2003) talk about accessible education through the use of assistive technology, explaining that this technology increases student's ability to access an education.

Access is also defined by legislative acts and Supreme Court decisions that give discriminated against groups entry to something they were previously denied. For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 ("The Civil Rights Act of 1964," 2004) allows people who use wheelchairs greater access to public buildings, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 gives African Americans greater access to voting, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, by prohibiting discrimination in lending practices, allows greater access to housing. In education, the Supreme Court Decision of 1954, *Brown v The Board of Education of Topeka*, declared racially segregated public schools unconstitutional ("The Civil Rights Act of 1964," 2004) and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 gave children with special needs access to a public education (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

However, legislative acts do not always guarantee the intended access and may give a false impression that through these acts equity has been achieved. For example, Alexander (2010) describes the disproportionate numbers of incarcerated African

Americans, as compared to incarcerated white Americans as a hegemonic way to limit their access to housing, voting, and employment, despite legislation that previously guaranteed African Americans access to these rights. Alexander notes that the rate of incarceration of young black men in the US is higher than for any other minority in any part of the world. In this manner, Alexander asserts, the forces of hegemony find legal avenues to discriminate against felons in housing and employment and to revoke the right to vote. She suggests, “We have not ended racial cast in America we have merely redesigned it” (p.2). Darling-Hammond (1995) assigns the academic discrepancy between African American students and other groups to the lack of access to high quality teachers. This inequality in education continues to exist despite the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka*, that declared “separate but equal” education to be a violation of the 14th Amendment, and despite later legislation intended to improve the education of African Americans, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (p.3). She claims that “minority” (p.2) students are disproportionately assigned poorer quality teachers, thereby denying them access to an equal education under the law.

From my research on nine students with learning disabilities and their families, I learned that despite numerous attempts by legislators and school professionals to make education accessible for all children, some school professionals persist in using an inequitable process to determine how students with learning disabilities may gain access to an education.

The Merriam-Webster on-line dictionary (2010) defines *access* as the “ability to obtain or make use of something.” In this chapter, I suggest a different kind of educational access—one that allows children with learning disabilities to understand and

process the education that is presented in order to facilitate their learning, thereby using their education to “make use of something.”

Legislative attempts to help children with learning disabilities access education were realized in part through the implementation of an Individualized Education Program (IEP). For some students with learning disabilities, however, the IEP is not a reliable gateway to an accessible education. Questions arise about the testing used to place children on IEPs, the educational methodology dictated by the IEP, and the need to label a child with a disability in order to get help. Children are often placed on an IEP after multiple testing assumes to identify a specific learning disability. Diagnostic tests, however, may become part of the problem rather than the solution. Harry and Klingner (2003) question the validity of certain intelligence tests for children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They note that the test itself may be culturally biased, leading to erroneous results. Discrepancy testing (comparing IQ test results with the results of achievement tests), as Shaywitz (2003) explains, has outlived its usefulness. New methods to provide verification for a child’s eligibility for special education such as Response to Intervention (RTI) are being implemented in some schools to address the inadequacies of discrepancy testing. However, RTI also requires student to have a diagnosis to be placed on an IEP (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

In this study, I discovered that educational testing at times provided faulty evidence of a child’s cognitive abilities, leading school officials to misinterpret the meaning of the test results. Poor test results may have multiple meanings. Poor test results may indicate a child’s cognitive abilities, but it may also reflect inadequacies with the current educational approach and may not measure how a student might perform in a

different learning environment. As Barringer (2009) explains, “performance data can reveal who isn’t learning and what isn’t being learned but not why students are struggling or how to address their needs” (p. 36).

When misdiagnosed or undiagnosed children with dyslexia struggle in school, professionals may falsely conclude that these children have low cognitive ability, are emotionally unstable, or are simply unmotivated (Shaywitz, 2003). Students with dyslexia, even when given IEPs and other learning aids, may not be able to access the educational program that is provided despite good intentions on the part of the professionals who work with them. Testing provides only one kind of information; the child’s statements, such as “I don’t get it” or “I feel stupid,” or behavioral expressions of the child’s frustration, may provide the most valuable information, if only professionals can read and evaluate these signs correctly. It appears from this study that the responsibility lies with parents to read these signs and others from their children and to gain the confidence to reject professional advice and testing results as the sole measure of their child’s ability to learn.

Once a child’s learning issues are understood, the child needs a productive learning environment in order to fully access the education that is provided. A productive learning environment should include professionals who know how to implement the correct education program for each particular student and who understand that a child must feel safe and supported in order to be ready to learn. Barringer (2009) and Olson (2009) discuss the importance of understanding brain science to know what learning environment will work for each student. For example, with new brain-imaging systems, it is possible to see how dyslexia is manifested in the brain. Noting the weakness in the

language system of children with dyslexia allows educators and researchers to work together to design reading programs that directly address this issue (Shaywitz, 2003). Understanding how a student's brain works provides educators with information needed to custom-design learning that a student can access. Although seven students in this study were placed on IEPs to customize their learning, this plan did not help them achieve an accessible education. But once they were placed at the Kelsey School—a school designed specifically for students with dyslexia—these nine students were able to access the education that was provided.

