Lessons from Children on the Moral Underpinnings of an Education Policy: Interpretations of NCLB

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Abstract: Children’s voices are rarely heard in the policy debates in education. Drawing on data from a focus group interview with three fourth grade students at a California “underperforming” school, this article attempts to demonstrate the power of listening carefully to children’s perceptions of policy enactments. Children reflect on high stakes testing, on their principal’s approach to “motivating” them, and on a major staff turnover, essentially a “reconstitution” that occurred at their school. A theme emerging from children’s narratives is the importance of community: this analysis, through listening to children’s voices, makes clear that some aspects of NCLB undermine local efforts at developing and maintaining strong, inclusive school communities.

Introduction

There is a delightful children’s book entitled “Testing Miss Malarkey” (Finchler, 2000) in which a bemused elementary student describes how everybody at his school starts to go a little “crazy” when the big annual “IPTU” test time approaches. On one page, our narrator is listening at the door to a PTA meeting in which parents are asking questions such as, “My son is gifted in a variety of areas. Will this test hinder his Ivy League (read: elite college) chances?” and, “Should I be concerned about performance anxiety?” and, “How will the test affect real estate prices?” As these adult comments emerge from the doorway, he turns to a classmate and remarks, “What the heck are they talking about?”

Children demonstrate astounding insight as they stretch to make sense of the adult universe. Yet, we don’t often ask questions related to this insight. What sense are children making of the many standardized tests they are being asked to take, of the high stakes that are being placed on them and on their schools and teachers, and of the new policies being instituted and the many changes these are causing in schools? It stands to reason that their interpretations will in some way impact their understanding of themselves and thereby influence their learning.
In the U.S. President George W. Bush’s 2000 renewal and revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, otherwise known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), signaled an unprecedented emphasis at the national level in education policy on uniform academic standards in the public schools. Teachers, schools, and districts are held accountable for meeting those standards, and there is heavy emphasis on annual standardized testing as a way to quantify schools’ and districts’ successes and failures. While the debate rages in many circles as to the rationales for these policy shifts, their wisdom, and their efficacy (Cohen & Rogers, 2000; Skrla & Scheurich, 2004; Valenzuela, 2005), policy-makers and education leaders alike sometimes forget to notice the people for whom all this work is purportedly being done: the children. Rarely are children’s voices heard in these conversations, and if they are, they are often dismissed – as cute, or disconcerting, or unfortunate, but ultimately irrelevant.

And yet, what use will “scientifically based instruction” and “data-driven decision making” and “high standards” be, if children ignore our lessons or systematically undermine our goals in their efforts to meet their own, unexplored (at least by adults) ends? As definitions of acceptable behavior in school narrow, as academic expectations creep into younger and younger grades, and as the numbers of children diagnosed with “learning disabilities" or “attention deficit disorder" soars, we have a lot to learn from the children’s own perspective on these challenges.

Researchers have, to a certain extent, asked teachers and school leaders about their views on policy (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Palmer & Garcia, 2000; Wright & Choi, 2005) We have asked parents and members of the larger community (Public Education Network, 2006; Stritikus & Garcia, 2005). And we have looked to various research methodologies to help us examine the effects of these new policies, making vociferous commentary about the influences these policies are having on our schools and on the children (Harris, 2006; Kohn, 2000; McNeil, 2000; Meier & Wood, 2004; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Ohanian, 1999; Rentner, 2006; Valenzuela, 2005). All of this is valuable in the larger dialogue in helping us evaluate the impact of our decisions on children. This article will attempt to demonstrate that children’s voices themselves can enrich and should alter our perspectives on policy.

Children at all levels of their education have spoken out about high stakes tests, even going so far in some cases as to boycott them (For an example of a public testimony by an elementary student who boycotted the Texas TAKS, see Zamora & Valenzuela, 2007). Valenzuela’s (1999) in-depth ethnographic exploration of a Houston high school gives voice to youth who face a high stakes English-only test for high school graduation, and (as a side effect) massive ninth grade retention for failure to pass one class. The bleak outlook of
some of these youth is breathtaking. However, there has been little attention in research to younger children’s voices.

