

CREATING A COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS OF PUBLIC SCHOOLING INEQUITIES:
PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Kathleen M. Nichols: Creating a Collective Consciousness of Public Schooling Inequities:
Participatory Action Research with Community College Students
(Under the direction of George Noblit)

Public schools across the US are perceived to be broken, in particular schools where higher dropout rates, violence, abuse, and lower literacy rates plague urban and suburban districts. However, there is limited information about the student's perceptions as to why public schools are failing across the nation. The purpose of this dissertation was to invite students to participate in the investigation of these public schooling problems as co-researchers of a critical participatory action research study. The 25 community college students/co-researchers lived in a polarized New Jersey county that included some of the most affluent and some of the poorest school districts in the state. I used critical participatory action research methods and critical pedagogy to conduct a qualitative study examining the themes of public school problems from a student perspective. The students/co-researchers who participated in the study were asked to write a personal narrative of perceived problems, code their narratives, share their stories and thematic discoveries with the class, organize into groups based on shared themes, and construct questions for community members around the identified themes. Students/co-researchers were trained to conduct and analyze their own interviews with community members, and they wrote reflective writings throughout the CPAR process. In groups that met weekly, students/co-researchers discussed themes that emerged in their writings and interviews, and they developed actionable solutions to address the problems identified.

Major themes identified that have contributed to failing urban schools included: increasing cruelty, distractive blaming, and severely unjust disparities between the quality of educational experience provided to suburban students and urban students. Solutions identified were multi-pronged and primarily included eliminating disparities between suburban and urban school districts, forming a collective effort in solving schooling problems, inviting and respecting student voice in decisions that shape school experience, implementing effective methods for increasing compassion for and acceptance of diverse people in schools, and supporting students' academic and social needs congruently. Students identified themes in public schooling problems that other researchers have previously identified, reinforcing that rather than focusing on accountability measures such as standardized testing, states and districts should work to improve students' public schooling experiences.

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“I suffered with deep seemingly interminable depression and anxiety about how to write up this fluid, sometimes incoherent, sometimes harmonious project in a linear, ‘scholarly’ way that was respectful of my co-researchers, our participants, and the organization”

(Monique Guishard, 2009, p. 86).

PREFACE

One of the greatest challenges I experienced while writing this dissertation can be captured beautifully in the words of participatory action research scholar Monique Guisard. Apart from the writing of this dissertation, all other aspects of this research process were highly collaborative, which is not only essential in a PAR project for reasons detailed throughout this paper, but also is the manner of learning in which I thrive. It was deeply troubling and difficult to transition from the rich plurality of epistemological growth felt in the collective research settings to the isolating, one-dimensional reporting of this meaning-packed journey. I worry that I will not do it justice, and know I will miss moments and discoveries that were meaningful to participants. There is not enough time or pages to capture the complexities of the lived experiences of the incredible students with whom I worked, learned, and grew, throughout the semester-long courses in which we investigated public schooling inequities in central New Jersey.

One of the biggest lessons I learned as a researcher facilitating a PAR project was that I could not expect my participants to share their intimate struggles, their pains, their vulnerabilities, if I remained a silent observer and hid mine safely and securely from them. Therefore, I share with you, the few perhaps, who read these words I have struggled to find for months. If I do not force myself to accept the best I can do at this moment, as mediocre as it feels at times, this collective journey of discovery will not respectfully report the hard work of 24 brilliant community college students. For them, and for my incredible loved ones who tirelessly supported me with this seemingly endless project, I write.

My Impetus to Conduct Research

I *hated* high school... not the people (the teachers, students, administrators, or staff) and not learning itself (my curiosity was insatiable). High school seemed to sterilize learning, like an R-rated film edited for network television, such that all of the provocativeness and inspiration for further inquiry had been gutted. I counted every tick of the second hand on that clock until that blessed day that harbingered my freedom. College had to be better and, for the most part, it was. Yet, after college, I ended up in a very unexpected place. As I mentioned mere sentences ago, I hated high school... so much so that my friends and family were a bit shocked when I chose to work as a high school Special Education teacher in a public high school in New York City. My goal had been to de-sterilize the learning process and invite student control and choice over the curriculum (the what and how they learned). Students seemed to like my class, and we could celebrate growth each marking period. However, every year, there were students who did not receive their high school diplomas. The high school I worked at was one of the better, with higher graduation rates than most. Throughout New York City, the graduation rates hovered around 60% for a four-year cohort (Appendix 1). Which meant that 40% of the high school students in each cohort were either not graduating within four years, or at all. After 6 years, it appeared to be the case that 25-30% were not earning high school diplomas (Appendix 1). It was a horrifying realization. As a teacher, and an educator cognizant of the necessity of having a high school diploma in order to be marketable in a competitive job market, not to mention the plethora of other reasons students might need a high school diploma, I thought I might be doing something wrong. I am a fixer by nature. I wanted to know how I could fix this seemingly Sisyphean problem. After three years of teaching English, Social Studies, Environmental Science, and Drama to students in a mix of self-contained, resource room, and collaborative team

teaching classes, I decided to pursue a PhD in Education because I wanted to explore ways to improve public schooling experiences for students who were systemically failed, i.e. the system of public schooling set them up for failure. Many students in special education, students of color, students living in poverty, students without homes, students who were non-native English speakers, were struggling to survive high school, and many did not.

As a doctoral candidate, I was required to become an expert in my area; however, I knew I was not, nor would I ever be, the expert of students' experiences. I am barely an expert of my own experiences. The Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) epistemology imagined a space where a group of students and I could collectively investigate schooling problems in a manner that invited students to become co-researchers. We shared authority and expertise, more so than other research designs; however, implicitly, I would always be understood as their teacher leading the study and they would be my students, and that power dynamic cannot, nor should not, be ignored. It exists as one problem of many in this study. Despite the problems riddled throughout the study, the journey is worth reporting, not only out of respect for the 26 students/co-researchers and all of their hard work, but also because their stories, the themes they identified, and their call for action deserve a place in greater discourse regarding schooling policies and reforms that impact Central New Jersey public schools. The pages that follow detail the questions and discoveries we collaboratively created, as well as the countless problems that surfaced along the way. As I mentioned before, I aim to write about this collaborative study the best that I can, despite it being written by only me, an approach that feels inherently wrong in the vein of critical participatory action research, yet understandably necessary in the grander scheme of things.

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CHAPTER 1 – OUR CPAR STUDY

1.1. Achieving Access is Not Enough

Critical participatory action research (CPAR) requires that co-researchers are engaged and invested in the study. An ideal scenario might be that community members collectively determine they would like to investigate local issues and find neighbors with expertise in qualitative and quantitative research methods. With guidance provided by experienced researchers, they conduct their study together. In this situation, local community members inspired the impetus to critically examine the complex problems in the community. It would be difficult to argue against the authenticity of the CPAR process. Power, privilege, and authority would still exist in nuanced ways; however, the project would be unquestionably directed and controlled by the community members.

My goal was to achieve a CPAR process and dynamic as close to this idealization as I could. As a researcher introducing community members to the CPAR process, moreover, as an instructor teaching students the CPAR process in a graded course they are paying for to receive credit, to ignore my position of power and authority would be irresponsible. Before determining that community college classrooms could be an appropriate place to conduct CPAR work, I had spent a year and a half exploring non-profit community organizations in New York City and New Jersey. Some of these organizations could have worked logistically, and some implemented critical community-based research already. I was even granted access into these organizations and invited to facilitate a study, which is quite hard to achieve. Unfortunately, I lived about 60

miles from these organizations and could not finance the travel expenses that would incur daily, easily a couple thousand dollars in a few months.

I explored a couple of local sites in Central New Jersey, including K-12 schools in suburban districts and an alternative school in the urban district; however, state budget cuts and aggressive political tactics forced them into a survival mode that consumed all of their time and energy. A fortunate ramification of this arduous journey, and my ongoing efforts to attain not just access but fiscal feasibility and an environment capable of being receptive to a CPAR project, was that I stumbled upon local community college classrooms as a fitting place to integrate CPAR into the course curriculum. While this setting did not illustrate the ideal one I detailed earlier, it became clear to me that community colleges can be perfect locations for investigating and unpacking local issues. Most community college students lived close to our community college, and they understood local problems because they lived them. Exploring critical thinking in a hands-on way, created relevancy and meaning to the remedial English curriculum. While advantages surfaced, I agonized over my position as the instructor facilitating the study and reminded students that I was aware of my role and hoped that it would not prevent them from taking ownership, control, and direction over their projects. After reflecting extensively upon this CPAR study, I have concluded that there is great potential for this kind of work in community college classrooms, as well as other types of classrooms; however, the role of the instructor should be explicitly and continuously scrutinized, discourses, and defined by co-researchers, community members, educators, students, and scholars, so that CPAR projects implemented in educational settings effectively empower students and community members conducting and participating in this emancipatory research.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

I implemented the Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) epistemology in this study. As mentioned in the CPAR literature review, CPAR's epistemological approach is a blending of Lewinian Action Research, critical theory, and methods deemed most appropriate for the participants/co-researchers. "The main methodological consideration in PAR is that the principles guiding processes must be participant-centered and non-alienating" (Udas, 1998, p. 604). Freirean Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000; Freire, 2005) informed the curricular and pedagogical design because students/co-researchers and I engaged in respectful dialogue with one another and community members.

In order to establish an environment of respect and open-mindedness, we used our critical thinking textbook as a platform to co-create tenets needed to ensure members were heard, especially when confronting conflict. Our text, *Critical Thinking: Reading and Writing in A Diverse World*, introduced topics like "Heading the Message, Not the Messenger," "Handling Disagreements," "Expressing Appreciation," and "Providing Feedback." In groups and class discussions, students/co-researchers explored these topics extensively, and they provided ideas for implementing practices that would ensure that the person was respected and heard, and feelings were validated; however ideas were challenged. Students/co-researchers determined that it could be helpful to explicitly say during heated discourse "I hear you and I respect you, but I challenge your idea." By spending a significant amount of time on co-cultivating safe, supportive discursive spaces and defining healthy conversation techniques at the start of each semester, and throughout each semester, we reduced and eliminated the possibility of students/co-researchers experiencing unhealthy or violent reactions to controversial and discomforting ideas, and we were able to delve into topics that we might have avoided out of fear of making people

uncomfortable, such as racism, homophobia, sexual abuse, social injustices, politics, and more. Our findings speak to the fullness and depth to which we felt comfortable sharing intimately troubling social phenomena. This journey and these results would not have been possible without uniform, collaborative, and explicit efforts in sincerely nurturing and supporting each other in every moment of every interaction.

In addition to critically-informed yet compassionate dialogue, we also performed critical reflection and action, to achieve praxis and hopefully a developed sense of conscientization. Our approach to gathering information from the community to create a picture of the oppression that exists aligned with Freire's concept of codification.

Our study incorporated methodological aspects of critical participatory action research (CPAR), participatory action research (PAR), and youth participatory action research (YPAR) (Cammarota, & Fine, 2008; Cannella, 2008; Creswell, 2008; Guishard, 2009; Morrell, 2008; Rogers, 2008; Torre & Fine, 2006) – and all of the studies explored in Section 1.4.A CPAR Studies that Informed Our Study - and the constructivist grounded theory model (Charmaz, 2000, 2003, 2008). Participants/students/co-researchers performed collaborative inductive analyses of the empirical data collected, which included: students/co-researchers' narratives about their experiences in their public schools, interviews/recorded conversations with other community members' about their schooling experiences, students/co-researchers' critical dialogue and ongoing reflective writings about the contrasted educational settings and the research process, and students/co-researchers' final presentation work (with a collectively-created critique of local schooling problems, research themes and results, and actionable solutions).

Our empirical data led our analyses, and the constructivist grounded theory model—with its inductive, iterative, and emergent approach to investigation—was the ideal research

methodology for our study (Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2000, 2003, 2006, 2008; Creswell, 2008). Cited in Bowen, 2006: “Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (Patton, 1980, p. 306). Thus, we focused our efforts on the emergent process and the discovery of patterns, themes, and categories that emerged from the data, in an overt and explicit attempt to prevent each other from jumping hastily to theoretical conclusions. This approach was of utmost importance since we followed the constructivist grounded theory model.

1.3. The Purpose of Our CPAR Study in Greater Detail

The purpose of this study was to create a context for critical dialogue among community college students about the meaningful, worthwhile experiences they have had in their urban and suburban public schools. The student-centered dialectic occurred in two community college Remedial English classrooms (one course taught in the Fall of 2011 and the second course taught in the Spring of 2012). A central tenet of this study, a PAR tenet, was to invite students to direct the learning process, i.e. CPAR studies as group projects. Students' interests, needs, and strengths defined the curricula and pedagogies, and I acted as a facilitator in the learning process. The stories, dialogues, and projects created can be used to understand the unique ways in which students and families experience urban and suburban public schools in Central New Jersey, and the themes and solutions identified can be used to shape discourse surrounding local reform decisions.