The journey of these students and families in their efforts to obtain an accessible education appeared to depend on the alignment of multiple factors, including the parents' ability to advocate, their confidence to reject the results of testing, their awareness of the need for a learning environment that would be tailored to their child's disability, and their socioeconomic status. Parents in this study maintained confidence in their child's ability, learned to question the authority of professionals in the school system, and became ardent advocates in their quest to find the best learning environment for their child. This often involved spending thousands of dollars on educational advocates and lawyers, as well as being lucky enough to find people to direct them to appropriate resources. As evidenced in this study, parental advocacy, along with serendipitous circumstances, may get a child to the point of finding an accessible education. Shaywitz (2003) suggests it is the responsibility of parents to advocate for their children's educational needs: "Your role—indeed, your responsibility—as your child's chief advocate is to bring new and important information to your child's teacher and school" (pp. 262–263). This raises questions about what happens to students whose parents, for whatever reason, cannot or do not

advocate for their child. Olson (2009) quotes a college student who, reflecting back on her school experience, noted the lack of parental advocacy “allowed the school to sweep me under the rug” (pp.48-49). The circuitous route taken by these nine students is evidence of an inequitable process whereby some students find access while others may be denied. Given this pathway, it is easy to imagine that many students do not find their way to an accessible education. Some children are tested and are believed to be working at their best ability, which by many measures is considered low for many instances. These children may stay at this level unless parents question and advocate for new testing that can show the existence of a learning disability that is impeding the child’s educational progress. The avenue taken may depend on the parents’ degree of involvement in the school, their socioeconomic status, the professionals in the school system, the quality of the testing, and other factors. For other children, emotional problems may mask a learning disability. These children may stay in a holding pattern without the tools to move forward in their education. Still other children are diagnosed and assigned a special education label when, in fact, it is a poor educational environment that is impeding their learning, not a problem with the child’s learning style (Harry & Klingner, 2006). In this study, each child’s parent played a key role in recognizing the signs and symptoms of a child frustrated with school. This galvanized the parents to advocate for their child’s education.

a. Access to an education.

I define access to an education as, an education that allows children to understand and process the education that is presented in order to facilitate their learning. This access must be a focus for ongoing research in education. Educational inequality in K–12

schools has long been a topic of interest to educational researchers. The literature suggests that by providing a higher-quality education only to some students then to others, our educational system contributes to economic immobility and is a form of institutional racism. Reasons for this inequality in education may include uneven distribution of funds, educational tracking systems that end up providing a higher-quality education to certain groups than to others, cultural dominance of one group over others, and discriminatory practices that provide misleading labels for many children (Delpit, 1996; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Kozol, 1991, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; McLaren, 2003). Darling-Hammond (1997) advocates for educational reform so that all children have “a genuine right to learn” (p. 5). She describes schools that fail to teach children as a result of poorly designed schools, inadequately trained teachers, and unequal funding. She notes the consequences to society when this right to learn is denied, citing the rise in the prison population with a high percentage of learning-disabled prisoners. She explains that over 50 percent of adult prisoners lack literacy skills for a labor market, while 40 percent of juveniles in prison have undiagnosed and untreated learning disabilities. I submit that the “right to learn” also includes the child’s right to access to an appropriate education. This access must be provided equally, so that all children with learning disabilities have the opportunity to find the education that best matches their learning needs.

When a child cannot obtain or make use of an education, that education is not accessible. Without access to the education that is provided, children are denied the opportunity to progress in their educational program. Access must not be dependent on serendipitous circumstances, including the ability of parents to advocate for their child.

Rather, access must be equally available to all children, regardless of their parents' advocacy and without stigmatizing labels. I suggest that, along with equal funding, culturally leveled playing fields, high-quality teaching, and nondiscriminatory practices, students who learn differently from the majority also have the right to an education that provides them with the skills and the tools to promote their academic ability without having to live with a deficit label. I suggest that unequal access to an education must become part of the well-established discourse on educational inequality.

b.. Conclusion: Redefining access to education.

Many factors must come into alignment to create the best environment for learning for those children whose educational needs may differ from the needs of the majority of students. For the nine children in this study, access appeared to be dependent on economic resources, parent advocacy, and a learning environment with educational professionals who understood that different learning styles required different teaching methodologies. The difficulties these students encountered provide evidence of a system that allows access to only a few. As this inequitable system persists in our schools, it ultimately affects our whole society by denying some children the right to an education. Access to education should mean that *all* children have the opportunity to learn regardless of their background, socioeconomic status, parental involvement in their school, or assignment of a learning-disabled label.

6.2. Overcoming Deficit Thinking: Creating a “Special Education” for all Students

Deficit thinking has too long been used to explain students' struggles in school (Valencia, 1997). This kind of thinking suggests that the problems lie within the child rather than the teaching methodology and results in labeling children with a disability

rather than deciphering each child's way of learning. Deficit thinking has been used to sanction racism and to support unwarranted assumptions about students from racial or ethnic minority groups. Deficit thinking is used to explain student failure by blaming the student's perceived cognitive ability, lack of motivation, or family issues rather than looking to the school operations for solutions. Valencia (1997) explains that deficit thinking has been around since the 1600s and that this model is "rooted in ignorance, classism, racism, sexism, pseudoscience, and methodologically flawed research (p. xii). Students in this study talked about their scars from years in a school system that did not know how to teach them. They endured a system that demanded that they be given a diagnosis in order to receive an education. They were pulled out of class and labeled with a problem, but their learning needs were still not met.

Inequities in the identification of students for special education services, along with the consequences of segregating a group of students from the general population, suggest that special education is not so special. Given the multitude of problems with the assignment of students to special education and the negative consequences of comparing students with an artificial norm, moving away from traditional special education programs seems urgent.

Shifting the tradition of special education will require a radical change in how educators conceptualize special education (Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010; Gurn, 2010). From the inception of special education, its design promoted segregation and normed criteria in order to facilitate separation of identified students from the general education population (Crawford & Bartolome, 2010). This process can harm individuals who must

live with a deficit label, as well as whole groups, as seen in the overrepresentation of minority students in special education (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Willis, 2010).

With a new approach to special education, students would no longer need to face comparison to an artificial norm. Instead, every child would be viewed as unique; *difference* would become the norm (Gurn, 2010). So, for example, reading help might be available for all students who need it, not just those who meet arbitrary criteria.