Even as they hover on the margins of our debates, listening to us at the doorways of parent/teacher meetings, overhearing us at the dinner table, or catching our discourses in the hallways or on the evening news, children absorb it all. They wonder, they worry, they reassure one another, and they act within their world to make the most of things for themselves and those they love. This action is at the heart of their learning, or of their “not-learning,” (Kohl, 1994) the lessons we have planned for them. With insight into their ways of making sense of policy, we can better help them navigate schools successfully. Ultimately (although beyond the scope of this brief exploration), we can most likely learn ways to improve policy that serves children by actually listening to them.

Consider, for example, this exchange, between myself and a fourth grade student at a school that is about to enter “Year 5” of NCLB’s “School Improvement” owing to its not having sufficiently improved test scores among the African American and English Language Learner (ELL) subgroups of students. (Please bear with me as I share this brief example; I will provide many more details about the school and students shortly.) This is a school that, while the accountability marker assigned to it is “Underperforming,” has held a strong positive reputation in at least some of the many communities it serves in this diverse region of Northern California. The school is housed in a brand new facility with a unique “village-center” architecture that has earned praise from all sides. It includes a two-way immersion language program with a long waiting list, and a grant-funded science magnet program that is well-respected throughout the district. There is much discussion in the adult discourses surrounding this school, both from parents and teachers involved in the school, and from community leaders and interested folks throughout the small city, about whether or not the school is worthy of its negative accountability label. This child has his own opinion (all names are pseudonyms):

James: Isn’t this going to be year five, if we fail the test?
D (researcher): Yeah, what do you think that means?
Maria: Yeah!
James: It means I’m probably going to leave the school if the government takes over.
D: Do you think the government’s going to take over this school?
James: No it’s probably not going to, because like, we’re not that bad.

“If we fail the test,” says James, even though he himself will likely emerge with a stellar score (he is a high-scoring child). He is referencing the adult discourse of accountability, which imposes blanket labels onto schools. If any subgroups
of the school fail to improve enough to meet their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), the entire school has “failed.” It appears that children, like adults in the public forum, have learned that their schools will be defined, judged, and labeled based on the cumulative standardized test scores of themselves and their classmates. Note also that James is well aware of his privilege as a white middle class student; he confesses that if the government takes over the school, which is obviously bad news, he will leave. He knows that he has other options. Yet, while James confides that “we’re not that bad,” there is definitely some concern behind his bravado. He appears to be struggling, as many in his community are, to understand why the government is threatening to take over his school, and trying to come to terms with the fact that he might need to leave the school, even as he continues to refer to it as “we,” and even as he has just admitted (right before the quoted comment above) that his current teacher is his all time favorite.

This article explores the perspectives and ideas that emerge in one thirty-minute conversation with three young recipients of the policy enactments of NCLB. In so doing, it will attempt to demonstrate the ways in which students’ own constructions of school reform matter in the ultimate enactment of that reform in their schools, their classrooms, and their lives. Ultimately, I hope to underscore the importance of listening, not just to the broad-brush research or public opinion that currently shapes policy in schools, nor even just to parents, teachers, and school leaders, but to the young students themselves.

The Study

I am a white woman, a bilingual educator who spent a year working as the “English Language Development Lead Teacher” at James’s school while I was a doctoral student in education at a large public institution nearby. This job had me involved in supporting classroom teachers with their ELLs, and working on a district-wide team to clarify and enrich programs to support ELL students. After one year on the staff, I spent a second year (2002-03) as a participant observer in the school collecting data for my dissertation project. I focused in particular on James’s classroom, at that time a second grade (for children between 7-8-years old) dual (language) immersion classroom. I was interested in issues of discourse and power in dual immersion settings, and my research questions involved examining the exchanges of linguistic capital during conversations in the classroom (Bourdieu, 1991). Yet, I quickly realized that the school wide context was important to this endeavor, and I conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with teachers, both in this classroom and others, the principal, other school leaders, and with the parents of seven children from the second grade classroom where I was observing. As I transcribed and analyzed my data, and eventually wrote up my findings, the school plunged into increasing accountability turmoil.
A small, diverse urban elementary school with approximately 350 students, the school’s racial composition included approximately 28 percent white students, 30 percent African American students, and 38 percent Latino students. At the time I chose the school for the original study, it was highly regarded in the community and included a range of curricular programs. The two way immersion language program, with one classroom at each grade level offered a 90:10 percent Spanish-English program, boasted a long wait-list and included a number of children of school district employees. The environmental science magnet program, funded by grants, boasted a fully equipped laboratory for hands-on science staffed by a certified teacher specialist that was visited weekly by every child in the school. The school had exciting garden and cooking classes that focused on nutrition, and an onsite counseling/support program for children and families, also funded by grants. Staff turnover was very low; many staff members had been at the school for fifteen years or longer, and had weathered many changes including the construction of the new facility. Overall, there was a great deal of pride in the school and in the efforts staff and community had made to serve the children’s needs.