The research question I wrote for the IRB process was: How do community college students understand, analyze, and evaluate their learning experiences from their urban and suburban public schools while participating in a critical participatory research project that

aims to be student-led? This was the research question that inspired the Critical Participatory Research CPAR study I facilitated. However, CPAR requires that the students/co-researchers create questions that are meaningful to them; some of these questions are listed later in the paper. Since these questions changed (some were edited, some omitted, some added) throughout the semester, those questions presented here are intended to provide an understanding of where groups were in a particular moment during the semester. The constant accruelement of new data, fresh perspectives, and unique experiences continuously challenged our grasp of the complex problems and phenomena present in surrounding public schools.

1.4. Participants and Recruitment

The participants included 25 adult community college students, all 18 years and older, who signed consent forms giving me permission to quote them and share their stories in this paper. Their names have been changed to pseudonyms. There were more than 25 students enrolled in the two semesters (15 Fall 2011 students and 25 Spring 2012 students). All of the students enrolled in the remedial reading courses participated in the CPAR projects and were invited to participate in the study at the end of each semester after their work was graded; however, not all students signed consent forms. I have only shared quotes from the 25 students/co-researchers who gave their consent. The problems, themes, and solutions came from the collective work of the entire class each semester, and these ideas and findings are reported in this paper.

1.5. Study Sites

CPAR projects were integrated into two semesters (Fall 2011 and Spring 2012) of a remedial reading class at a central New Jersey community college. Twenty five students participated in the study with consent. In other words, twenty five students gave me permission

to share their CPAR work (their narratives, reflective writings, discussions, and projects) in this paper.

In the fall semester, I co-taught with the primary professor of the remedial reading course, and in the spring semester, I was the primary instructor of the remedial reading course. Students/co-researchers conducted and completed their CPAR projects (their reflective writings, interviews, and group meetings) inside their remedial English classrooms and throughout their community.

1.6. Procedures

Each semester, Fall 2011 and Spring 2012, there were 15 classes that met once a week for three hours. Half of each class was dedicated to reading and analyzing scholarly articles and literature and the other half was dedicated to students' CPAR projects, which provided students with the opportunity to practice and develop the critical reading skills that were a major aspect of the course design as well as to mobilize Freire's praxis (action and reflection).

This CPAR research study used a qualitative research design. Community college students wrote about the meaningful experiences they had in their urban and suburban public schools and shared these narratives in their community college classrooms. Most of their narratives were centered on problems, challenges, and obstacles since the CPAR process is fueled by the goal of action: the process of solving community problems with community members, led by community members. In groups, students became co-researchers in the CPAR study and collected community members' narratives about their schooling experiences through interviews/conversations they facilitated. They analyzed their own narratives and reflective writings and the conversations and narratives they collected from community members, and they

engaged in critical discourse and critical reflection throughout the CPAR process. They synthesized their findings in a final group presentation at the end of each semester.

The CPAR block included:

- class discussions and dialogue concerning articles we had read together about struggling schools and students,
- moments devoted to critical reflection independently and collectively and to making the CPAR process explicit and transparent,
- activities to build community and trust,
- blocks of time dedicated to teaching students the methods for collecting data (mainly practice with interviewing or facilitating meaningful conversations with family and friends about their areas of interest regarding schooling experiences) and for analyzing data.

Said analysis consisted of an iterative process of chunking out themes from reflective journals and interviews/conversations, individually and collectively, throughout the second half of the semester). We followed a grounded theory model approach to analyzing the data we collected. The bulk of the rest of this paper will detail the process of these CPAR projects, particularly the great breadth of the students/co-researchers' findings and their critically reflective responses to the CPAR process.

Freirean critical pedagogy conceptually grounded the procedural process which included moments of critical dialogue, critical reflection, and praxis (action/reflection). "Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation. The content of that dialogue can and should vary in

accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality” (Freire, 2000, p. 65). Whether all students/co-researchers achieved a state of awareness according to their specific, intimate stage of struggle and whether they achieved a raised critical consciousness, conscientization, could not be confirmed with certainty; however, there were hints of possibilities, which are explored in the findings.

In our study, to satisfy the goal of action, we strived to collect and co-create actionable solutions that we could share with members of the class and community. In addition to their own stories, students/co-researchers wrote reflectively throughout the CPAR process and conducted one or two individual interviews/conversations with fellow classmates and/or community members about their schooling experiences. In groups, students/co-researchers discussed each other’s narratives and interviews/conversations, and they identified themes and instances of shared experiences and unique experiences. Throughout the semester, the students/co-researchers and I read and shared articles and media that explored schooling issues so that participants could analyze and critique these additional perspectives about educational experiences and could contrast them with their personal educational experiences and the community members’ experiences that had been collected. I facilitated the ongoing dialogues and reflections that took place in the community college classroom, with the ever-present CPAR goal that the students/co-researchers made the decisions during each step of the process. I provided guidance with the research tools.

All students enrolled in the remedial reading classes participated in the CPAR project and were graded not on content but on participation. Tests, quizzes, and written responses to textbook readings consisted of the vast majority of their grade. The remedial reading curriculum at the community college includes a class project, which can be individual or group and requires

students to demonstrate their critical thinking capabilities through reading and writing. Students analyzed the critical thinking process in this course and implemented it in the culminating project. The CPAR project satisfied the critical thinking project component of the remedial reading curriculum. I facilitated the semester-long project that encouraged students to engage in critical dialogue about their schooling experiences. As part of the class project, students completed ongoing reflective writings, interviewed each other and/or members of their community, and created a final product and group presentation that synthesized what they had learned from thinking critically about their schooling experiences and local community members' schooling experiences. At the end of each semester, I invited students/co-researchers to share their schooling narratives, reflective writings, and final presentations with me so that they could be reported in this paper. The quotes provided came from students/co-researchers who gave their consent formally. Their names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

1.6.a. Negotiating My Power as Teacher

As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, it cannot be ignored that I had great power as an instructor of these remedial English classes. I facilitated the classes and graded students' work. I was inarguably in the position of power and authority in the classroom. I chose critical pedagogy and critical participatory action research as frameworks to direct and inform my teaching because I hoped to position myself as a facilitator in my students learning and not an expert of it. I have struggled to define critical pedagogy, other than to acknowledge that it requires the teacher and students to constantly question and critique how people are positioned socially and systemically. I was comforted when I read that Matthew Smith and Peter McLaren (2010) wrote:

It must be said that any attempt to define or categorize critical pedagogy is usually counterproductive to the development of radical agency, for to do so risks limiting its

constant evolution and re-invention by numerous communities and collective struggles worldwide. Critical pedagogy demands that people repeatedly question their roles in society as either agents of social and economic transformation, or as those who participate in the asymmetrical relations of power and privilege and the reproduction of neoliberal ideology. (p. 332)

I had been looking for a sound bite that would capture a process complexly fluid and malleable. Critical pedagogy must be respectfully connected to the needs of struggling people. As a teacher, I cannot deny that I have power and authority, which I did acknowledge openly with my students. I also explained to the students that I could not be considered an expert in students' experiences of their schools and in their learning. Students were the experts. I told them that I hoped to be a facilitator of learning in class and the CPAR study. My goal was to provide them with the tools and support they needed to become stronger readers, writers, and critical thinkers so they could comfortably challenge, question, critique, and investigate the dynamic texts they interact with daily, including research, literary works, media, and the stratifying social systems they navigate in their communities.

As a critical pedagogue and CPAR researcher, I was aware of the problems my power could create in the classroom and our CPAR study. "Given the centrality of power in PAR, at all levels from conscientization to the gathering of knowledge and action, researchers must be prepared to engage in what can be a very personal struggle with their own deeply embedded beliefs. The researcher can, in very subtle ways, silence voices and undermine the entire process (Rahman, 1991)" (Kidd and Kral, 190). Although I cannot report all of the specific moments, it certainly is feasible that I could have silenced students/co-researchers, prevented them from making meaningful discoveries about social injustices in their own lives, and affected other

possibilities for them. I strived not to by participating in active, on-going reflection and open communication with my students/co-researchers. I wrote reflectively about my role as the teacher throughout each semester, and I communicated openly with my students/co-researchers about my role in the classroom as a facilitator and supporter and not a director or an expert.

Another problem that arose was that students/co-researchers sometimes expressed discomfort or resistance about the sharing of power: “most groups who engage in PAR are themselves acculturated into traditional understandings of relational hierarchies; they may resist the sharing of power that the researcher offers (McTaggart, 1997; Rahman, 1991)” (Kidd and Kral, 190). Positioning myself as a facilitator, collaborator, and learner created greater discomfort for students earlier in each of the semesters because, during the first few weeks, students/co-researchers indicated that they wanted me to tell them exactly what to do and wanted to know what the right answer was. Students also waited for my lead at times and wanted to know what I thought before they shared what they thought. As a teacher sharing my power and authority with the students, I had disrupted social convention and students’ expectations, and we had to work together to create a collaborative class environment. When students/co-researchers requested guidance, I repositioned myself as a co-learner when discussing data and lived experience and a facilitator when supplying students with tools they could use to become stronger readers, writers, and researchers. This difficult dance became easier when we had stories and data to discuss. Nonetheless, I did question my role publicly and privately throughout this process. My power was certainly always present. It was also integrated into the critical discourse and was included in discussions about teachers, pedagogy, and curriculum, all of which were cited as playing significant parts in schooling problems during data analyses in both semesters and are explored in various points of the results section.

It should be noted that discussing power in participatory, community-based research efforts is highly important and warrants deep scrutiny. As Michelle Fine (2008) elucidates, “While the processes of PAR have been grossly appropriated by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, oil and pharmaceutical companies to try to co-opt ‘locals’ to ‘buy into’ corporate takeover of lands and resources, critical participatory projects are designed to unveil the ideological and material architecture of injustice” (pp. 215-216). If CPAR projects silence the co-researchers and perpetuate injustices, that power is being abused. It is possible that I silenced students/co-researchers in these remedial English courses because I was the instructor and evaluator. I communicated daily that they were the experts of their CPAR projects and the local community problems they experienced, and I was a facilitator and learner. Nonetheless, the power dynamic inherent cannot, not should not, be ignored. CPAR studies require that power and authority be explicitly acknowledged and discourses, and CPAR projects must be collaboratively, and completely, controlled and directed by the co-researchers.

1.6.b. The Power of Story

As part of their CPAR class project, students/co-researchers wrote narratives about the experiences they had in their public schools in their reflective writing journals, which were shared with other participants and me (and the professor of the Fall 2011 reading course during the fall semester). I also shared narratives about my own experiences in these settings. I did not share my position as soon as I needed to in the fall semester, though, and I learned from my mistake. Just a few weeks into the semester, students were asked to respond to the first formal reflective writing prompt (See Appendix 3). This exercise resulted in a student storming out of our class.

Story was supposed to aid in the strengthening of our community - as bell hooks (2010) wrote, "One of the ways we become a learning community is by sharing and receiving one another's stories; it is a ritual of communion that opens our minds and hearts. Sharing in ways that help us connect, we come to know each other better." Instead, story threatened to destroy our community. The student left class because she was forced to feel vulnerable and share her vulnerabilities, not what she expected when registering for a remedial reading class at her community college. I realized quickly that if I hoped to salvage any chance for fostering a healthy community necessary for a CPAR project, I would have to share my troubled schooling experiences. Doing so would "lay the foundation for building an authentic learning community" (hooks, 2010). My vulnerability communicated to the students "that they can take risks, that they can be vulnerable, that they can have confidence that their thoughts, their ideas will be given appropriate consideration and respect" (hooks, 2010).

Sharing was difficult because wearing my vulnerabilities openly could have been viewed by my students as a sign of weakness. While it is required in CPAR, and inherently good teaching practice, to participate willingly in any task required of the student, particularly difficult ones, I knew I must share my troubling educational experiences with my students if I expected them to feel comfortable enough to share theirs with their classmates and me. As I mentioned earlier, sharing my story came sooner than I had anticipated in the fall semester. After reflectively on this pivotal moment in the study, I learned from my mistake in the fall semester and led with my story in the spring semester.