Gallagher (2010) promotes the use of the term *belonging* to replace *inclusion*. She notes that inclusion has come to be exclusion, whereas the idea of belonging promotes acceptance and understanding that although everyone is different, all students belong to the larger group. Shifting away from traditional special education might provide all students equal access to a “special education,” instead of relying on criteria that often depend on each child’s school, teachers, and parents. With belonging as the norm, students would no longer need to meet specific criteria to get services and would no longer need to live with a feeling of deficiency. Ball and Harry (2010) explain: “With systematic and individually tailored instruction we can open the doors to effective education for all children “ (p. 119). Teachers will need to find ways to teach to reach all children so that the children will no longer be blamed.

Hallowell (personal communication, January 28, 2011) provides a framework for altering the discourse around the concept of “disability.” He notes that a diagnosis of ADHD, commonly viewed as a disability, could instead be considered normal and even highlighted as advantageous. For example, students with greater degrees of activity may get more done in a day than other students. He comments that it would be just as easy to define people with a greater degree of focus with a label like “Over Focus Disorder

(OFD),” noting that the tendency to overfocus limits these individuals’ ability to get more things done in a day. In other words, both groups have advantages and disadvantages that can be celebrated rather than being viewed as a deficit.

Armstrong (2010) uses the term “neurodiversity” (p.3) to describe neurological differences in people’s brains. Like Hallowell, he notes many advantages of commonly defined neurological disabilities such as dyslexia, autism, ADHD that are often overlooked in the rush to assign pathology to brain difference. He suggests that brain differences should be understood instead as gifts, providing unique strengths from which people can learn. Armstrong argues that along with bio, cultural, and racial diversity, brain diversity needs to hold a place in societal discourse about differences to reorient our thinking to appreciate all the natural differences in the human brain. He advocates for “a new field of neurodiversity” (p. 3) where there is no normal brain that other brains are compared to. Judy Singer, a parent of a child with Asperger’s syndrome, is credited with coining the term *neurodiversity* (Armstrong, 2010). Armstrong notes that the term was part of “a movement among individuals labeled with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who wanted to be seen as different, not disabled” (p. 7). Armstrong suggests looking for the gifts that each different kind of brain offers, rather than the deficits. It seems to make more sense to think about every child as having a gift and to recognize that no one type of brain is the “model” brain to which we should all aspire. In fact, individual human brains differ in many significant ways, and these differences should inform the ways in which we teach. For the students in this study, the opportunity to find their gifts, understand their talents, and know that they were just as capable as other students came only when they were able to attend a school where the norm was for children to have dyslexia. This

type of environment is not available to all students, yet all students may need to feel they are simply different, not disabled. This thinking may move schools past the deficit model.

Ladson-Billings (2006) use the term “education debt” (p.6) to replace the commonly used term “achievement gap” (p.3). She suggest that the term “educational debt” places issues of racism and classism at the forefront, moving the discussion to the political arena and away from blaming the child.

Shifting the tradition of special education may mean that more students will get the services they need and that teachers will get additional training so that students no longer are blamed for not grasping what is taught in class. Labeling children should not be the route by which children can qualify for services (Gurn, 2010).

6.3 Shifting Traditional Thinking about the Ways in which Schools Operate

The isolated teacher culture predominates in many schools despite evidence suggesting that a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture would create a sustaining environment that would enable more students to achieve (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Wehlage, et al., 1996). The Kelsey School provides a model of a comprehensive collaboration teacher culture and a professional learning community that perhaps may serve as an example for other schools. For many schools to embrace a professional learning community, school personal will need to shift their current thinking on the ways in which schools are structured and operate.

To enact this shift requires looking at education as we know it today in a different light. As a private school, the Kelsey school may have certain advantages that facilitate a culture of learning. However, I believe a shift for public schools is also possible. For example, I can imagine a position of “superintendent of culture” rather than the

traditional “superintendent of curriculum and instruction.” With ample evidence that a comprehensive collaborative teacher culture enhances student achievement, it would make sense that top-level administration would provide both expertise and support in maintaining cultures that maximize student learning. In this approach, the head administrator would model collaboration and create a structure to allow teachers and principals time and space to work together so they can have ownership of curriculum and instruction. Schein (2004) provides an example of leaders in an organization modeling teamwork that had an impact on the core functioning of the company. He describes the culture of Hewlett Packard (HP) as the “HP way” (p. 29). William Hewlett had a technology background, while David Packard brought business experience to the company. The HP way emphasized teamwork. The founders teamed together, using their respective areas of expertise, to move the company forward. The HP way permeated into all areas of the company, where teamwork became the norm. If a school’s superintendent of culture models collaborative leadership while also providing the support that principals and teachers need to maintain a collaborative teacher culture, both teachers and principals might be able to ease into this culture.

Another shift requires teachers, principals, and students to view all teachers and administrators as part of the team helping each individual child. No single teacher is responsible for certain children’s achievement. Instead, every teacher is responsible for every child. Assessments are shared across classrooms, and both successes and failures are “owned” by all staff. I can imagine that classrooms might be labeled as groups are in summer camps. For example, at the elementary level, instead of “Mrs. Morgan’s class,” the group might be “the bluebirds.” This label emphasizes that the bluebirds are not just

Mrs. Morgan's students, even though she serves as their principal teacher. When Mrs. Morgan sees a student struggling, she can expect the entire staff to offer support and suggestions. The "milkbreak" meeting at Kelsey helped establish the shared ownership of all students as teachers shared successes, failures, information, and asked for help regarding specific students during these meetings.