The negative accountability label of “underperforming,” and/or the principal’s reaction to it, wrought some changes at the school in ensuing years, including low morale, loss of staff and families, and a great deal of negative attention from the community and the press. A new emphasis on “accountability,” and its accompanying focus on math and reading, threatens the science, cooking and garden programs. Tensions came to a head in April 2004, when a majority of the teachers signed a “letter of no confidence” in the principal, and submitted it to the district superintendent. In May 2004, the superintendent stepped in to mediate the conflict. She sided with the principal, and decided to “forcibly transfer” four teachers. A number of others left apparently in solidarity, resulting in approximately 50% staff turnover in a single year.

The focus-group interview that will serve as the main source of data for this article was part of a follow-up study conducted in April 2005, one year after the transfer event. The questions that drove the follow-up study concerned the effects of the negative accountability labeling at the school. Overall, the follow-up study involved open-ended interviews with three parents, three teachers, the principal, and one focus-group interview with three fourth-grade students (former second-grade two way immersion students and participants in my original study).

I had been out of the area for a year and a half, maintaining contact only tenuously through periodic emails and conversations with one teacher and one parent, when I decided to return to follow up on the events at the school. Therefore, the details I obtained in the brief period in which I returned to the school in April 2005 are not sufficient to draw sweeping conclusions. There are
gaps in what I came to know about the events that had taken place at the school, and there are still many questions in my mind (as there surely will be in the reader’s) about the connections that may be drawn between the events at the school and the larger policies influencing the school. Yet, the assertions made by the children in this focus-group interview were so striking to me, it seems worth making the attempt at analysis, even with the limited data available. Erickson (1986) explains that small alterations in a school or classroom can make vast differences in the meaning-construction of those working and learning in that setting. Open-ended ethnographic interviews offered windows into the changing nature of context for education in this school and the ways that community members construct their understandings of teaching, learning, school improvement, accountability, and equity (Mischler, 1991; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The three children who participated in this interview are James, Nancy, and Maria (all pseudonyms). James is a middle-class white boy, the son of professionals who are highly involved in the school politics. As he mentions twice during the interview, his mother is in the Parent/Teacher Association. He has participated in the dual language program since kindergarten, works on or above grade level in both Spanish and English, and is a high achieving student particularly in reading and mathematics. His peers view him as academically oriented and competitive. Nancy is a middle-class biracial child of an African American mother and a white father, both professionals. Nancy has been at the school since kindergarten, but joined the dual immersion program in the first grade (she was in an English-only kindergarten class at the school). She performs at grade level in both English and Spanish in academic subjects, and is very social and popular among her peers. Maria is the daughter of Mexican immigrant working class parents. As a Spanish speaking participant in the dual immersion program since kindergarten, she has strong oral fluency in both languages, but her academic skills, particularly in English reading and mathematics (which is what is tested for high stakes in California), are below grade level. These three students were in a sense a sample of convenience, as they were the three whose parents had returned the permission slips by the time I arrived to conduct the study. Ideally I would have liked to involve more children in the study. Yet, as I had known the students in this class well two years previous, I knew that the three would also be relatively representative. There were children in the class whose backgrounds were similar to James’s, to Nancy’s, and to Maria’s. There were no children in the class from any other class, race or ethnic background.