At the start of the fall semester, time was provided during class for students to complete their initial critical reflection. The prompt seemed innocent enough. (See the first prompt in Appendix 3.) All but one student wrote lengthy writings during the class. Students were invited

to share their stories. Initially, some students shared eagerly and openly, and some students did not. We discussed commonalities, striking moments, and gratitude. As more students shared stories, the students began to create connections between each other's experiences and acknowledged other students' struggles as shared. Some of them noted that it was not right or it was unfair that students endured such hard time in their schools. Students warmed up, smiled at one another, and relaxed. Students struggled in their schools for many different reasons: they experienced racist attacks by other students or faculty; they had poor health and had trouble keeping up with school work when they were absent frequently; their families moved frequently and they had to frequently code-switch socially, culturally, and academically in each new environment; they did not speak English as a first language and language barriers impacted all areas of learning; and they were attacked or victimized because they were perceived as weak or different (due to their perceived race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, disability, religious affiliation, size, athleticism, physical (un)attractiveness, social class, intelligence, social acceptance, and social/emotional/physical/academic abilities).

It seemed as though the sharing of their stories had immediately improved our sense of trust and community in our classroom, until we asked the student who had not written if there was anything she wanted to share. She stood up and shouted that she had been the bully, she had slept around, she had gotten pregnant, and she had dropped out of high school. She said she was not the victim, like these other students. She was the aggressor. She was the problem. Then she stormed out.

At that moment, I was fairly certain that I failed at CPAR. I felt sick. I felt physically ill about putting this student, and potentially others, in a position where she was forced to confront all of these traumatic moments simultaneously and publically in front of her class. We took a

break. When we all returned, including the student who had walked out, I apologized for making anyone feel as though they had to share and reminded them that writing about the schooling problems they had experienced might bring up uncomfortable moments, and they were never required to share. They could step out if they needed to, and they were not graded on the content of these stories. They also were invited to write about anything they wanted. They were never required to respond to any of the prompts. The prompts were provided as guides in the critically reflective writing process, and were supposed to be helpful for moments when students could not think of anything to write, a writer's block tool.

I also shared that part of the reason we were doing this project in a remedial English class that stressed the importance of critical thinking was that literacy and language, like human beings and lived experiences, are complex and dynamic but are often packaged and distributed to classrooms in simple, linear, and compartmentalized ways. Stories can be powerful because they offer us a collective understanding and rich description of how we have experienced public schooling in our communities. These stories certainly cannot capture all lived moments and they do not define us or restrict our capacity to exist as dynamic beings. If we did something we thought was lazy, that does not mean we are lazy? Sometimes students are described as lazy, does that mean they are lazy? Or do they appear to be lazy but are actually confused, scared, tired, overwhelmed, sick... I imagine I rambled nervously a bit.

I also acknowledged that it was not fair for me to expect students to share their stories without sharing my own. I am not sure I said all, or any of this, in an eloquent way and am fairly certain I might have stumbled though the message and my own story. Nonetheless, this moment was a turning point in the semester. We developed a trusting and open class community in both semesters after I shared my story, my vulnerability, my perceived weakness, just as hooks

recommended. As a result, students opened up to me, quickly, warmly, and genuinely. In the spirit of responding to students' vulnerabilities by providing my own, I shared the following story:

It was March of my 11th grade year, and my community was enduring a brutal Minnesota winter. Given my family's economic circumstance, I had no money for college, so I studied diligently in the hope that I might earn GPA that would make me eligible for scholarship opportunities. I had enrolled in an English class with a professor who was known for requiring a lot of work, but I welcomed the challenge as I hoped it would make me a stronger student. Mid-March I drove through a blizzard to participate in a required band concert. I tried to stop for a yellow light and the car spun out of control. It was my mother's car, and I remember crying uncontrollably at the hospital because I knew it had been totaled. A number of times, I was told to stop crying because I was lucky to be alive. My survival was inconceivable to those who had witnessed the accident and to those who had pried me from the wreckage using the "jaws of life." I was absent from school for a week and returned to learn that my grade had dropped to a point where I was no longer eligible for academic recognition and competitive scholarships. I was devastated and pled my case to the teacher. He told me that he would not allow me to make up the work because he had learned the hard way never to adjust his standards for special cases. He had once had a female student who suffered from depression who was out of school for weeks. He let her make up the work, but, since then, he determined that allowing her to earn an "A" had not really been fair to the other students. My special situation, unfortunate as it was, did not warrant special treatment. I would not receive any additional time to complete missed work. My grade could not be improved.

That summer, I was talking with a co-worker, a close family friend of the teacher's, and learned more about the teacher's decision-making process. The student informed me nonchalantly that his grade had been bumped up, and not mine, because this teacher favored male students and students who were not from "broken homes." The latter hurt a bit more - maybe because I knew there were other female students who had tolerated the teacher's sexism in that class, so I was not alone in that experience. The "broken home" quip was a direct shot at my family and me. My family had problems, financial struggles and familial conflicts, which made us socially and economically undesirable to some members of our community. I was sometimes comforted by imagining that we did not have the issues we did, but I had never perceived my family as broken. My parents were hardworking and loving, and they taught me from a young age that my education was important.

While a few teachers overtly communicated that I was innately undeserving of the advantages provided to other students, there were countless, many more, teachers who inspired and encouraged me, who believed in me and my potential to be more than my discredited societal position, my family problems, and our socioeconomic struggles. My public schooling experience was not defined by those difficult moments, but it was certainly shaped by them. If my self-esteem had not been boosted by these other teachers, I might have given up on school.

To put it succinctly, sharing my story changed everything. The student who had stormed out in the fall semester was not required to share anything with the class, but she did. She shared generously, as did all of the other students in the class. As the semester progressed, we shared more stories from our own experiences and stories collected from the community. Each week, the space felt warmer. The same was true of the second semester. By the end of each semester, students spoke about the friendships they had created and the love they felt for one another. Yes,

love. Not a word that often appears in classroom conversations, and certainly not spoken as comfortably and casually as it did.

Story, the power of story, transformed our space and played a significant role in fostering trust, compassion, understanding, and love. This power should not be ignored.

1.6.c. Community College Students Become CPAR Co-Researchers

In the Fall of 2011 and Spring of 2012, each semester began with students gaining a general understanding of the CPAR process and an understanding of the steps we would follow as a class. An overview of the CPAR research project is located in Appendix 2. We read scholarly articles and literary pieces, from their course texts and from online, about environmental, political, social, and systemic forces that create challenges for learners and impact students' abilities to achieve academic success. Based on information provided by the articles, students discussed how they could or could not relate to the authors' claims that not all students have equitable access to resources, information, and critical thinking opportunities that they need in order to be able to make the best decisions for themselves, their families, and their community members. Taken from these articles and class discussions, barriers to a quality education included: school environments (unsafe with a lack of resources, books, materials, and qualified teachers), home environments (permissive parents, a lack of encouragement from parents, heightened stress, a low income or financial struggles, and parents who were absent or who worked too much), problems with peers and social distractions, anxiety-inducing pressures from focusing on high-stakes testing, a lack of critical thinking present in school curricula and pedagogy, communities that do not seem to value education, and a lack of communication between schools and communities/families.

Students had opportunities to reflect on their own schooling experiences in their reflective writings. The reflective writing prompts are posted in Appendix 3. In their first writing, their prompt was: “Reflect on your schooling experiences and your experience of access to quality education (particularly obstacles and roadblocks you experienced in your schools).” These writings were brought to class only a few weeks after the start of the semester. If they felt comfortable, they shared their initial reflective writing, their narratives about their schooling experiences, with the class. In the discussion section of this paper, I explore the difficulties I had early in the fall semester when I asked students to share their stories. I had asked students to engage in a potentially painful process of discussing difficult moments of their lived experiences, and I should have been the first to make myself a vulnerable participant. In the spring semester, I learned from my mistake and shared first. In both semesters, at the very beginning of the semester, we discussed the importance of listening to each other with an open mind and challenging ideas and not people. The course curriculum included readings and discussions about fostering a trusting and compassionate class community. We stressed the importance of respecting people and their experiences but welcomed the practice of challenging ideas that caused harm. This approach was integrated into the remedial English course because we read controversial articles and literature. We needed a space where we could explore these texts respectfully and critically. We respected people and allowed them to feel heard, but we also challenged ideas that could silence other people. The respectful, critically-engaged environments created were ideal for the integration CPAR projects.

Once students/co-researchers felt comfortable enough to open up to their classmates about their own schooling experiences, they then began practicing data analysis as co-researchers of the CPAR process and analyzed and coded these narratives. Individually and collectively, they

searched for patterns and identified themes in their experiences and the experiences of their fellow researchers. Naming, renaming, and organizing the themes they identified was an ongoing, iterative aspect of the CPAR process. It began with their first reflective writing and continued throughout the rest of the semester. Once students analyzed their initial reflective writing, they noticed that their stories included certain collectively-created themes and not others. At this point, five weeks into the semester, students/co-researchers organized into groups based on the themes that were central to their own experiences of schooling, from which they could create questions they wanted answered.

The groups listed below were formed in each of the semesters:

Fall 2011

Group 1: Racism in Education

Group 2: Urban vs. Suburban Schooling

Group 3: Community's Impact on Schooling

Spring 2012

Group 1: Home life, poorer communities, overcrowding in the schools

Group 2: Disabilities, learning disabilities, disorders, groupings (cliques, self-esteem, bullying, peer pressure)

Group 3: Overworked students (sports, jobs, lack of sleep, drug abuse)

Students/co-researchers then wrote reflectively about the discussions they had about their group topics with their newly-formed groups. (See Appendix 3 for the Formal Reflective Writing Prompts).

One student/co-researcher in Spring 2012 Group 2 wrote the following in her reflective writing about her first group discussion regarding their school experiences: "(Topics discussed

by this group included) Disabilities, learning disabilities, disorders, groupings (cliques, self-esteem, bullying, peer pressure). There are 8 people in my group, which is very good because it is 4 guys & 4 girls. Since I'm the oldest in the group to listen to their problems on being bullied, peer pressured, and pressured from family members, I think they feel very comfortable to have an older adult in the group." From the very start, this student/co-researcher noted the value of diversity in her group and immediately positioned herself within her group as a valuable, contributing member.

After the CPAR groups identified themes in their narratives, they wrote research questions they wanted to answer as a result of conducting the CPAR process. They also wrote interview questions they planned to ask classmates, friends, family, and community members in order to gain a better understanding of how the schooling problems they were investigating impacted the people in their communities (See Appendix 4).

Throughout the rest of the semester, students/co-researcher conducted two or more interviews, continued to write reflectively about the CPAR process, and met with their group members during class weekly to discuss and analyze the data collected. At the end of the semester, the groups presented the schooling problems they identified, their findings, and their actionable solutions. In the next section, the Results section, students/co-researchers' findings are reported.

CHAPTER 2 – OUR RESULTS

2.1. CPAR Groups’ Final Presentations

Each semester culminated with CPAR groups’ final presentations. Drawing from their own schooling narratives, interviews with community members, class dialogues, and their critical reflections, students/co-researchers shared their understandings of schooling problems in the local community, the themes and findings they identified in the iterative and emergent process of analysis, and the actionable solutions they recommended for immediate implementation. Below are summaries, with some direct quotes, of the CPAR groups’ final presentations.

Fall 2011

Group 1 (*Racism in Education*) final presentation summary: They shared, “We looked at racism in education. Racism is discrimination and prejudice.” They found numerous examples of racism that impacted students’ sense of safety and belonging in their schools and hindered their academic and social learning. Groups in the Spring 2012 semester made the same discovery. Racism surfaced via severe and shocking acts of violence and bullying, subtle comments and microaggressions, and school practices performed by students, faculty, and administrators. Many of the students in this group were first generation, and they recounted the many ways in which they had been targeted and ostracized for being different. They stressed the importance of treating students who had moved from other places with compassion. The act of moving has the potential to be stressful and sometimes traumatic, and feeling unwelcome in a new community can add insult to injury. Schools and communities need effective programs and

strategies to support families new to the area and to encourage community members to accept newcomers with warmth, compassion, and understanding.

Group 2 (*Urban vs. Suburban Schooling*) final presentation summary: Group 2 mentioned that while these problems were present to some extent in both suburban and urban schools, it was evident through their research that the severity of these problems was greater in the urban schools. They shared, “These are the problems my group members came up with: lack of attendance, racism, large class sizes, lack of parental involvement, lack of interest, and lack of resources.” At the start of the semester, students/co-researchers in Group 2 thought there might be some discrepancies in the functioning of urban public schooling systems versus suburban public schooling systems; however, by the end of the semester, Group 2 deemed the discrepancies deplorable, unacceptable, and offensive. The grand scope of the disparities necessitates immediate action to rectify the unconstitutional differences in the quality of education delivered in the urban public schools, as compared to the quality of education received in the suburban public schools. In the Spring 2012 semester, groups also made this discovery and reacted in a similar fashion.