Shulman (2004) presents a third shift in the way teachers discuss, learn, and know about their students. He proposes that schools introduce the idea of the case conference, as used by other professions, to support a collaborative culture and give teachers opportunities to learn from one another. In this model, teachers present a narrative about a particular subject they teach. The narrative includes the teacher's methodology for presenting that subject to students, the teacher's intentions for a particular lesson, any concerns or issues that came up during the lesson, and the ways in which the teacher addressed those concerns. The case conference establishes a structure that ensures collaboration as the norm. It suggests that teachers possess knowledge to share and that they should ask for help when they need it. It acknowledges teaching as a challenging and difficult job that requires collaborative efforts. Teaching, suggests Rosenholtz (1991) should be viewed as a difficult job in which asking for help is the norm. The case format institutionalizes this concept. Kelsey uses the case manager system to facilitate teachers working together to help the child achieve to the best of his/her ability.

A fourth shift requires bringing issues of trust to the forefront. More than staff parties and community-building activities such as ropes courses, discourse on trust needs to have a prominent position in schools. This entails commitment on the part of the principal and staff, as it is easier to change curriculum every year than to talk about deep

trust. As Meier (2002) discovered in opening her second school, developing trust takes time as well as the structure and leadership to allow trust to develop. Trust needs to be part of the everyday language of the school. Teachers need to talk about trusting one another and making themselves vulnerable, and administrators need to trust teacher knowledge and expertise, and to give teachers freedom to make mistakes that will facilitate learning. At Kelsey, strong bonds between veteran teachers and novice teachers helped establish a feeling of trust. Novice teachers were expected to make mistakes and veteran teachers provided the support and learning.

Finally, I can imagine a school with a true “shared soil” (Heller, 1997, p. 161). In such a school, learning is truly the focus. Teachers, students, and administrators become messy with the “clay” of learning (Barth, 1990, p. 94). I believe, based on this research, that the Kelsey School provides this model. Teachers, students, and administrators allow mistakes without judgment. There are times for self-reflection, chances to receive feedback from peers, and ownership for all students who are not labeled in a deficit manner. In this way, the school becomes a true learning organization. In this shift, a genuine comprehensive collaborative teacher culture emerges. It ignores the barriers created by traditional school structures and, instead, exemplifies what teachers and principals can achieve when given autonomy, tools, and support to become “messy” with learning.

6.4 Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on only a short period of time in a child’s life. Additional information could be gained from a longitudinal study that would follow students from elementary school, through a program like Kelsey’s that appears to match the child’s

educational needs, and then beyond, to see how these students fared after leaving Kelsey. Additionally, research on programs similar to Kelsey that exist within a public school setting would add another layer of information about how these kind of programs might be replicated to help more children find success. Finally, I did not focus on teaching methodology. Clearly, this is an area that deserves increased attention for this student population.

6.5. My Surprise

It was with great surprise that I came to understand my own learning issues through the process of researching these students' educational journeys. I find irony in the serendipitous fashion in which both these students and I discovered our learning issues. I feel a sense of compassion for the students in my study and others in the same situation, as I understand the labels, limitations, and expectations that others place on us and that we also place on ourselves. It is this passion that drove my research. In my case, as with many others today as well as years ago, my learning issues were not identified or addressed until later in my educational career. Even then, I probably never received the services that would directly address and remediate my language disability. I am like many adults and children today, who never understood that our struggles with language were not related to intelligence and, in fact, could be remediated. This information deserves more attention, as does the undue suffering of so many children in school who are unable to access the education provided, often as the result of labels that prevent them from getting the education they deserve. Through this study, I hope to draw attention to these children and to how one school's model might illuminate a possible solution.

References

- Access. (2010). In Merriam-Webster's online dictionary. *Retrieved January 28, 2010, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/access>.*
- Ames, C. (1992). Classrooms: Goals, structures, and student motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 84*(3), 261-271.
- Ancess, J. (2001). Teacher learning at the intersection of school learning. In A. Lieberman & L. Miller (Eds.), *Teachers caught in the action: Professional development that matters*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Angelides, P., & Ainscow, M. (2000). Making sense of the role of culture in school improvement. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 11*(2), 145-163.
- Armstrong, T. (2010). *Neurodiversity: Discovering the extraordinary gifts of autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other brain differences*. Philadelphia: Da Capo.
- Arons, S. (1983). *Compelling belief: The culture of American schooling*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Ashton, P., & Webb, R. (1986). *Making a difference: Teachers' sense of efficacy and student achievement*. White Plains, New York: Longman Inc.
- Assistance to States for the Education of Children with Disabilities. (2011). *34 C.F.R. pt. 300*.
- At a glance*. (2008). Landmark School.
- Ayers, W. (2001). *To teach: The journey of a teacher*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ball, & Harry. (2010). Assessment and the policing of the norm. In C. Dudley-Marling & A. Gurn (Eds.), *Myth of the normal cure* (pp. 105-122). New York: Peter Lang.

- Ballenger, C. (1992). Because you like us: The language of control. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(2), 199-208.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman.
- Barnard, A., & Spencer, J., (ed.). (1996). Glossary. In A. S. Barnard, J (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of social and cultural anthropology* (pp. 600). New York: Routledge.
- Barringer, M. (2009). The science of learning. *Principal Leadership*, 9(8), 36.
- Barth, R. S. (1990). *Improving schools from within: Teachers, parents, and principals can make the difference*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Berg, B. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. New York: Pearson.
- Biddle, B. J., & Berliner, D. C. (2002). Small class size and its effects. *Educational Leadership*, 59(5), 12.
- Bjerke, B. (1999). *Business leadership and culture: National management styles in the global economy*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing Unlimited.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In J. Karabel & A. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. 487-511). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in Schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