Using the focus group discussion, I conducted a narrative analysis. A specific tradition within discourse analysis, narrative analysis examines the ways in which individuals define themselves and the boundaries and parameters of their social and cultural worlds within and through the stories they tell (Jaworski &
Narratives generally follow predictable structures, which according to the work of Labov (2003) often (although not always) include the following elements: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, and coda. They appear to at least include a plot, characters, and themes. Because of the subjective nature of narrative telling, more insight is generally offered into the storytellers and the contexts and purposes that govern them than into the objective events they relate. Looking at the stories the children told offered me insight into the children’s relationships with peers and adults in their contexts, and into their subjective experiences with the policies that shape their schooling.

As the ultimate arbiters of reform as it is enacted upon them, children offer us insight into the ways reforms function in schools. This article first examines adult framing of school reform, and then focuses on children’s interpretations of that reform. Real and imagined stakes associated with high stakes tests are discussed; children’s perceptions of the principal as exerting pressure on them to increase their test scores are examined; finally, children’s descriptions of the conflict generated by “reconstitution in April 2004 are included.

How High are the Stakes?

A key component of recent U.S. federal and state education policies is annual standardized testing Examinations of students in grades 2-8 in English language arts and in mathematics has been mandatory in California since 1999, when then-governor Gray Davis signed into law the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA), in many ways a precursor to the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. According to the PSAA, schools are given an Academic Performance Index (API) based primarily (although not entirely) on their students’ test scores. In addition, according to NCLB, schools that do not “make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)” (defined as raising test scores by a designated amount in all subgroups for which they have the minimum number of students) are assigned negative accountability labels. If a school continues to fall short of the requisite improvement, increasingly draconian consequences are imposed through a “school improvement” plan developed within the constraints of state and federal policy. Students are given the option to leave the school (although there are sometimes very few places students might go); the school is forced to “reconstitute,” meaning that the entire faculty is dissolved and a new one formed; and eventually, the school is threatened with “state takeover” and possibly transformed into a privately run charter school.

Thus far, all of the “high stakes” connected to standardized test scores in California’s elementary schools apply at the school level; no California policy, except the newly instituted High School Exit Exam (which was still in preparation at the time this study was being conducted), exerts high stakes on children or their individual teachers. Thus, high stakes are in a sense exerted on
the school community rather than the individual, despite the fact that they
depend upon the collection of individual test scores. There has been much talk,
however, of introducing individualized high stakes policies, and it is a topic of
much discussion and commentary in local newspapers and other public forums.
In Texas, very much the model for California’s high stakes policies, testing
carries high stakes for children at third and fifth grade: without a passing score
on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), Texas third and
fifth graders cannot advance to the next grade. There is also talk of exerting high
stakes on teachers by tying pay increases to the test scores of the students under
their supervision. Certainly, in an effort to encourage children to do their very
best on these tests, teachers and parents are guilty of emphasizing their
importance in sometimes vague and confusing ways.

I asked the children why annual standardized tests matter. Here is their
speculation:

D: This is a really different question now. Next week you all start testing.
   Why? Why do you have to take tests?
James: It’s a standardized test so it’s for the school. I’m personally deciding
   whether to fail it on purpose. I would because I hate this school, but
   I’m going to try hard because it goes on your like file, and it determines
   like how your college goes, and what job you get like if it’s a crummy
   one like Wal-Mart or something.
Nancy: Or McDonald’s, Mickie D’s!
   (laughter)
D: What do you all think? What do you all learn from the test?
Maria: I think it’s like what you learned and they want to see what you learned
   this year and if she’s had a really low score then maybe she’s going to
   get fired, but if she has a really high score that we have learned so far,
   then she’s probably going to stay at [this school].
James: I don’t think Miss J’s going to get fired. She’s been teaching for over
   15 years. She’s a really good teacher.
Nancy: I don’t think the tests have to do with the teachers. They might because
   um it shows how much she’s been teaching us and how good we
   understand it. I don’t know; I’m not sure!