Group 3 (*Community’s Impact on Schooling*) final presentation summary: Group 3 began the semester aggressively demonizing teachers. To a lesser extent, yet still significant, they attacked students. They thought the primary problem in school was that teachers and students were lazy and apathetic. As they engaged more extensively in discursive practices with community members and fellow students, their interview processes, their narratives and experiences, critical reflections, and group analyses work, they began to illustrate a more complicated system at play. They realized that one person or group is not to blame and that assigning blame is part of the problem. During their presentation, they shared, “We were trying

to figure out what the main problem in schools was and we realized it isn't just students or teachers, it's really everyone: the curriculum, parents, the environment that the students are in, the socioeconomic disparities. This is what we realized from doing the research that we did."

These students/co-researchers discovered that there are problems in all facets of schooling that can hinder a child's ability to succeed, and attention must be heeded to all of these areas.

Futhermore, they determined that without committed collaboration from all people and all groups in a community, schools will not function as effectively as they could. In communal efforts to improve local public schools, everyone must feel welcome, heard, and respected.

Spring 2012

Group 1 (*Home life, poorer communities, overcrowding in the schools*) final

presentation summary: At the start of their presentation, Group 1 showed a video of a recent outburst at a high school in the urban school district. It captured a visibly overcrowded school with too many students. They conjectured that there was a fire alarm, students were sent out onto the lawn, and chaos ensued. They shared, "So that's one problem: overcrowding." Plus, a:

lack of supplies, not enough seats, lack of transportation, not enough high schools and middle schools. I had an interview with a (high student in the urban school district) who had dropped out, there was something called the annex project or program, I don't know if you all had heard of that, if you all went to (the high student in the urban school district), and it was because it was so overcrowded that they had to send students from (the high student in the urban school district) to local junior schools. And make it like a program. So they can get their high school classes but outside of the school. So that was like big. So not enough seats, they didn't have enough seats for the students to sit because

they were so many kids, there were like 30 kids per classroom with one teacher. (Spring 2012, Group 1, final presentation)

Students in this group discovered, just as Group 2 in the fall semester had, that students in the urban district were receiving a grossly subpar education as compared to the students in the surrounding suburban districts.

They concluded, “(After completing this CPAR project) we know so many problems as well, about poverty and schools. Getting a quality education is every child's right. But in our society all children are not getting a quality education.” They stressed that most of the children living in poverty are attending urban schools. These underserved youngsters are struggling to achieve a poor education in buildings that are dangerous schools and overwhelmed while privileged students in surrounding suburban schools enjoy a higher quality education in safe, clean buildings with an abundance of supplies, resources, and social and academic support services and programs. They believed this was a serious injustice to children who had so little to begin with and thought the government should act immediately to improve these schools.

Group 2 (*Disabilities, learning disabilities, disorders, groupings (cliques, self-esteem, bullying, peer pressure)*) final presentation summary: Like Group 1 in the fall semester, Group 2 in the spring semester determined that rampant racism in schools and communities is a grave problem. They expanded their investigation to identifiers beyond race. They reported numerous acts of cruelty experienced by students and community members because of perceived difference and inferiority. Students suffered aggressive attacks at school based on their perceived difference (or diffability): race, disability, class, dress, appearance, sexual orientation, gender, religious affiliations, and more. They reported that cruelty students endured in their schools and

communities had serious implications. They asked, “What are the effects of bullying?” Citing research, they informed:

Firstly, bullying can lead to changes in students' appearances and personalities, work ethic inside and outside of school. For example, grades begin to drop, kids show up to school less, and it can start to become, kids can start to become depressed... Effects of bullying in the community (include that) parents feel they start to lose connection with their child. There could be an increase in violence throughout the community; high schoolers' dropout rate will increase; and a decrease in test scores and a lack of work ethic. (Spring 2012, Group 2, final presentation)

Their presentation illustrates the interconnectedness of a community, as expressed by Group 3 in the fall semester. Whether acknowledged or not, when students suffer vicious attacks of cruelty and other schooling problems, a ripple effect occurs such that one student's experiences can impact other members in the school and community at large. These problems affect us all and should not be ignored.

They recommended the following actionable solutions:

Schools should have peer mediation groups so that the bully and the bullied can talk to one another and work out their problems. Schools should have assemblies to talk about bullying and the effects bullying has on each other. Teachers and parents should become more involved in their kids' lives, ask them about what is going on in school, doing more activities together, and show them that they care.” Like groups in the fall semester, they stressed the need for collaborative efforts among school and community members and groups, the importance of increased caring and compassion for students, and greater engagement in students' daily lives. (Spring 2012, Group 2, final presentation)

Group 3 (*Overworked students (sports, jobs, lack of sleep, drug abuse)*) findings: Group 3 came to similar conclusions as Group 2. They reported that students are overworked and desperately need greater academic and social support in their schools to guide them through healthy ways of managing their work, home/peer conflicts, and stress/anxiety/fear regarding building demands on students in a complicated world: a lack of money, exam pressure, competition to get into and afford college, lack of quality/affordable childcare, etc. They stressed that it is extremely important that public schools immediately increase student access to supportive, caring people (guidance counselors, teacher, support service staff, etc.) and academic and social support services and programs (child care, tutoring, exam prep, scholarship programs, counseling, internships, etc.).

2.2. Our Collectively Identified Themes and Subthemes

This section is organized according to the themes and subthemes that were identified by the students/co-researchers and me. The overarching themes I created to organize the many themes and subthemes identified by the students/co-researchers include: cruelty in schools, school and community (i.e. positioning them within schooling problems), students (i.e. positioning them within schooling problems), urban school problems, problems and solutions, and the CPAR process. Most of the themes and subthemes noted as part of the first four overarching themes were identified by the students/co-researchers, and I identified most of the themes in the last overarching theme, the CPAR Process, as it focuses more on process analysis of the CPAR study. I also included tables at the start of each of the six overarching theme sections. The numbers in these tables represent how many times each of the themes appeared in reflective writings and during the final presentations. These tables are included merely to provide a rough sense of how often topics came up in written and performed discourse.

Tables are incorporated into the results sections, and figures of these tables are in the appendices (Appendices 5-10). These numerical and visual representations are included in order to illustrate how often these topics came up in written and performed work in each of these semesters and across these semesters. I provide details concerning my rationale for including these numbers and visuals, and a few disclaimers, in the next section.

2.2.a. Data, Data, So Much Data...

The previous section provides a glimpse at our findings and themes. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I provide a plethora of student/co-researcher quotes which capture the many, often overlapping, themes and subthemes identified throughout the CPAR process. While some themes and subthemes could potentially be collapsed into others, I decided not to do this because doing so would remove nuance and our individual and collective processing of an overwhelming amount of data. I strived to communicate transparency and unadulterated representations of students'/co-researchers' narratives, experiences, and discoveries by presenting as much of their language, thoughts, and discourse as I could. To achieve this, I decided not to merge similar themes and subthemes. At times I have also noted relevant research that relates to students/co-researchers' findings, to respect and support their work and position it within the context of germane academic scholarship.

While I aimed to make students'/co-researchers' words central throughout this chapter and tried to organize their work in a sequential order that revealed an overarching sense of our collective journey in discovering these themes, it cannot possibly communicate the beauty and complexity of our transformation and raised critical-consciousness. At the end of each of the semesters, I had incredible student/co-participant writings, stories, and projects that together created an enormous amount of data. It took months to enter all of the data from both semesters

into an excel spreadsheet so that codes co-created by the co-researchers and me could be used to analyze the findings across both semesters. Some of the themes were named by the student/co-researchers, and some were named or renamed by me so that both semesters' data could be analyzed together. There were moments of synchronicity across the semesters that are interesting to note, as well as topics that were more or less prevalent. In order to illustrate the breadth of topics explored, basic descriptive charts are provided at the end of this paper in Appendices 5-10.

Throughout the chapters reporting our results, quotes (shorter moments as well as longer narratives) capture the depth and humanness (lived experience) of these topics. All of our gatherings were dynamic and often hard to record, so it is important to note that there may have been moments in which these topics were mentioned and missed in either semester.

Regarding the tables at the start of each major theme and charts in the appendices, the purpose of reporting the number of times these subjects appeared in recorded discourse and writings was not to identify certain topics or areas of discussion as more important than others because they occurred at a higher frequency on record, but to illustrate how often the groups mentioned these topics in their writings and recorded discussions in each of the semesters in order to note that there existed numerous moments of connection across the semesters. In other words, there appeared to be shared experiences across semesters. There were also topics that students/co-researchers wrote about and presented in one semester and not the other, so those differences are noted numerically and visually as well.

This CPAR study not only forged shared understandings among co-researchers within the class and among these researchers and the community members with whom they dialoged, but also it inspired hints of shared understanding among co-researchers across the two different semesters. They did not engage directly with each other as a result of this CPAR project;

however, they were connected by their shared communal existence as co-members in the surrounding community and their experiences exploring and traversing CPAR pathways respectively.

Another word of caution concerning the charts, while certain areas tended to be discussed and brought up more often in each of the semesters, another topic might have been brought up toward semester's end so that students/researchers only engaged with it a few times. Nonetheless, that discovery was a meaningful and important issue. Therefore, again, it is key to approach the visual representations of topics as an additional method for creating connections and noting nuance across the semesters and not as a tool used to determine the worth or value of the themes identified and topics discussed. Reporting the data in this manner also makes it much easier to organize, illustrate, and digest the incredible work (data collected, analyses conducted, findings reported, etc.) that was collectively accomplished by these remarkable community college students/co-researchers throughout the two semesters.

2.3. Cruelty in Schools

Table 2.3: Cruelty in Schools

Cruelty in Schools (Reds)	Fall 2011	Spring 2012
Physical	29	23
Bullying	27	81
Technology/Media	0	23
Racism/Discrimination	71	30
Diffability	15	27
Sexual	3	5
Language	7	9
Unkind/lack of compassion	44	58
Emotional response	30	25
Being a Bully	3	8

In both semesters, students discussed numerous acts of cruelty that they or their friends, families, or community members had experienced. As part of the Spring 2012 group presentation

on bullying, Mateo listed the problems he, his group members, and their interviewees experienced when they were in school, which included: bullying in high school, harassment, abuse, being judged on appearance, being judged based on race, and being judged based on a special problem someone had. Cruelty included the overt and covert behaviors and practices of certain members of the school or greater community that inflicted pain and caused suffering (physical, emotional, psychological, and social) in individuals or collective groups of people. In the schooling experiences investigated, student researchers reported the prevalence of bullying and violence, a lack of interest in student's sense of safety and belonging, and the silencing of student voice. Students described the occurrence of these acts of cruelty in both urban and suburban public school settings and in public and private realms across the communities in the area. The cruelty, which impacted students' physical, emotional, and sexual well-being, appeared to know no bounds. In both semesters, students/co-researchers stressed the importance of creating diverse learning environments and the need to explicitly teach students how to approach people who are different with open hearts and open minds.

2.3.a. Physical Violence and Physical Abuse

Stories about physical violence and abuse were plentiful in both semesters. Students/researchers shared the experiences of community members and detailed bloody fights that were motivated by difference: racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, religious, gender, dress, appearance, ability, sexuality, etc.

One of Emma's interviewee's attended an urban high school. Emma reported:

She liked high school and misses it. Everyone was nice and treated equally. She wish she could have gone to a different high school because she would have been able to get into a different college, but not because she could keep up with the work. School was very

mixed so not a lot of racism. Two kids got into a fight, one pulled out a knife and killed the other one. It left a big impression on everyone because they were both really quiet and no one expected it. Everyone was scared, and everyone was curious as to what would happen to this kid. (Fall 2011, Emma)

Emma and her interviewee viewed school diversity as a positive attribute and thought racism was curbed as a result. Nonetheless, students in this urban school had to make sense of the horrors of student homicide at the hands of another student.

The groups that investigated bullying also noted the occurrence of violence begets violence. Shani explained:

That's why (bullying is) really a cycle, and it's a bad cycle. Because you probably was bullied, but here it is, you took it in, and you didn't feel like it was going to be a little problem, but later down that line, you start bullying the next one. You keep it all inside of you, and you're bullying the next one. And you're going to get one over on this one because he's younger than you, or he looks like a wimp, or he just don't do right. That's just bullying right there. (Spring 2012, Shani)

The group identified the spider web effect of the spreading violence, too. During their bullying presentation, Mateo shared the effects of bullying in the community. These included: “parents feel they start to lose connection with their child. There could be an increase in violence throughout the community. High schoolers’ dropout rate will increase. Decrease in test scores and a lack of work ethic” (Spring 2012, Mateo).