- Charney, R. S. (1997). *Teaching Children to Care: Management in the responsive classroom*. Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.
- Cheng, Y. C. (1993). Profiles of organizational culture and effective schools. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 4*(2), 85-110.
- The Civil Rights Act of 1964. (2004). *Human Rights, 31*(3), 12.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1993). *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cole, R. W., & Schlechty, P. C. (1993). Teachers as trailblazers in restructuring. *Education Digest, 58*(6), 5-8.
- Crawford, F. A., & Bartolome, L. (2010). Labeling and treating linguistic minority students with disabilities as deficient and outside the normal curve: A pedagogy of exclusion. In C. Dudley-Marling & A. Gurn (Eds.), *The myth of the normal curve*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Creswell, J. (2003). *Research Design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications.
- Curriculum*. (2008). Landmark School.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1988). Policy and professionalism. In A. Lieberman (Ed.), *Building a Professional Culture in Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *The right to learn: A blueprint for creating schools that work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Darling-Hammond, L. (2004). "Separate but equal" to "No Child Left Behind": The collision of new standards and old inequalities. In D. Meier & G. Wood (Eds.), *Many children left behind* (pp. 3-32). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Davies, D. (2002). The 10th school revisited: Are school/family/community partnerships on the reform agenda now? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83(5), 388-392.
- Deal. (1993). The culture of schools. In M. Sashkin & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *Educational leadership and school culture*. Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Publishing Corporation.
- Deal, & Kennedy. (1983). Culture and school performance. *Educational Leadership*, 40(5), 14-15.
- Deal, & Peterson. (1999). *Shaping school culture: The heart of leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (1990). *The principal's role in shaping school culture*. Washington D. C. : Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Definitions of Anthropological Terms*. (2006). Retrieved January 4, 2007, from Oregon State Web site: <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/anth370/gloss.html>.
- Delamont, S. (2002). *Fieldwork in educational settings*. New York: Routledge.
- Delpit, L. (1996). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: New Press.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (1994). Introduction: Entering the field of qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- DePlanty, J., Coulter-Kern, R., & Duchane, K. (2007). Perceptions of parent involvement in academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Research*, 100(6), 361-367.

- Dreeben, R. (1968). *On what is learned in schools*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Dudley-Marling, C., & Gurn, A. (2010). Introduction: Living on the boundaries of normal. In C. Dudley-Marling & A. Gurn (Eds.), *The myth of the normal curve*. New York: Peter Lang.
- DuFour, R. (2003). 'Collaboration lite' puts student achievement on a starvation diet. *Journal of Staff Development*, 24(4), 63-64.
- DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.
- Dweck, C., S., & Leggett, E., L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review*, 95(2), 256-273.
- Dyson, A. H., & Genishi, C. (2005). *On the case: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Eisenhart, M., & Howe, K. (Eds.). (1992). *Validity in educational research*. New York: Academic Press.
- Eisner, E. W. (1991). *The enlightened eye*. New York: Macmillan.
- Elementary and middle school programs*. (2008). Landmark School.
- Epstein, J. (1987). What principals should know about parent involvement. *Principal Leadership*, 66, 6-9.
- Evans, R. (1996). *The human side of school change: Reform, resistance, and the real-life problems of innovation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Ferri, B. (2010). A dialogue we've yet to have: Race and disability studies. In C. Dudley-Marling & A. Gurn (Eds.), *The myth of the normal curve*. New York: Peter Lang.

- Fink, R., & Samuels, S. J. (2007). *Inspiring reading success: Interest and motivation in an age of high-stakes testing*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Finn, J. D., Gerber, S. B., Achilles, C. M., & Boyd-Zaharias, J. (2001). The enduring effects of small classes. *Teachers College Record*, 103(1), 145-183.
- Fletcher, J. M., Lyon, G. R., Fuchs, L. S., & Barnes, M. A. (2007). *Learning disabilities: From identification to intervention*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Frankel, H. (2009). A child with a dyslexia diagnosis gets extra classroom support. Are canny parents playing the system? *Times Educational Supplement*(4833), 10-17.
- Franz Boas. (2005). Retrieved November 19, 2006 from the Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia (6th ed.).
<http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=%22franz+boas%22+concept+culture&btnG=Google+Search>).
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy and civic courage*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Fullan, M., & Hargreaves, A. (1996). *What's worth fighting for in your school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gabrieli, J. D. E. (2009). Dyslexia: A new synergy between education and cognitive neuroscience. *Science*, 325(5938), 280-283.
- Gallagher, D. (2010). Educational researchers and the making of normal people. In C. Dudley-Marling & A. Gurn (Eds.), *The myth of the normal curve*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Garate-Serafini, T. (n.d.). Empowering choices and empowering transitions projects. Retrieved May 16, 2009 from <http://sdsp.uncc.edu/uic.asp>.

- Gasbarra, P., Johnson, J., & Public, A. (2008). A matter of trust: Ten key insights from recent public opinion research on attitudes about education among Hispanic parents, students and young adults: Public Agenda. Retrieved August, 2011 from <http://www.publicagenda.org>.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gelb, S. (2010). Evolutionary anxiety, monstrosity, and the birth of normality. In C. Dudley-Marling & A. Gurn (Eds.), *The myth of the normal curve*. New York: Peter Lang.
- George, P. (2000). The evolution of middle schools. *Educational Leadership*, 58(4), 40-45.
- Gitlin, A., & Margonis, F. (1995). The political aspect of reform: Teacher resistance as good sense. *American Journal of Education*, 103(4), 377-405.
- Glazzard, J. (2010). The impact of dyslexia on pupils' self-esteem. *Support for Learning*, 25(2), 63-69.
- Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Goffee, R., & Jones, G. (1998). *The character of a corporation: How your company's culture can make or break your business*. Hammersmith, London: Harper Collins Business.
- Gurn, A. (2010). Conclusion: Re/visioning the ideological imagination of (special) education. In C. Dudley-Marling & A. Gurn (Eds.), *The myth of the normal curve*. New York: Peter Lang.