The debate that ensues above about whether Maria’s fear is true or not is never
quite resolved. The children are unsure how high the stakes really are. Overall,
in this excerpt, the following dangerous-feeling high stakes are offered as
possibilities:

- The tests are “for the school” and therefore if I “fail it on purpose” I am
damaging the school.
- The tests “go on your file” and can have tremendous power over our
futures, including college entrance and job prospects.
- The tests are to see “what you learned this year.”
• The tests are to see if the teacher’s “had a really low score” and if so, maybe she’ll “get fired.”
• The tests “show how much [the teacher’s] been teaching us and how good we understand it.”

To pull together these different answers, collectively these children construct an understanding that the tests are meant to pass judgment: on their school, on their teachers, and on themselves. Further, they worry that their own performance might have negative repercussions, not merely for their current situations, but for their teachers’ lives, for their school’s reputation, and for their own futures.

Each assertion seems to be followed by doubt, as the students grapple with the unknown in much the same way that the adults around them seem insecure about the purposes and uses of the tests. James first asserts his sense that the test is “for the school,” and therefore doesn’t matter for him personally. He could “fail it on purpose,” and it would be an effective way of damaging the school he claims to “hate.” He is right on target in pointing out the vulnerable, powerless position of school officials, when the fate of their institutions (and in some cases their own jobs) depend upon the goodwill and best efforts of individual students.

Yet, James is not entirely convinced that he is free to fail this test; at the age of ten, he worries that to “fail” a standardized test of reading and math might taint his future ambitions and play a role in excluding him from opportunities.

Most poignant is Maria, a child whose past experiences with standardized testing have not been positive (according to her second grade scores she was “below level” in reading and mathematics), who repeatedly throughout our conversation expresses her admiration and love for her teacher, Miss J. Here, she worries that if her class (herself included) should score poorly on the test, it will reflect badly on their teacher and may cost Miss J. her job. Even as both James and Nancy jump in to reassure her (both also expressed their respect for Miss J multiple times), doubt remains in Nancy’s honest conclusion, “I don’t really know!”

The children care deeply and authentically for their teacher. They sense that their teacher cares for them as well. The importance of such caring in school is self-evident in the ways the children appear motivated to learn by their caring teacher. The children also admit to an inherent fairness in being tested on what they have learned and being held accountable for their learning. As Maria and James have correctly assessed, it is their collective scores, even more than their individual scores, that matter to the school. Students wonder out loud (whether true or not) if perhaps their futures ten years down the road, their teachers’ careers, and their school’s reputation are in their hands and will be determined on a single day, in a single score. It seems possible that rather than find in this
pressure an incentive to “try harder” – as if to imply they were not trying hard enough to begin with – students branded with low scores may dig themselves deeper into failure by virtue of any insecurities and inadequacies they feel.

Accountability and Power: The “Office Thingy”

To further illustrate the negative impacts of high pressure and stress on children and the individuation and competition introduced by high-stakes, consider the following story the children related, in which their principal pulled individual children aside, and (evidently without parent permission) shared with them their previous year’s test scores, giving them an individualized pep-talk about improving their scores:

Nancy:  She [the principal] did this little office thingy - here you go in the teacher’s office. She lets you read to her and say how’s it going, and then she goes, “I don’t want you to feel nervous or anything” and then she’d give you like a number for this reading level number, and you tell somebody and they have higher than you, and that makes you feel nervous

Maria:  I don’t mean that Ms H [the principal] sucks, I just think that Ms H’s not a very good principal.

Nancy:  She’s ok. I mean there’s never going to be a principal who doesn’t have rules.

By Maria’s assessment, Ms H is “not a very good principal.” In part, this comment was related to a previous part of the conversation in which the children were complaining about Ms H’s “no running on the playground” rule. However, Maria is also clearly referring to, and contributing to, Nancy’s current narrative; this “office thingy” is further evidence to Maria that Ms H’s school leadership skills lack something. Under extreme pressures to improve test scores, Ms H appears to be pushing students to further identify themselves with their scores in the hopes of motivating them to improve – again, assuming they were not already trying their hardest to learn and grow in school. According to the children’s narrative, she ends up pitting student against student, bringing out students’ worst insecurities, and undermining any sense of a learning community among low and high scoring children. This is exhibited in the contrast between James’s and Maria’s experiences with the principal’s “pep talk.” Because of his high test scores, James was made to feel extremely needed by the school:

James:  When I went in there, when I was called in, she gave me the ratings. She gave me the scores on the tests, and she said, “Ok, James, I want you to stay at this school. You may not quit. We need you for five years or something.”
D: How did that make you feel?
Nancy: Good, but –
D: No, how did it make you feel (James)?
James: Good but like
D: Proud of your scores I guess, huh?
James: But she shouldn’t be saying, “You have to stay here for the standard test.” If I want to leave, I can leave!
Nancy: Yeah because what if you got a really bad score? She wouldn’t say, “oh I don’t want you at the school, you gotta leave” but if you get a really bad score and she tells you, that doesn’t make you feel good.

In this last comment, Nancy brings up one flaw of high stakes testing: although the project purportedly supports increased equity, the result is often to make low-scoring students feel unwelcome in schools. At the high school level, student drop-out (or “push out”) rates are soaring, especially in communities of color, and some argue this is due in part to high stakes accountability (McNeil, 2000). Nancy’s comment implies that even students too young to express their feelings of exclusion by dropping out of school, are nonetheless subject to such feelings. Sadly, students like Maria (aside from low test scores, an otherwise quite successful, happy, thoughtful, caring and creative child) are merely getting set up to be pushed out of school in a few years’ time:

D: Maria what happened to you when you went into the office to get your scores?
Maria: She’s like, you should raise your score up. And she kept saying, you should get it all the way up there, but I tried, but she just says um,
James: She puts pressure on you.
Maria: Yeah she puts pressure on you.
James: You are what you are!
Maria: I know!
D: How did you feel?
Maria: Bad.

James and Maria, and Nancy as well, all express that their principals actions were hurtful; they seem to share the perspective that each child brings strengths and weaknesses and should be accepted as they are, a perspective that high-stakes pressures may well be undermining among the adults.

Finally, because the principal did not inform students’ parents, she put these children in the uncomfortably powerful position of choosing whether or not to inform their parents themselves:

D: Had your parents told you about the scores beforehand?
(Kids): yes!
Nancy: I don’t remember.
D: Were your parents upset when you told them what the principal did?
Nancy: I told my mom and she was like, “I’m going to have to talk to her about that.” I mean that didn’t make me feel good at all. She always likes me to tell her if something’s going on at school.
Maria: My dad, I tell my dad everything, but I just don’t like telling him stuff that happens at school. He’s going to talk to I don’t want to get embarrassed by my dad or mom. It’s just embarrassing.
Nancy: Like, your mom (…)
D: So you didn’t tell your dad?
Maria: No.
James: My mom would probably have me transferred, and then I wouldn’t have Miss J, and I really like Miss J,
Maria: I know! I like Miss J!
James: so I didn’t tell her.
Nancy: I’m looking forward to meeting the new principal.

So Nancy told her mother, and received the worrisome response, “I’m going to have to talk to her (the principal) about that.” Maria decided not to tell her father, even though she usually tells him everything, out of fear that he would “embarrass” her by coming in to talk to the school authorities about it. James decided not to tell his mother because, like the others, he knew she would be furious. According to him, his mother would likely have him transferred from the school (a possible exaggeration, but then again, students have been leaving the school a lot lately). It all comes back to his teacher: he likes Miss J. and will do much to protect his relationship with her. It is telling that Nancy ends this part of the interview with a decisive, “I’m looking forward to meeting the new principal.” (In fact, the students and the entire community know that this principal is leaving the school at the end of the school year.)

This incident was also related in one of the teacher interviews. A fourth grade teacher, the English-only counterpart to the students’ dual language class with Miss J, Miss E related the following to me within the first minute of our interview:

Miss E: Well now we’re year four [of program improvement].
D: Mm.
Miss E: It feels like being in a vice. Where it’s just turning and turning and the pressure is just getting stronger and stronger. I think that the stress of it all is being felt by all of us but especially our principal, and so she’s getting a lot of pressure from the district to get those test scores up and passes that on to us in various ways. Things are happening this year that have never happened since I’ve been teaching. It’s just not that one, I mean it’s seven years, but…
D: Mhm.
Miss E: She met with each of the upper-grade students and showed them their scores, talked about how they could improve, talked about their grades.
D: One on one?
Miss E: Yeah.
D: Wow.
Miss E: Yup… The kids are very aware more than ever that there’s this test that’s happening. I talk about it more than I used to. We do prep more than we used to, but there’s just a lot of pressure.