Students/co-researchers thought that cruelty, bullying, and violence experienced in schools had gotten worse than previous years. Researchers have concluded that violence and bullying is a more prevalent problem in schools and the workplace (Fox & Stallworth, 2005;

Gomez et al., 2014; Sticca & Perren, 2013; Weber, 2015); however, statistics illustrate that rates of school violence in the U.S. are declining, apart from cities like Detroit, San Francisco and Cleveland (Neuman, 2012).

Students/co-researchers questioned their sense of safety in Central New Jersey's urban areas. A prominent local news story reported on September 16, 2011 that "Today, 108 Trenton police officers will lose their jobs. The biggest blow to the department in its history has residents wondering how safe their streets will be tomorrow" (Zdan, 2011). Students/co-researchers voiced concerns that the state seemed to be pulling safety services and support from not only the communities in and surrounding New Jersey's Capitol but also from vulnerable families in underserved neighborhoods in other urban areas of the state. Community members insisted that they experienced an immediate crime spike when local police officer presence disappeared. Perhaps they are unfazed, and sadly validated, by the August 29, 2013 local news article announcing "Trenton becomes 'numb' to near-constant violence; new murder record set in capital city" (Zdan & Pizzi, 2013). Adding insult to injury, Governor Chris Christie has praised Camden, New Jersey, for reduced rates of violent crimes, which he credits to replacing local police officers with regional officers. Some view this move as a union-busting tactic. Alternatively, "Camden County Police Chief Scott Thomson cautioned against discounting the effect more officers can have on crime in a city. He said that Camden currently has more officers patrolling its streets than at any point in its history" (Laday, 2014). Camden County Police Chief Scott Thomson's message echoes the pleas of underserved urban areas like Trenton. In response to Chris Christie's recommendation that Trenton replace city police officers with regional officers:

Trenton Mayor Tony Mack's office issued the following statement, calling for state aid to hire more officers immediately: Our administration is open to hearing ideas on how we can reduce crime in the City of Trenton. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the regional police force was proposed for Camden City in early 2011 while new hires only just started this year. We have a very real issue with telling our residents to wait two years for basic quality of life that other communities enjoy all day every day.

Trentonians need relief now and we stand by our earlier proposal, whereby the State increases our funding so we may hire an additional 75 police officers. (Portnoy, 2013)

Local community members believed that violence was getting worse in their communities and in their schools. They worried that families, organizations, and local businesses would flee their neighborhoods, and criminal activity would run rampant. Without adequate state aid and support, they did not think a reprieve from the violence was possible.

2.3.b. Bullying (all forms)

Bullying became the catch-all term for describing situations when students were verbally, physically, emotionally, and psychologically attacked. The prevalence of bullying was mentioned frequently, and bullies seemed to target students who were perceived as different. Therefore, students were picked on because of differences related to perceived: race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, disability (or diffability based on perceived academic, social, physical, emotional, and cognitive/intellectual abilities), sexuality, appearance, dress, socioeconomic status, and more.

During the Spring 2012 bullying presentation, Shani shared the following story:

Yes, this is about Malik. Malik lives in my neighborhood, okay. Malik had had bone cancer so he walked very funny and used to get teased a lot about it. Three guys always

constantly teased him because of the way he walked. They would call him Frankenstein, something he really didn't like. Malik loved sports but he couldn't play sports because of his leg. He went from therapy and everything to see how he could redevelop and walk but he couldn't. The best part about Malik (Shani gets choked up) the best part about Malik, he is in an ivy league school right now. The three bullies were suspended from school. Malik, he takes my breath away, because Malik is very smart. They actually skipped him to another grade in another school. His mom didn't want any publicity from anyone, so I won't tell you his last name, his real name is Malik, and he lives in (the urban school district). He is going to other schools to share his story, and he wants to write a book about his story. (Spring 2012, Shani)

Malik was targeted because of his illness and his disability. Students/co-researchers expressed shock and disgust that a child struggling to overcome complications from serious health problems would then have to surmount cruel, targeted attacks from his classmates. It appeared that bullying had hit an all-time low because the unspoken, discomforting question in the group was “Who picks on a cancer kid?”

While some scholars think cruelty, bullying, and violence are on the rise and human decency is at a low (Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Gomez et al., 2014; Sticca & Perren, 2013; Weber, 2015), students/co-researchers were not sure if bullying had gotten worse than previous years and whether bullying is starting younger. Some of them were inclined to think bullying is more pervasive and destructive, and hurts a greater number of children. Shani mentioned in her reflective writings that, unlike the teenagers she interviewed today who experience a lot of bullying and bottle it all up inside, she did not feel there was a strong bullying presence when she was in school. “In my younger days of high school it never was about being a bully. It was all

about who was in the best well known group, who had the best fashion, who had the best sports team of the pro's, and who had the hottest car" (Spring 2012, Shani). While Asha is in a younger generation than Shani, she communicated that, even today, the social pressure of consumerism, i.e. being the right kind of consumer, persists in determining a student's value. In her reflective writing she stated:

For my group's topic, we will be talking about bullying in schools as well as outside of school. My personal experience with this topic was not good. During middle school and part of high school, I was bullied a lot. This was because I didn't have nice clothes or brand name sneakers like the other girls. Also, I had messed up teeth. However, in my junior year it stopped because I started to dress like the other girls, but I never changed who I was. (Spring 2012, Asha)

For Asha, conforming to consumerist pressures provided relief from the taunting, ridicule, and ostracization. Thus, students who can afford to appease bullies by conforming might experience acceptance, but students who cannot afford the goods or cannot transform themselves as needed seem to be at a loss.

Asha explained during the Spring 2012 bullying presentation that while many freshmen are afraid of juniors bullying them:

It's younger now. Because my nephew he had a problem when he was only in first grade. He actually got pushed into the toilet and one of those paper towel dispensers. He's a skinny guy with a really big head and they'll tease him because of it. The kids pushed him into the toilet and paper towel dispenser and then he got shoved into the wall in the hallways. (Spring 2012, Asha)

By the end of the semester, her group thought that bullying could be getting worse and starting younger, but the focus on bullying in the media and political discourse, and the use of technology to publically humiliate students in front of a global audience, certainly complicated the issue. Cyberbullying appeared to change students' experiences of bullying and cruelty, for the much worse.

2.3.c. Technology and Media Influence

Students/co-researchers also discovered that technology and the media were used to reinforce cruel messages that troubled students, and their understandings of themselves and their social positioning. Tegan asked the group presenting on bullying “Do you think the media and television influences bullying? Like, there's a certain image they have of people, everybody should be skinny, so when they see somebody that's fat they're going to start (bullying that person)?” The group members presenting responded with a strong *yes*. They believed that the media did fuel bullying and the cruel ways in which students, and people in general, are treating one another and themselves. To which Tegan asked, “Well, how do you stop bullying if it's all over. If it's on TV and all over the media...?” Later in the presentation, the group shared their actionable solutions, which are listed under that theme later in this paper. Dan supported Tegan's position about bullying and cruelty becoming more prevalent due to widespread use of technology, and the isolation and anonymity it creates. With cyberbullying, “you really don't know who the bully is. Half of the people in this room could be bullied but they hide it so well because it's so accepted now” (Spring 2012, Dan). The pervasiveness and ambiguity of cyberbullying have shaped it into a formidable force in students' lives, a predator that destroys them in silent isolation.

In her reflective writing, Asha wrote about a former classmate of hers who “got cyber bullied by some of the girls in our class. She was homosexual and was teased a lot in the beginning because we were in seventh grade when she came out. Many kids were too young to understand something like that” (Spring 2012, Asha). Asha also noted in her reflective writing:

bullying has become more of a problem from when I was growing up because now there is cyber bullying going on a lot more. Also bullying has made kids commit suicide more often. To fix this problem, the government should get involved with school programs to make high school students aware of the effects bullying can have on people. This could help reduce the suicide rate and let kids know different ways to deal with bullying.

(Spring 2012, Asha)

Furthermore, during the Spring 2012 bullying presentation, Asha said that, because of bullying, “this one girl overdosed on pills, and she had to get her stomach pumped. One of her old friends made a fake page for her, and they were teasing and criticizing her and everything. She couldn't even walk down the hall of her old school because she would get constantly teased” After student expressed concerned reactions, she continued:

That's what's going on with this little girl now. I saw her on the news either last night or the night before. This girl is thirteen, and they made a fake Facebook page. They made her fatter, and they put racial statuses up that weren't coming from her. (Spring 2012, Asha)

The class discussed the need for parents to become more involved in protecting their children from bullying and other attacks, and some students stressed the importance of parents talking to their children regularly and asking them if anyone is hurting them and whether they feel safe. While some students agreed that the bullying problem could be improved if families

were more involved in their children's education, Asha brought the conversation back to the influence the media has on children. She thought celebrities could be successful in ending the widespread bullying problem:

if celebrities, since kids don't listen to their parents, we all didn't listen to our parents.... I think if they had more celebrities that are big and known promoting bullying prevention. Kids look up to celebrities more than they look up to people in their own community. So if they had Nicki Minaj say, 'Oh, yeah, bullying is wack. Da da da da da.' Then kids would be like, 'I'm not bullying then' or whatever, they'll move on probably. (Spring 2012, Asha)

Shani stressed that media continues to bully everyone, children and adults, into thinking they are not good enough:

Well, you can see it right now on yahoo. You see a woman, she's big as ever, then all of a sudden she shrinks. They have a cartoon character of this person and then they have a live version of this person. She's huge and then all of a sudden she shrinks to a Coca-Cola bottle form. Come on! You're bullying a female. It's like sexist, too, because every slide that you see for yahoo's sign face is just a female. It's not talking about a male or nothing like that. It's just a female, so bullying comes in different forms, all the way around.

(Spring 2012, Shani, during the final presentations)

Many students/co-researchers in the class agreed that the media is a bully and glorifies cruelty. Audience members are invited to criticize and judge the people on display, all the while this process fuels their own insecurities. The media can be a destructive force, complicating and confusing community efforts to improve schools, which is explored further in the discussion section.

In her reflective writings, Shani wrote:

But the group is finding that the bullying problems the nation has to deal with are moving into the spotlight, like the Rutgers student who jumped off the bridge after being videotaped (with a webcam) by his roommate, which was not in the best for him with his same-sex partner. This is 2012. The world still has strong bully acts, they are coming to the light as known fact. The article title of another NJ bullying story is NJ Bully's Paralyzing Punch Nets \$4.2 million settlement. (Spring 2012, Shani)

Shani shared the details of the article quoted in her group presentation. A New Jersey student who was being targeted by a school bully informed his guidance counselor and assistant principal about the attacks and emailed them, asking them for help. A few months after that, the bully punched him in the abdomen, an act of violence which caused paralysis. New Jersey was certainly in the media spotlight for these events and because, in January 2011, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie had signed into law the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act (P.L. 2010, Chapter 122), which went into effect at the start of the 2011-2012 school year. The media reported this law to be "the toughest anti-bullying law in the country" (Friedman, 2011).

Shani also reminded the class that the bullying problem was so pervasive and socially disruptive that a documentary film had been made about it. Despite its media coverage, being victimized by bullying is still shamefully internalized and silenced. She stressed the importance of encouraging people to discuss it more openly. During her presentation, Shani said, "You've got to figure out some type of way to publicize it: 'Hey, we've got a problem here!' They have a movie that's out right now called *Bullying*" (Spring 2012, Shani). The class agreed that it is a start but not enough.

2.3.d. Racism, Discrimination, Prejudice

Cruel acts stemming from racism, discrimination, and prejudice were present in suburban and urban schools throughout the county and beyond. In fact, often throughout cruelty sections, it is abundantly clear that numerous acts of cruelty and violence are racially motivated, or spawn from discrimination or prejudice based on perceived racial or ethnic difference.

Halima, who moved her family from Africa to Suburban District 7, shared that her daughter is frequently a target of racist attacks:

My daughter always tells me her experience in her school. She faces some form of racism. She is a very intelligent girl, and honor roll student, also in gifted and talented classes. However, some of the people in her class 100% Caucasians always try to make her feel she doesn't belong in that class because of her skin color. (Fall 2011, Halima)

Halima's daughter is a hardworking, motivated student who aspires to be the best student she can be. Despite her merits, achievements, and countless positive contributions she brings to her classes, she is made to feel ashamed because of her skin color and endures social exclusion to boot. Racism and bigotry take many forms, which can be subtle, direct, violent, widespread, unchecked, and most certainly cruel. The overarching theme of "cruelty" was created in part because "bullying" and "racism" are often blurred in discourse. Halima's daughter was treated cruelly, with callous indifference, because of her skin color. The "100% Caucasians" made her feel like an outsider because of her skin color, her perceived racial difference. The distinction between cruelty and bullying is important in her situation because being treated with indifference may not be considered bullying. However, it is just as poisonous to a person's sense of self and social belonging, and warrants immediate attention and rectification. Later in the "CPAR Process" section, the subtheme "Bullying Label Erases Underlying Prejudice" addresses the

concern about naming all vicious attacks against students as acts of bullying. This umbrella term can be problematic because it can veil deeper social problems (racism, homophobia, sexism, etc.), which can be harder to understand and eradicate if they are not explicitly acknowledged and addressed appropriately.