- Haigler, K. O., Harlow, C., O'Connor, O., & Campbell, A. (1994). *Literacy behind prison walls: Profiles of the prison population from the National Adult Literacy Survey.*: Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times.* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (1992). Introduction. In A. Hargreaves & M. Fullan (Eds.), *Understanding teacher development.* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Harris, C. (2008). *A brief history of Landmark School.* Unpublished manuscript.
- Harry, B., & Klingner, J. (2006). *Why are so many minority students in special education?* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Heller, C. (1997). *Until we are strong together: Women writers in the tenderloin.* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hillard, A. (2003). No mystery: Closing the achievement gap between Africans and excellence. In *Young, gifted, and black: Promoting high achievement among African-American students.* Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hoelt, F., Hernandez, A., McMillon, G., Taylor-Hill, H., Martindale, J. L., Meyler, A. (2006). Neural basis of dyslexia: A comparison between dyslexic and nondyslexic children equated for reading ability. *Journal of Neuroscience*, 26(42), 10700-10708.
- hooks, b., & Mesa-Bains, A. (2006). *Homegrown: Engaged cultural criticism.* Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Huberman, M. (1988). Teacher careers and school improvement. *Journal of curriculum studies*, 20(2), 119-132.

- Humphrey, N., & Mullins, P. (2002). Self-concept and self-esteem in developmental dyslexia. *Journal of Research in Special Education Needs*, 2(2), 1-12.
- Jansen, G., & Peshkin, A. (1992). Subjectivity in qualitative research. In M. LeCompte, W. Millroy & J. Preissle (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research in education*. New York: Academic Press.
- Kirk, J., & Reid, G. (2001). An examination of the relationship between dyslexia and offending in young people and the implications for the training system. *Dyslexia* 7(2), 77-84.
- Kohn, A. (2004). NCLB and the effort to privatize public education. In D. Meier & G. Wood (Eds.), *Many Children Let Behind* (pp. 79-100). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York: Crown
- Kozol, J. (2000). An unequal education. *School Library Journal*, 46(5), 46-49. Retrieved January 6, 2010, from ERIC database.
- Krovetz, M., & Arriaza, G. (2006). *Collaborative teacher leadership: How teachers can foster equitable schools*. Thousand Oaks, California: Crowin Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3.
- Lareau, A., & Horvat, E. M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education*, 72(1), 37-53.
- Lavoie, R. (2008). The teacher's role in home/school communication : Everybody wins. Retrieved April 29, 2009 from www.ldonline.org/article/28021.

- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2003). *The essential conversation: What parents and teachers can learn from each other*. New York: Random House.
- Lawrence Lightfoot, S. (1983). *The good high school: Portraits of character and culture*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- Lee, J. (2002). Racial and ethnic achievement gap trends: Reversing the progress toward equity? *Educational Researcher*, 31(1), 3-12.
- Lewis, A. C. (2002). School reform and professional development. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83(7), 488.
- Lieberman, A., & Miller, L. (2008 a). Developing capacities. In A. Lieberman & L. Miller (Eds.), *Teachers in professional communities* (pp. 18-28). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lieberman, A., & Miller, L. (2008b). Introduction. In A. Lieberman & L. Miller (Eds.), *Teachers in professional communities* (pp. 1-3). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lipsitz, J. (1984). *Successful schools for young adolescents*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books.
- Little, J. W. (1990). The persistence of privacy: Autonomy and initiative in teachers' professional relations. *Teachers College Record*, 91(4), 509-536.
- Little, J. W. (1990a). Teachers as colleagues. In A. Lieberman (Ed.), *Schools as collaborative cultures: Creating the future now*. New York: Falmer Press.
- Lortie, D. C. (1975/2002). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Lyon, G. R., Sally, E. S., & Bennett, A. S. (2003). Defining dyslexia, comorbidity, teachers' knowledge of language and reading a definition of dyslexia. *Annals of Dyslexia, 53*, 1.
- Maccartney, B. (2010). Living on the edge of the normal curve: It's like a smack in the head. In C. Dudley-Marling & A. Gurn (Eds.), *The myth of the normal curve*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Macedo, D., & Marti, T. S. (2010). Situating labeling within an ideological framework. In C. Dudley-Marling & A. Gurn (Eds.), *The myth of the normal curve*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Maehr, M. L., & Midgley, C. (1996). *Transforming school cultures*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Mapp, K. (2003). Having their say: Parents describe how and why they are involved in their children's education. *School Community Journal, 13*(1), 35-64.
- Margaret Mead. (2005). Retrieved November 19, 2006 from the Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia (6th ed.).
<http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=%22margaret+mead%22+concept+culture&btnG=Google+Search>).
- Martin, B. (1997). Culturally responsive teaching. A review of research and literature. (*ERIC Document No. ED408387*). Retrieved May 1, 2008, from ERIC database.
- McDermott, R. (2001). A century of Margaret Mead. *Teachers College Record, 103*(5), 843-868. Retrieved December 6, 2006 from Academic Search Premier database.
- McLaren, P. (2003). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Boston: Pearson Education.