With these interview excerpts we are viewing the events through the children’s narrative descriptions. Thus, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions about the principal’s actions. However, we can certainly seek to understand the children’s subjective experiences surrounding the event. The way the children have understood it, their principal is privileging the need for high scores above the emotional and psychological needs of students. She has left low-scoring children to feel unwanted by the school, and she has failed to inform parents of her intentions, leaving that conversation up to the children themselves. Children may come away feeling essentialized, burdened with a heavy responsibility to perform individually on the test, isolated from peers and parents, and in some cases undervalued (or overvalued) due to their identification with their test scores.

Reconstitution: Intentionally Ruptured Community

If by the fourth year in “school improvement,” a school has not managed to reach its AYP in all of the requisite areas, one of the consequences district administrators can choose to exert on the school is “reconstitution,” in which the majority (if not all) school personnel are dismissed and an entirely new staff is brought in to start the school fresh. Recent research suggests that as a school reform strategy, reconstitution is not terribly effective (Hess, 2003; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005). In the examples researched, the event of reconstitution was experienced by remaining staff members as emotionally taxing, eliciting feelings of grief, guilt, and resentment. Not surprisingly, it can be disruptive to the entire school community and lead to an exodus of students and families. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that new staff will do any better job preparing students to perform on tests than departing staff; in fact, often new staff are less experienced and less connected to the community than those who leave. As a strategy for “school improvement,” reconstitution has not proven effective.

While this school was not officially reconstituted, the events that transpired at the school during the spring of 2004, which eventually resulted in the departure of approximately 50% of the staff, were experienced by many in a similar way to a reconstitution. There was a sense that the school had lost some of its most
loyal and long-standing teachers, that the principal had driven out the most vocal of the teachers, and that the new people coming in were intended to bring a new culture to the school. Every adult interviewed related this event and mentioned it as one of the most precipitous changes at the school in recent years.

As with the adult interviews, the story emerged fairly early in the conversation with the children. James took the lead in relating it, although both Nancy and Maria corroborated and contributed. James’s narrative drew on his own experiences, his knowledge of literature, and his mother’s knowledge of larger school events and motivations:

James: Oh, last year, the principal… have you read the fifth book of Harry Potter?
D: Not yet, no. I need to, don’t I?
James: Oh well there’s this person Miss Umbridge, and she’s like a […] and she goes around and she writes on her little board in classrooms if a teacher should be fired or not. And that’s what Ms H (the principal) did last year. She went into classrooms, she like stood in the back …
Maria: She’s still doing it this year!
James: … with her clipboard and she wrote like if the teachers should be laid off or not. And all the really good teachers, the really experienced teachers, the ones that basically hold the community together? They got fired - except for Miss J—(their teacher).

In the end of the fifth book of Harry Potter (since I have now read the book) Miss Umbridge is forcibly removed from the scene. The beloved head of the school Albus Dumbledore returns, and the teachers Umbridge had identified as “below standard,” including Harry’s dear friend Hagrid, are allowed to return. The message of the book seems to be that schools are as much about community as about “excellence,” and that “excellence” itself must be defined within a context (Rowling, 2003). Although by no means perfect, the teachers who were forced to leave this school were, according to James, the “ones that basically hold the community together.” The feeling of instability that has resulted from disrupting a long-standing community in this way are visible, not only in the students’ repeated oaths of loyalty to Miss J, according to James the only “really experienced teacher” to stay at the school, but also in Maria’s comments below about her sadness upon discovering that her kindergarten teacher, Ms S, was no longer at the school:

D: It sounds like you didn’t like what Ms H did to the teachers it sounds like.
Maria: eah I didn’t really like it. It kind of hurt me because like, I knew Ms. S—(her k teacher) for a very long time from 1st grade I mean and I really miss her. In the beginning of the school year I was like, “where’s
Ms S--, Where’s Ms S--!” And then somebody told me when they had a meeting or something that Ms S-- got asked um to go to fourth grade or something …. I just miss her a lot, I miss her.