In the fall semester, Zaafer shared how he was a target of violent attacks, in the wake of 9/11, because students knew he was from Afghanistan:

Hi everybody, my name is Zaafer, and I'm from Afghanistan. I came here in 1999 and started school. I never went to school back home, so it was all new to me. I never knew what a teacher was. My parents taught me stuff at home. That was pretty much my education back home. Once I got here, I had to deal with kids at the school. I finally made some friends, and after that, 9/11 happened. I was affected by 9/11 very hard because the people around me already knew where I was from, where I came from, my background and all that. They knew where I lived and everything. After the whole thing, everybody pretty much turned their back on me. Every day I was going home with some kind of scar or knowing the trouble I would face if I went back to school. I never got my parents involved until my last two years in high school, and then after that, I went up to my parents, I mean my uncle because he speaks English. He's a lawyer, and I told him about the situation. That's when he found out that I was threatened in school by three kids—that they were going to kill me. I had never shared this before. Once I told him, he immediately took action against it, went to the school, talked to the principal, and everybody got together. After that, while I was going through the whole thing, I didn't know what was going on because I still had problems with reading and writing, and I was always going through that. I didn't want to worry too much about what's going to happen

to them. Finally those kids got expelled from school. They asked me if I wanted to press charges, but I didn't because I knew everyone at school would have known about it, and they would hate me even more. Other than how they hate me for being where I'm from. Later on, throughout the years, my last year, I became very popular in the school because, not because I was picked on and all that stuff, because what happened with my story. Everybody knew me, where I was from, and I guess they did a little bit of research on their own, like what 9/11 was about. And that was when people already knew what was going on and what the war was about and everything. And that's my story. (Fall 2011, Zaaafir)

Zaaafir's story is filled with many themes identified by the students/co-researchers. He had moved to a new school; he encountered racism, discrimination, and prejudice in his school; students bullied him, abused him, and treated him cruelly rather than compassionately; his parents were not in touch with what he was experiencing at school because they did not speak English; he struggled with reading and writing and was socially isolated, so he needed greater academic and social support in his school. He was not the only student who was targeted maliciously after 9/11. He also shared that "an Indian student's turban was burned during a fire drill by another American student" (Fall 2011, Zaaafir). The student was labeled a terrorist and her turban was set on fire while she was wearing it:

One of my friends shared her high school story. They had a fire drill and everyone was standing outside. One American student burned another Indian student's turban. It wasn't burned all the way, but it did show discrimination against an Indian student. I believe it was something very wrong to do. I was very amazed thinking about how discrimination still exists. After so many laws and awareness, it's sad how people still are racist. Also, I

have many Muslim friends, and they have been discriminated so many times. They have been called bad names and bullied. It's just upsetting to see or hear all these type of stories. (Fall 2011, Zaafir)

The post-9/11 anti-Muslim backlash continues to inflict pain and strife in the lives of American Muslims a decade after the attack. Muslim students are unjustly labeled as terrorists and enemies of the state by their peers, and faculty and administrators are not consistently naming the destructive racism for what it is and not fostering a climate of humane understanding (Hing, 2009; Jandali, 2012).

At the start of the Spring 2012 group presentation, Dan shared the following story:

Yeah, my mom went to high school in the 80's, I don't want to tell her age, she went to high school around the 80's. She went to a really big, gang affiliated high school, one with a lot of Hispanic and African American students. She was really the minority, which is not the case in a lot of high schools. She was in a bathroom, and she was in the wrong bathroom at the wrong time, and she got jumped. She got jumped by a bunch of African American ladies, and my mom stuck up for herself and wound up fighting the girls off and got out, but that just goes to show you that race can be a factor in any type of high school. It doesn't really matter, white, black, purple, anyone can get bullied for any type of reason. (Spring 2012, Dan)

Students/co-researchers acknowledged that racially-motivated attacks can have the potential to impact anyone. Dan explained that his mother had been targeted because she was "White" and a minority in her school. He also shared that she was harassed for smoking a brand of cigarettes that was not favored by her attackers. Racial allegiances had been made to certain brands. Repeatedly, in all of the stories shared in which a student is assaulted or victimized by

other students, the victim is identified as being different than the others and consequently worthy recipients of admonishment, maltreatment, and cruelty.

During the bullying presentation in Spring 2012, Asha shared:

And speaking about race. The person that I interviewed, my coworker, she's from a whole other country. She's from Africa. So when she first came here in like 7th or 8th grade, she didn't know English at all, and had no whereabouts about American customs or anything, so she got teased a lot by other kids. They called her 'African Booty Scratcher' all the time, and she didn't understand what it meant, but she understood that it wasn't something that was supposed to be said to her. So, one incident, she was riding the bus and this girl kept teasing her. And when they finally got off the bus, she kicked the girl's butt. Cause she just got sick of it. And then they became best friends after that, and they still talk on the phone and everything. So, I mean, from bullying, you could make a friend or two, but nine times out of ten times you're not going to. (Spring 2012, Asha)

Asha's interviewee was likely in need of a welcoming, compassionate community when she arrived to her new home, far from the comforts and familiarities she had known. Instead, she was branded an outsider by communal renaming. Students/co-researchers enjoyed the unexpected, positive ending in this story. However, the reoccurring message in this tale also communicates the prevalence of aggressive and malicious acts, motivated by racism and bigotry. This cruelty frequently inflicts pain and suffering, and it reminds student of the dangers of being perceived as different.

2.3.e. Diffability: looking/appearing different, disability, dress

Students/co-researchers noticed that cruel attacks were motivated by racial differences, as well as numerous other types of difference or “diffability.” The basic condition of standing out or seeming different appeared to invite cruelty. Diffability encapsulated the numerous, idiosyncratic markers for identifying someone as different and lesser. Milan wrote in his reflective writing:

My experience for group two is that I went through school with learning disabilities, low self-esteem, bullying, and peer-pressure. It was hard to understand and learn English because my parents were foreign. I had low self-esteem so I was shy and quiet and worried about what people thought of me. People always bullied me because I was short, my background, and cause I was different. My peers always pressured me to do something stupid or just unsafe. Hearing my group’s problems, most of us experienced similar things. It made me feel upset and worried a lot. It made me think about what I’ve been through in my life. We might come from different backgrounds but had almost similar outcomes. I believe my school problems changed me as a person to help people in need. (Spring 2012, Milan)

Milan’s story is one of many throughout this paper that illustrates how being different can make students a target of malicious attacks and the self-damage that is internalized as a result. After years of being tormented for being different, Milan shared throughout the CPAR process that he wanted to do something to diminish the acts of cruelty in public schools and to bring comfort to students who were suffering in silence.

2.3.f. Sexual Abuse/Harassment, Teen Pregnancy, and Sexual Orientation

This theme became an identifier for topics related to sexual abuse and harassment, teen pregnancy, and sexual orientation (perceived/projected by others or self-proclaimed). One of

Milan's interviews shared that "There was definitely sexual harassment among students. I experienced it first hand in my junior year, which was upsetting" (Spring 2012, Milan). As mentioned previously, when one of Asha's interviewee's came out as homosexual in her school, she was bullied and cyberbullied so ruthlessly that she attempted suicide.

In Rashida's reflective writing about her interviewing, she wrote that one of her interviewees had attended a suburban school and reported:

It was a good environment to learn. My teachers were very helpful in my learning experiences. The biggest issue that I encountered in high school was that I was a teenage mother before I graduated. If I could have changed or improved the school I would have suggested to them to build a daycare on school grounds. (Fall 2011, Rashida's)

Other students/co-researchers and community members echoed a desire for services and programs that would support teen parents, children coping with abuse, students overwhelmed and confused about sexual intercourse and sex-related issues, and more. The need for greater student support is explored further in the "Solutions and Problems" section in the subtheme of "More Student Support Services and Programs."

Rashida's also wrote reflectively about different interviewee who shared that she: attended a suburban school. Learning environment was above average academically driven and for the most part rewarding. Teachers pushed you to excel in your own gift. They found what sparked an interest and pushed you in that direction to succeed. An issue encountered, I had a male teacher try to touch me inappropriately. To improve school, more support groups for students. (Fall 2011, Rashida)

Both of these interviewees expressed a need for, and a lack of, support in their schools so that they could more effectively manage stressful events that occurred in their lives and their schools. These students struggled with life-changing and traumatic events seemingly alone.

Later in the semester, Rashida wrote:

I chose various people to interview. Learning about the segregation in Southern schools was something I thought went well. One interviewee had an experience with sexual abuse and believing the information she shared would somehow help other students she was willing to share. All problems need to be addressed and solutions rendered so that the future becomes brighter for those willing. (Fall 2011, Rashida)

Students who had experienced trauma and abuse often expressed their desire to share their stories with others, in the hope that by doing so they can inspire positive change and something would be done to provide greater support to current students. Ultimately, when students wanted to make sense of issues viewed as sexual in nature, they lacked a supportive school community.

Schools' negligence with addressing sexual topics, often intentionally, is a long withstanding, serious global problem (Zimmerman, 2015). Until school and community members determine and implement effective practices for teaching sex education and counseling students with sexually-related issues, students will continue to navigate confusing and controversial terrain alone or with insufficient support.

2.3.g. Harmful Language, Name Calling, and Rumors

Cruel language existed in a colossal degree. Examples were abundant: being called "Frankenstein" because of a limp caused by cancer and frequent use of historically oppressive slurs to demean students in special education, students who were racially or ethnically profiled,

students associated with what was considered by some as non-normative sexual orientations, students who performed gender roles ambiguously or outside traditional expectations, students who experimented sexually, students who worked hard to excel academically, students who wore or used the lesser valued brand of any product or service, and more.

Students/co-researchers reported the damage caused by hurtful, malicious language. The consensus was that sticks and stones could break the bones and the body, and cruel language could break the spirit and the mind. While much of the harmful language brought up in class targeted students who were different in numerous socially-constructed ways, often the cruel language was racially motivated. Zaafer shared, “I have many Muslim friends, and they have been discriminated so many times. They have been called bad names and bullied. It's just upsetting to see or hear all these type of stories” (Fall 2011, Zaafer).

As mentioned elsewhere, one of Asha's interviewee's told her that students “called her ‘African Booty Scratcher’ all the time, and she didn't understand what it meant, but she understood that it wasn't something that was supposed to be said to her” (Spring 2012, Asha). While a student new to the United States, far from her familiar home, could have benefitted from a warm, compassionate, welcoming schooling community, she had a very different welcoming in her New Jersey public high school. Asha wrote:

She had a very scary experience in high school. She is a native of Africa and when she came to the states in the 8th grade. She did not know a lot of English or American customs. As a result she would get talked about and laughed at by classmates. (Spring 2012, Asha)

During the presentations, Asha shared her interviewee's story and students/co-researchers related with the racist language. Valerie described the way in which one of her bosses imitates

the way she speaks because she has a Spanish accent. He would also speak disparagingly about Mexicans to her. While she is not from Mexico, she felt uncomfortable about his free expression of bigotry. Valerie said, “He was always saying ‘the Mexicans’ and all that. Always trying to make things Mexican. And I was like, ‘You know what, leave the Mexicans alone.’ I’m not a Mexican but still we’re all Spanish, and it’s just...” (Spring 2012, Valerie). Valerie experienced firsthand that racial and ethnic bullying in the workplace is a serious, growing problem (Fox & Stallworth, 2005).

Students discussed that if bosses feel comfortable enough to speak this way about minority groups in professional work environments than it is no wonder that members of school communities (teachers and administrators) and students speak this way. Students/co-researchers agreed that public schooling needs to include programs and curricula that encourage open-minded, non-judgmental, interactive explorations of different racial and ethnic groups within a diverse context. However, schools and classrooms must be as diverse as possible in order for students to benefit from rich, dynamic, and meaningful explorations of multiple perspectives and worldviews. Unfortunately, New Jersey’s highly segregated status is homogenizing the potential for diverse learning opportunities. Students are not only missing out on meaningful lessons that could broaden their understandings of our diverse, globally-connected existence, but also students are being harmed by festering, unchallenged ignorance.