- Mclaughlin, M., & Talbert, J. (2001). *Professional communities: And the work of high school teaching*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mead, M. (1963). Our educational emphases in primitive perspective. In G. Spindler (Ed.), *Education and culture*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Meier, D. (2002). *In schools we trust: Creating communities of learning in an era of testing and standardization*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mendler, A. (2001). *Connecting with students*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Menuey, B. P. (2005). Teachers' perceptions of professional incompetence and barriers to the dismissal process. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 18(4), 309-325.
- Moody, K., Holzer, C., Roman, M., Freeman, D., Haynes, M., & James, T. (2000). Prevalence of dyslexia among Texas prison inmates. *Texas Medicine*, 96(6), 69-75.
- Moore Johnson, S., Birkeland, S., Donaldson, M., Kardos, S., Kauffman, D., Liu, E. (2004). *Finders and keepers: Helping new teachers survive and thrive in our schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nias, J. (1985). Reference groups in primary teaching: Talking, listening and identity. In S. Ball & I. Goodson (Eds.), *Teachers' lives and careers*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Nias, J., Southworth, G., & Yeomans, R. (1989). *Staff relationships in the primary school: A study of organizational cultures*. England: Cassell Educational Limited.

- Nord, C., & West, J. (2001). Factors associated with fathers' and mothers' involvement in their children's schools. *Education Statistics Quarterly*, 3(2), 40-43.
- Nugent, M. (2008). Services for children with dyslexia--the child's experience. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 24(3), 189-206.
- Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Olson, K. (2009). *Wounded by school: Recapturing the joy in learning and standing up to old school culture*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Perry, T. (2003). Up from the parched earth: Toward a theory of African-American achievement *Young, gifted, and black: Promoting high achievement among African-American students*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Raider-Roth, M. (2005). *Trusting what you know: The high stakes of classroom relationships*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rathyen, C. (2004). Providing safety in a multi-cultural, multi-ability classroom. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 71(1), 52-55.
- Ready, T., Edley, C., Jr., Snow, C. E., & National Academy of Sciences - National Research Council, W. D. C. (2002). *Achieving High Educational Standards for All: Conference Summary*.
- Reiff, M., & Ballin, A. (2010). *What do adult graduate students say about student self, instructors, and course content/process?* Paper presented at the National Adult and Continuing Education Conference, Clearwater Beach, Florida.
- Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Renchler, R. (1992). Student motivation, school culture, and academic achievement: What school leaders can do. *Trends and Issues paper. ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. (ERIC Document No. ED351741)*. Retrieved May 1, 2008, from ERIC database.
- Rodriguez, R. (1982). *Hunger of memory: The education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York: Random House Inc.
- Rogers, R., & Mancini, M. (2010). The discursive pathways of ADHD. In C. Dudley-Marling & A. Gurn (Eds.), *The myth of the normal curve*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Rosenholtz, S. (1990). Education Reform Strategies: Will they increase teacher commitment? In A. Lieberman (Ed.), *Schools as collaborative cultures: Creating the future now* (pp. 79-101). Bristol, PA: Falmer Press.
- Rosenholtz, S. (1991). *Teachers' workplace*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rozalski, M., Stewart, A., & Miller, J. (2010). How to determine the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. *Exceptionality, 18*(3), 151-163.
- Rutter, M., Maughan, B., Mortimore, P., Ouston, J., & Smith, A. (1979). *Fifteen thousand hours*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Salend, S. J. (1990). *Effective mainstreaming*. New York: Macmillan.
- Saphier, J., & King, M. (1985). Good seeds grow in strong cultures. *Educational Leadership, 42*(6), 67-75.
- Sarason, S., B. (1990). *The predictable failure of educational reform: Can we change course before it's too late?* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Sarason, S., B. (1996). *Revisiting the culture of the school and the problem of change*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Schein, E. H. (2004). *Organizational culture and leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schlechty, P., C. (1990). Schools for the twenty-first century: The conditions for invention. In A. Lieberman (Ed.), *Schools as Collaborative Cultures: Creating the Future Now*. New York: The Falmer Press.
- Schlechty, P., C. (2008). No community left behind. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89(8), 552-559.
- Schunk, D. (1985). Self-efficacy and classroom learning. *Psychology in the Schools*, 22, 208-223.
- Schwarz, P. (2006). *From disability to possibility: The power of inclusive classrooms*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Sergiovanni, T. (1994). *Building community in schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Shaywitz, S. (2003). *Overcoming dyslexia: A new and complete science-based program for reading problems at any level*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Shulman, L. (2004). *The wisdom of practice: Essays on teaching, learning, and learning to teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sizer, T., R. (1996). *Horace's hope: What works for the American high school*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Snowling, M. J., Adams, J. W., Bowyer-Crane, C., & Tobin, V. (2000). Levels of literacy among juvenile offenders: The incidence of specific reading difficulties. *Criminal Behaviour & Mental Health*, 10(4), 229.
- Spindler, G. (Ed.). (1982). *Doing the ethnography of schooling: Educational anthropology in action*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Spotlight on language-based learning*. (2010). Landmark School.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Stephanie, S. D., Adam, K. W., David, B. G., Elizabeth, M. A., & et al. (2006). Suicidality, school dropout, and reading problems among adolescents. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 39*(6), 507-515. Retrieved January 6, 2010, from ProQuest database.
- Stolp, S. (1994). Leadership for school culture. *ERIC Digest, Number 91. (ERIC Document No. ED370198)*. Retrieved May 8, 2006 from ERIC database.
- Svensson, I., Lundberg, I., & Jacobson, C. (2001). The prevalence of reading and spelling difficulties among inmates of institutions for compulsory care of juvenile delinquents. *Dyslexia (10769242), 7*(2), 62-76.
- Tschannen-Morgan, M. (2004). *Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Valencia, R. (Ed.). (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London: Falmer.
- Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: The University of Chicago.
- Varenne, H., & McDermott, R. (1999). *Successful failure: The school America builds. .* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Waller, W. (1932/1961). *The sociology of teaching*. New York: Russell & Russell.
- Watson, M. (2003). *Learning to trust*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wehlage, G. G. (1986). At-risk students and the need for high school reform. *Education, 107*(1), 18-28.
- Wehlage, G. G., Newmann, F. M., & Secada, W. G. (1996). Standards for authentic achievement and pedagogy. In F. M. N. a. Associates (Ed.), *Authentic*