Instability has also influenced parent perceptions of the school, at least in students’ eyes, as is evident when Maria explains her family’s decision to place her younger sister at a different school, and the pressures she is feeling to follow her sister and transfer to the other school:

D: So, do your parents like the school?
Maria: Not much, they want me to transfer. They love, the only reason my parents put me in this thing is because these little houses – these look like houses!
D: They liked the building [architecture]! But they decided they don’t like it? How come?
Maria: I don’t know they just don’t. Just like, they fired a lot of good teachers, and, yeah, it’s just …
D: It’s a tough time.
Maria: Yeah, it’s just kind of like Laura [a classmate who has left], they want me to transfer, but I don’t want to transfer.
D: You don’t want to.
Maria: I have a friend named M-- she lives in my neighborhood, and she goes to my sister’s school St. P’s, … and she was like ‘you should move or you should go to that school just like your sister’ and I really feel like I want to go to that school because that’s my best friend and really she knows what I’m talking about
D: What grade’s your sister in?
Maria: Kindergarten.
D: Oh she’s just starting but your parents put her in a different school, not here?
Maria: I don’t know, she was going to go this school, but they didn’t really like this school because they found out that the teachers were gone …

One of the rationales behind NCLB is that the introduction of competition to the schools will force them to do a better job at serving their community. Parents at this school have for the past four years received letters from the school district, informing them that their child’s school is considered “underperforming,” and that therefore they may opt to remove their child to another district school. While the other schools named in the letter do not always have spaces for their children, it is evident that some families are taking this letter, and other events at the school, as proof that it is indeed time to leave. One of Maria’s closest friends in the class, Laura, who she mentioned above, has already left the school. This dynamic has been documented in other places to follow school “reconstitution” (Hess, 2003).
While the adults interviewed in the study expressed mixed feelings about the “reconstitution,” admitting that the community has experienced a certain amount of renewal because of the changes, the children’s experience with the deliberate disruption in their community appeared to be entirely engulfed with loss, sadness, resentment, confusion, and fear. It is conceivable that such disruption may be unavoidable at a school, but if so then adults must keep in mind that it appears to affect children deeply and impact their attitudes towards school and learning on many levels.

**Conclusion**

As educational researchers, we strive for the deepest understandings possible of the dynamics of schools in order to find ways to improve schooling experiences for children. This snapshot of three children in one elementary school is meant to demonstrate the power and possibility in listening closely to children. Their narratives offer us insight into how they, as the recipients of policy enactments, understand policy-related events and how these events shape their experience with school.

The children’s concerns about high stakes revealed the ways in which adult-imposed pressures undermine their senses of competence. The children’s description of their principal’s individual interviews with them leads us to a deeper understanding of the ways an overemphasis on test scores can undermine a student’s sense of being welcome at school, her sense of belonging and connection. The children’s relating of the story of the school’s “reconstitution” demonstrated that for them, the event was laced with sadness, loss, and instability. In all three of the policy enactments explored above, the undermining of their learning community (through high-stakes pressures on them individually, through divisive actions by the principal, or through forcible transfers of beloved teachers) is the theme that emerges as most worrisome to the children.

Meier and Wood argue that NCLB undermines the most important educational characteristics of school communities: “that they are places where citizens and professionals can exercise judgment and build trust” (2004, p.69). According to the stories told by the children throughout their conversation, school is all about the teachers they have, the friends they make along the way, and the fun adventures they share. It is shaped by the restrictions adults place on them as much as by the dreams adults have for them.

Accountability and excellence are words that hold tremendous power in education, and few would deny that we “need accountability” and must “strive for excellence.” Yet how are these words defined? To whom should our schools be accountable and in what ways? What does it mean to strive for excellence?
and how will we know if we are achieving it? Does excellence look the same for everyone? Is it measurable by a standardized test? These questions are about the ultimate purposes of schooling, the nature of learning, the hopes and dreams we have for our children, and the appropriateness of our current policies. While the children do not themselves ask the questions, through their direct reactions to, and interpretations of, policy enacted upon them, they compel us to ask them.

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