Towards the end of the semester, Gabe wrote, “What I noticed is since my group consisted of minorities, we all had problems with some type of racism. Mine was verbal and physical racism. It was the same issue with the person I interviewed, since she came from another country” (Fall 2011, Gabe). Gabe’s interviewee reported that there was “no bullying in the beginning but came later. Around 7th grade the mocking, name calling, treating like crap

began, because of her race. She was afraid so she couldn't defend herself” (Fall 2011, Gabe). Cruel language, like racial slurs, mocking, name calling, derogatory labels, and verbal assaults perpetuating histories of oppression, can be as damaging as other forms of abuse and violence. These words are a swift reminder that students do not belong and are not accepted members of the community.

2.3.h. Unkind Treatment and the Lack of Compassion

Unfortunately, students who were most in need of compassion (the children suffering from cancer and illness, the children of families who had recently moved to the United States and searched for a warm community and a sense of belonging far from the home they missed dearly) were the ones who were targeted because of perceived differences. Examples of this have been highlighted in quotes and stories throughout this paper. Julia shared an interviewee’s story in her reflective writing. While his story also illustrates other themes (racism, disability, moving, emotional response, and more), it also captures the lack of compassion he received while struggling to adjust to a new country:

He migrated from Ecuador, a poor country where Education is not the best. He finished school in America, and he told me how it was really hard for him to adapt to school because it was so different than Ecuador. He told me how the way teachers are in America is completely different than back home. He had to learn English which was hard for him and took him a while to actually perfect, and kids bullied him because he was ‘different.’ He really didn’t have much friends in school which also made it hard on him to adjust. Also his parents didn’t know much English so they weren’t in touch with the school, he received very little help from the staff. (Spring 2012, Julia)

Many students struggling to overcome personal, familial, social, and academic obstacles must also confront cruel attacks from others. Being met with compassion rather than hostility could have made a huge difference in these students' lives.

2.3.i. Emotional Response to Cruelty: fear, pain, isolation, victimization

Students/researchers repeatedly heard victims of bullying express the emotional and psychological damage that these acts of cruelty created. More so, these individuals shared that, as a result of the attacks, they felt socially isolated and ostracized at school and no longer wanted to be there. They often did not talk to anyone about the fear and pain they endured and the cruelty they experienced damaged their personal sense of worth. After conducting his interviews, Dan noted that one of the young women he talked to:

Enjoyed school until bullied. Started in 7th and continues (female student finishing 8th grade). Made fun of because of height and red hair. Felt accepted when playing sports. Bullied at lunch, recess, and afterschool girls bullied on the internet and over the phone. It messed up my self-esteem and put me in a weird place. I couldn't discuss it with family or friends. I couldn't talk to anyone. I just wished it would all go away. (Spring 2012, Dan)

The shame and fear students experience when being victimized leads to a desire to silence the traumatic events. In his written reflections to prepare for his group presentation, Milan shared that "I was bullied a lot and picked on growing up. I was scared and never talked about it with anyone" (Spring 2012, Milan). Students could benefit from opening up about the pain; however, they bottle up the trauma, which could fester and cause damage in complicated manners.

During Group 2's final presentation in the fall semester, Rashida shared "I have learned that the littlest problem can really affect schooling. The major schooling problem is racism and bullying. It makes children not focus on school. They're scared to go to school" (Fall 2011, Group 2). While in a different group and written in her reflective writings weeks prior, Zoe corroborated when she wrote, "One major problem that I noticed was racism. Racism has played a major role in children not doing well in school. Bullying goes hand in hand with racism. Children become afraid to go to school" (Fall 2011, Zoe). Students/co-researchers consistently reported the emotional distress students felt when they endured cruelty. Thus, many students, distracted from their school work and social opportunities, perform poorly academically and suffer alone in silence.

2.3.j. Being/Becoming a Bully

Students who became bullies themselves often did so because they were trying to gain power and control over their own lives. They wanted to position themselves such that others could no longer hurt them. In his reflective writings completed to prepare for his group's presentation on bullying, Milan shared, "My interviewee was a bully and became a bully. This person learned not to care about what people say" (Spring 2012, Milan). When students were tormented, they sometimes found others to torment. Being treated cruelly hardened them at times, and they were less likely to be considerate of others. Thus, the cycle of cruelty (or the cycle of bullying as named by a group in the spring semester) perpetuated spaces of learning where cruelty bred cruelty.

CHAPTER 3 – PEOPLE AND GROUP INVOLVEMENT

3.1 School/Community

Table 3.1: School/Community

School/Community (Greens)	Fall 2011	Spring 2012
Community	13	15
Parent Involvement	38	60
Parent Blame	13	18
Parent Sympathy	3	13
School responsibility	12	31
Administrator	18	2
Teacher Involvement	48	22
Blame Teacher	41	19
Sympathize with Teacher	1	2
Government	15	28
Shared Responsibility	31	11

Discussed in greater depth in the “Collaboration from All” theme of the solution section, students/co-researchers realized that many people need to be involved in children’s education in order for it to be a meaningful and positive experience. They noted a lack of clear expectations and explicit responsibilities for all of these people and groups and the need for more involved collaboration among all of these key players.

3.1.a. Community Involvement

Educating children is a community effort, and students/co-researchers noted a lack of community involvement in the schooling systems. They wondered if this was because community members are unaware that they play an important part in children’s education. Tegan reported that:

The community also plays a big role in children's education. A clean community ensures that children can go to and from school safely without influence from gangs or street activities. Proper transportation is also important. A community that cares offers school buses for children living far from their schools. The community can also help by providing more law enforcement so that the streets remain clean of crime. (Spring 2012, Tegan)

Tegan also stated, “All in all I believe the community is a significant part in a child's education. I learned from my own experiences that after school programs and community-based activities help a struggling student through those rough school years” (Spring 2012, Tegan). The community at large can impact the success of local schools. Thus, communities must be involved in local education, research, and reform so that the complexities, unique functionalities, and enigmatic relationships and practices specific to each community can be respected and understood.

3.2.b. Parent/Home Involvement

Early in the semester, Abigail wrote that “A child's home life seems to be the root of the problem of children not getting quality education” (Spring 2012, Abigail). While later in the semester and in various moments throughout her CPAR project work, Abigail identified other factors that impact children’s access to quality education, she and other co-researchers agreed that children’s home lives influence their schooling experiences in significant ways.

In addition to greater community involvement in children’s education, Tegan argued, “Home life is just as important to a successful education. In my opinion, parents need to be completely involved in their child's life and advance their child towards graduation and beyond” (Spring 2012, Tegan). Students/co-researchers noted how the lack of parent involvement in their

children's schooling could make these students feel less motivated to work hard in school. Tegan shared:

I saw how home life was also important. I learned how I was not the only one who struggled with my education because of these factors. Family can create a barrier in a student's education. If parents do not encourage their kids to learn, if they are never there to investigate or to help their children, then this will create a pattern of troubled learning. (Spring 2012, Tegan).

Students/co-researchers determined that parent/home involvement matters greatly in a child's schooling. In some cases, students/co-researchers and community members concluded that having increased parental involvement or an educationally focused home environment could have improved students' schooling experiences significantly.

3.1.c. Blame Parents

Asha shared during the final group presentation that it is hard to tell when someone is a victim of bullying and "that's why parents need to get more involved because that's the main reason why kids commit suicide because when they are bullied they feel like they have no one to go to" (Spring 2012, Asha). James wrote that "Parents and teachers need to be more active in preventing abuse and need to be more open to students, so when they have a problem they can come to someone" (Spring 2012, James). Students/co-researchers identified a toxic lack of parental involvement at times.

During his group's final presentation, Sam also reported that:

Another problem could be at home. Parents, they don't really know what goes on in classes. It seems like they don't know what impacts classes negatively or positively. So rather than a back to school night there should be a parents go back to school night,

which is like a seminar that teaches them, you know, gives them a breakdown of the classroom, what happens with disorderly students, how they can impact it, what teachers can do to motivate the kids better. (Fall 2011, Sam, Group 3)

Students/co-researchers determined that parents and families must be aware of how their children experience their public schools, and they need to have a role in making decisions that impact their children in their schools. Parent and family involvement is important, and could be improved, in both urban and suburban schools.

Maliha noted that, while they are technically involved, it is problematic that:

Parents in affluent suburbs are pressuring children to be the best just to brag to others that their child is better than your child. The pressure is hard on the kids. College friends in (the urban district) have different problems. Their family members don't care as much about their studies, parents work and don't have time to spend with children. (Spring 2012, Maliha)

Student/co-researchers reported the need for parents and families to work with the school to improve schooling experiences for all children, their own children and other children in the community. The competitive school and community climate undermines meaningful learning.

3.1.d. Sympathize with Parents

Students/co-researchers in both semesters noted that parent-teacher conferences are underutilized and have the potential to be much more effective. Parents in the Spring 2012 class complained that teachers only had five minutes to meet with each parent and not much could be said in that amount of time. Parents did not feel welcomed as collaborators in their children's educational experiences. One actionable solution they developed was a federal law which made

parent-teacher conference dates in the fall and spring no-work holidays, so parents could attend conferences without being penalized at work.

Valerie explained that providing parents with paid time off and the ability to attend parent-teacher conferences would greatly improve communication between parents and teachers:

Because then it would be easy, and parents would be able to go to the teachers to find out what's going on with their kids instead of getting an email. Like myself sometimes I have work and I don't have enough time. By the time I get to the house. You know. I email her and she's not in school anymore. (Spring 2012, Valerie)

Students/co-researchers requested that schools explore ways to include parents and families more in decisions that shape the bigger picture (their children's K-12 journey through the district's schools) as well as the smaller details (their children's day to day and moment to moment experiences of their community public school).

In the fall semester, students/co-researchers also wanted parents and families to be able to play a bigger role in improving their children's schooling experiences. Towards the end of the semester, Sam shared, and his group agreed, "I feel there needs to be a 'going back to school night' where there is a seminar that teaches parents what goes on in a classroom and they can create solutions to unproductive classrooms together" (Fall 2011, Sam). In order for schools to run most effectively, students/co-researchers envisioned educational communities where parents always felt welcome to visit their children's schools and participate fully in their children's learning, academic growth, and social development.

3.1.e. School's Responsibility

Parents and families are overworked and unable to stay as connected to teachers as school staff as they would like. Therefore, students/co-researchers concluded that school members need

to think of creative ways to involve parents and families more in their children's education. "I think schools should offer a little more than a standard education. The most important thing is getting and keeping parents involved" (Fall 2011, Rashida). They thought it was important for school members and officials to acknowledge their responsibility in improving the inclusion of parents and family members in schooling decision and practices.

Students/co-researchers also thought schools have a responsibility to meet the needs of all students. Too many students have problems that are systemically ignored. At the end of the semester, Zoe wrote reflectively, "I have learned that a lot of people had problems in high school. Schools don't realize that everyone has problems. Schools need to create programs that help kids get through schools" (Fall 2011, Zoe). She and other students/co-researchers recommended that schools hire more guidance counselors, teachers, and support service staff and train and educate them to be more compassionate. Additionally, schools must provide more time in the day dedicated to supporting students and their unique needs. They also recommended that schools implement student support programs, with significant input and direction from students in the school.

A few solutions Abigail thought schools should implement included "bringing back study hall for students and more references at school for teen moms. This way teen moms can have a little relief and can go to school and graduate, and a student can have less stress with homework and studying" (Spring 2012, Abigail). Isabel and her group also recommended that schools "provide after school programs, one-on-one, tutoring sessions... in reading, math, writing, and study skills" (Fall 2011, Isabel). Schools can support students better if they implement social and academic programs before and after school, in addition to integrating necessary supports throughout the school day.

Daniel and his group, and the rest of the class, were troubled that some suburban schools had low class and school sizes, while other suburban schools and urban schools had class and school sizes that were well beyond a healthy capacity. They noted that larger class and school sizes had an immediately negative impact on student learning, and that it was a grave injustice to allow any school, let alone schools with the greatest number of underprivileged and marginalized students, to fill classrooms beyond 18 students. Some urban classrooms crammed in almost double this number. “Schools should cap their academic classrooms at 18 students and should hire more teachers so there are two teachers in every class” (Spring 2012, Daniel). Schools in more affluent districts frequently had classrooms that followed a collaborative team teaching model in which two licensed teachers taught together. Many of the students who had attended schools in the urban district had never experienced this model. Taking into account their own experiences and the experiences of the community members they interviewed, students/co-researchers determined that all schools should follow the collaborative team teaching model and should cap their class enrollments at 18 students.