- Achievement: Restructuring schools for intellectual quality*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- White, E. A., Wepner, S. B., & Wetzel, D. C. (2003). Accessible education through assistive technology. *T.H.E. Journal*, 30(7), 24-32. Retrieved January 25, 2010, from Research Library.
- Who should apply*. (2008). Landmark School.
- Wigfield, A., Eccles, J., S., & Rodriguez, D. (1998). The development of children's motivation in school contexts. *Review of Research in Education*, 23, 73-118.
- Wilcox, K. (1982). Ethnography as a methodology and its application to the study of schooling: A review. In G. Spindler (Ed.), *Doing the ethnography of schooling: Educational anthropology in action*. (pp. 454-456). Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.
- Wiles, J., Bondi, J., & Tillier Wiles, M. (2006). *The essential middle school*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education.
- Williams, A., Prestage, S., & Bedward, J. (2001). Individualism to collaboration: The significance of teacher culture to the introduction of newly qualified teachers. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 27(3), 253-267.
- Willis, A. I. (2010). Miner's canaries and boiling frogs: Fiction and facts about normalcy in educational and reading assessment. In C. Dudley-Marling & A. Gurn (Eds.), *The myth of the normal curve*. New York: Peter Lang.

- Winzer, M. (2002). The inclusion movement: Review and reflections on reform in special education. In M. Winzer & K. Mazurek (Eds.), *Special education in the 21st century: Issues of inclusion and reform*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.
- Wlodkowski, R. J., & Ginsberg, M. B. (1995). A Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching. *Educational Leadership*, 53(1), 17.
- Wolf, M. (2007). *Proust and the squid: The story and science of the reading brain*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Wood, G. (1992). *Schools that work*. New York: Penguin Group.

Appendices

Appendix A: Letter to Parents

Dear Parents

January 10, 2009

I am writing to tell you about my doctoral research in education which I will be commencing at Landmark. I started my doctoral program three years ago with an interest in school culture, and I began working at Landmark last year as a part-time counselor. Since arriving, I have been consistently impressed by the fondness with which students embrace the school. Therefore, I began to explore the possibility of doing my research at Landmark. I have presented my proposal to my program supervisors at Lesley University and to Landmark's own internal Research Review Board prior to initiating my project.

My research will involve a qualitative case study of a few students who have found their way to Landmark. I am specifically interested in finding students who acknowledge difficult schooling experiences before coming to Landmark but are now finding success at Landmark. I define "difficult school experiences" as experiences that have led students to develop negative images of themselves as learners (as noted by themselves, their parents, or teachers), to focus on their limitations rather than their strengths, and to articulate negative descriptions of school. In contrast, I define successful school experiences as those where students focus on positive feelings of themselves as learners. Success relates to the students' self-confidence in their ability to learn. The study aims to understand the student's experience by examining the many facets that combine in unique ways to create the student's school life.

To identify students' appropriate for the study I will ask teachers, parents, and administrators for recommendations. In any case, I will approach you the parents first, to explain the research and assess your interest in participating in the study. During that conversation, I will explain to you what interviews and observations would be involved should you and your child agree to participate. I will acquire both parent and student consent, and participation can be discontinued at any point. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study using only pseudonyms for both people and places. My intention is to start my research as soon as possible and to stop at the end of the school year.

I welcome any questions or suggestions for subjects from parents regarding my research. I can be reached through the school e-mail or by phone.

Sincerely,

Amy Ballin, M.S.T., M.S.W., C.A.G.S.
Counselor – Landmark School
Doctoral Candidate – Lesley University

Appendix B: Student Information Form

Principal Investigator
Amy Ballin
Lesley University
617-349-8663

Co-Principal Investigator:
Caroline Heller, Ph.D.
Lesley University

Description of the Research: In this research we hope to learn about your life at the Landmark School. In order to do the research we will ask you, your teachers and your parents questions. We will follow you during your school day to see what your day is like and we will look at your schoolwork and records. .

Participation: If you decide that you no longer want to be in the research study, you can stop at any time

Confidentiality: We will not use your name or the name of the school in the study. We will not tell anyone about you.

I have discussed with _____ the above information and I have asked whether any questions remain. I have answered these questions to the best of my ability.

Date:

Principal Investigator's Signature

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Principal Investigator
 Amy Ballin
 Lesley University
 617-349-8663

Co-Principal Investigator:
 Caroline Heller, Ph.D.
 Lesley University

Description of the Research: The study aims to understand the school experience of four to six students by examining the many facets that combine in unique ways to create the student’s school life. The goal of the research is to follow the students’ educational journey by exploring the dual lens of the students’ own perceived histories as learners and their sense of culture of the Landmark School. The research will involve extensive observations, examinations of school artifacts including student records and interviews of teachers, parents, students, case managers and administrators.

Participation: If you decide that you no longer want to be in the research study, you can stop at any time.

Confidentiality: We will disguise all names when we transcribe conversations and in all observations. We will not tell anyone about you, your child, your school, or your family. The school name will be disguised as well. No facts that might identify you, your family or the school will appear when we present this study or publish its results.

I have discussed with _____ the above information and I have asked whether any questions remain. I have answered these questions to the best of my ability.

Date: _____
 Principal Investigator’s Signature

I am 18 years of age or older. The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I agree that I will participate in this study.

Date: _____ Name: _____
 Signature of participant

Date: _____ Name: _____
 Signature of witness

Date: _____ Name: _____
 Signature of principal investigator

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.