3.1.f. Administrator Involvement

Some students interviewed described school administrators solely as disciplinarians who rigidly demanded that students obey them. With this school leadership style, students immediately felt silenced. If they desired to be heard, they were deemed rebellious. In other toxic schools, administrators were aggressively racist and insisted that students eschew their native traditions and values and assimilate to hegemonic norms and values. In schools with administrators who abused their power, students reported that they thought school leaders would have performed more effectively if they had utilized a more collaborative, open-minded, caring approach with the students.

One of Sam's interviewees shared with him that in Suburban District 6 "the principal was kind of communistic (fascist, dictator) and harsh, and forced kids to rebel." He had attended a "nicer suburban school. Thought administration was a problem. Harsh, rigid principal made kids feel unheard, unrespected. (Thus, they) wanted to riot, rebel" (Fall 2011, Sam).

Isaac and his group thought re-envisioning school leaders would be a good first step because leaders greatly impact the entire community. "Many different aspects from school need to change starting with who runs the building (principal and dean)" (Spring 2011, Isaac). Students/co-researchers recommended that school administrators rethink their approach to leading and implement programs and practices that enable everyone to feel heard. Administrators could explore ways to increase shared power, open communication, and respect for everyone in the learning community.

Theodore brainstormed with an interviewee and wrote:

I think there should be a meeting in the auditorium with the staff and students monthly, so the students can actually tell the staff what they need to know and/or they can have a suggestion box in the main office, have students drop something in the box if they need to share something, want to inform the staff. (Fall 2011, Theodore)

Students/co-researchers concluded that it is the responsibility of administrators to create and foster a school climate of open dialogue and respectful listening and hearing amongst all school community members. Practices that improve communication and respect amongst all groups and individuals would make schools feel more welcoming to students from a plurality of backgrounds, and these students would feel more empowered and accepted in their schools.

During Group 2's final presentation at the end of the semester, Halima said, "In order to improve parental involvement, school administrators must embrace the principle of a learning

community, such as reaching out, inviting parents from the community to participate in the school environment. School environments will be improved with their participation” (Fall 2011, Halima). School administrators must also acknowledge their role in creating a welcoming school environment for parents and families.

Sofi shared that her schooling:

was not a good experience due to the fact that I didn't get anything good or positive out of it. Students should organize and talk to the teachers, principals, and superintendents and share our opinions with them. How are we going to better ourselves and our future?

These experiences are rare because most high funded schools do not go through these problems. If they don't, urban schools shouldn't either. All students should get the same respect and education. I was glad to hear my group's opinion just to see if I can agree with them. (Fall 2011, Sofi)

Students/co-researchers consistently stressed that administrators' involvement in improving schooling experiences for students must include concerted efforts to hear, respect, and respond to the needs of the students and their families. Administrators have a lot of power in their schools, and they are key players in any movement that aims to improve schools. In order to create and implement effective and appropriate education reform, administrators will need to share their power with students, families, teachers, and other members of the community. They should also possess the qualities and backgrounds deemed essential in order to perform as the great leaders their communities need.

3.1.g. Teacher Involvement

Teachers appear in most of the overarching theme sections (Cruelty in Schools, School/Community, Students, Urban Problems, and Problems/Solutions), which is

understandable because teachers and students interact intimately with each other throughout most of the school day. Conversations about teachers, especially teachers who had caused harm, dominated much of the discourse early in the semester. The neglectful, apathetic teacher is explored more in the next theme (and other sections when fitting). The need for more supportive and caring teachers is discussed in the Problems/Solutions section. This subtheme captures the desire for teachers to have a more involved and collaborative role in the school and community.

In class, students/co-researchers discussed that teachers need to play a more active, involved role in their schools and communities. Valerie responded:

They used to. I remember when my son was little teachers were able to do more stuff.

Now you have to, you know, if you say something inappropriate then you get in trouble.

I'm sure that's why they don't even want to say anything. It's like that with parents too. If you slap a kid, they'll call DYFS on you. (Spring 2012, Valerie)

Valerie, and other students, reported that they recognized the importance of teacher involvement but sensed that teachers' hands were tied by unknown forces. Some students/co-researchers determined that teachers should be able to speak freely about what their students needed without fear of retaliation. Teachers must feel safe to participate honestly and openly about schooling problems. They should also share their power and authority with students, families, and community members, just as administrators or other public figures are expected to do.

3.1.h. Blame Teacher

Early in the semester especially, students/co-researchers blamed teachers for many of the schooling problems they experienced. They described bad teachers as lazy, apathetic, just collecting a check, and ignorant about curricular content area. Later in the semester, students/co-

researchers determined that teachers are not solely to blame for schooling problems, nor is any person or group solely to blame. They explore the need to Stop the Blame Game in the Problems/Solutions section. However, students/co-researchers still determined that teachers who do harm (i.e., teachers who do not care about their students and who are not knowledgeable about the content areas they teach) do not belong in the classroom teaching children. Isaac insisted that “non-enthusiastic and not knowledgeable teachers should find another job” (Fall 2011, Isaac). His sentiment was shared passionately by many of the fall semester students/co-researchers.

Rashida presented during her final presentation that:

One of the things our group discussed in regards to lack of interest is that teachers must have mastered knowledge of the content area that they teach. If the teacher has a degree to teach the class then they should utilize all the knowledge they learned while they were in school to implement some of that knowledge in their students. A lot of times in different schools, whether it's suburban or urban, you find teachers who are not working to their ability, the way that they want their students to work to their capability. It causes the student to not want to participate in class let alone attend class. Like, why am I coming here if the teacher is not doing her best to teach me? It doesn't really serve me a purpose in being in the classroom. (Fall 2011, Rashida)

During Group 3's presentation Isabel shared:

Okay, I'm going to piggyback off of Ashley here, personal distractions and death of a relative which causes not being able to be focused which causes grades to fail, teachers being unfair to students, not allowing them to makeup work because of serious excuses, I mean they could have been in an accident, they could have had death in the family. Some

teachers are very hard and won't allow you to make up a certain amount of work, and a lack of academic support from teachers, certain goals pertaining to future classes and classwork. (Fall 2011, Isabel)

When writing about one of his interviewees (who had attended school in Suburban District 5), Sam wrote:

He said that the teachers didn't really have the patience if a kid didn't understand something. One thing he said 'it was the teacher's way or the highway.' They didn't really give into anything. They were condescending if you asked for help. They acted like you were bothering them. He said it seemed like they were just there to collect a paycheck, not serve like a proper teacher. (Fall 2011, Sam)

Ashley presented that her teachers "showed a lot of favoritism. They showed that they didn't really care. Like the rest of the group said, it was basically just a paycheck to them. They made me feel like I shouldn't care either. So that was my issue. That was my problem." (Fall 2011, Ashley, Group 3 Final Presentation).

Teachers who did not care about their students and did not care about their content area spread their lack of interest to their students like a contagion. Later in the semester, students/co-researchers concluded that a problem-riddled schooling system and societal injustices to a larger degree impacted teachers as well, and ineffectual teachers might be symptomatic in the grand scale of schooling maladies. Communities participating in educational reform and research must investigate the entire picture, as challenging as this endeavor promises to be.

3.1.i. Sympathize with Teachers

There were very few moments of sympathy expressed for teachers in either semester. Valerie noted that in her community (Suburban District 3, which is in an affluent, small town):

I always feel welcome, and the staff and teachers always have a smile on their faces. In overcrowded schools, the students do not have the necessary supplies. It is hard for the teacher because instead of working with 15 children, they have to work with 35 children. Lunch starts at 10am, and students are hungry by 2pm, so they cannot concentrate on their school work. (Spring 2012, Valerie)

She described teachers as warm and welcoming in the suburban schools, and she sympathized with the overwhelmed and under-supported teachers in the urban schools. A few other students/researchers also noted how challenging it must be for teachers to work in overwhelmed and underfunded schools. However, most discussions about teachers positioned them as part of the problem. Later in the semester, caring teachers, involved in their schools and communities, became a vital component when implementing meaningful solutions.

3.1.j. Government Involvement

Students/co-researchers determined that the government must work more aggressively to ensure that all students are receiving a quality education. Funding must be distributed in a manner that enables all schools to provide equitable access to resources, materials, opportunities, and support. New Jersey has state laws and statutes that are pro-desegregation, and the government officials need to enforce them.

One group wrote at the end of the spring semester, “More importantly the government needs to enact policies that tackle the real issues that affect school performance. There must be a system setup to make sure all schools perform at a similar level regardless of the community income ratio” (Solution from a group in Spring 2012). While students/co-researchers stressed that government officials had to work more aggressively to ensure that all children are receiving quality educations in diverse schooling environment, particularly historically marginalized

students and little ones growing up in impoverished and urban communities, they also wondered whether these officials even care. If they do not care, they determined that communities need to explore tactics that can be conducted in order to incentivize officials so they do care, and so that they are motivated to construct systems that check and balance educational experiences and outcomes to validate equities across all districts and communities.

During his group's final presentation, Leo and his group also called upon the government to make college an affordable option for students:

Students/co-researchers also thought that state and federal governments need to make college more accessible financially to students from low and middle class families. They talked frequently in class about the unmanageable financial burden of higher education. They argued that attending college, even with loans, has become unaffordable for many students. We also think that the government needs to provide more funding for students to stay in college, especially poorer students to be able to attend college. (Spring 2012, Leo, Group 1)

The student loan crisis and sky-rocketing costs to attend college warrant immediate attention and reform. Governing bodies on local, state, and federal levels must guarantee that all citizens, and people striving to become citizens, can afford to earn a quality education, particularly because our democratic nation requires an educated populace in order to function and thrive.

3.1.k. Shared Responsibility

Students/co-researchers determined that all parties are responsible for communicating the importance of education, creating best conditions for student learning, and achieving the highest academic/social results, including community members, parents, students, school members,

guidance counselors, teachers, support service staff, administration, government officials. Since everyone plays an important role in the education of children in our communities, there must be clear expectations and specific responsibilities for all groups involved (for example, students, parents, teachers, administrators, school staff, community members, government officials, etc.).

Sam wrote that “By doing this research, I’ve learned that the main problem with schooling is everyone around the student and the students themselves create the ambition that they have. It’s a group effort” (Fall 2011, Sam). Sam also noted that problems, like “other students slowing down the learning process, students getting caught up with the ‘cool people,’ teachers not teaching to full capacity because of other distracting students”, while it would be easy to blame those individual people who are not respecting students’ right to a quality education, improving schooling actually “boils down to being a joint effort with students, parents, teachers” (Fall 2011, Sam) The class also discussed needing administrators, the state board of education, community members and more. Isabel wrote, “After this research process and coming up with solutions, any school problem can be addressed by coming together with the teachers, board of education, and other supporters to turn things around. Everyone as a whole involved in the community should come together to make changes about our schools” (Fall 2011, Isabel). A group in the fall reported that they had learned that “the problems are involved with everyone, not just the students” (Fall 2011, Group 3). By the end of semester, students in both semesters concluded that educational reform can only be designed and implemented meaningfully and efficaciously if everyone is involved, including community members, families, students, teachers, administrators, all of the other school members, government officials, etc. All people in the community, and people who make decisions that impact the community, must be

included, respected, and heard, and provide the same dignities to co-participants, when working collaboratively to improve local schools.

3.2 Students

Table 3.2: Students

Students (yellows)	Fall 2011	Spring 2012
Responsibility	25	1
Student Blame	31	2
Onus Despite	12	4
Student Sympathy	27	16
Academic vs. Social	17	12
Peer Pressure	4	10
Cruelty's Lasting Impact	13	10

3.2.a. Student Responsibilities

After moving from Mexico to the United States, Gabe realized that “students in Mexico applied themselves more” (Fall 2011, Gabe). Students/co-researchers who moved from other countries to the United States often expressed dismay about American students’ lack of interest and lack of value in their education.

Students/co-researchers also recognized that students need to be included in the decisions that are made concerning their education and need to be involved in collaborative efforts in their schools. “Students should organize and talk to the teachers, principals, and superintendents and share our opinions with them. How are we going to better ourselves and our future? These experiences are rare because most high funded schools do not go through these problems. If they don't, urban schools shouldn't either. All students should get the same respect and education” (Fall 2011, Sofi, reflective writing towards the end of the semester).

They also stressed that students should work together to ensure that all students enjoy a quality education. “We all have different ways of learning, each of us since we’re all different.

So it's up to us, like he said, we all have to put our own motivation into working and to learn. That way we know we can learn and help out each other" (Fall 2011, Gabe, Group 1 Final Presentation). Students have a responsibility to demand the best learning experiences for themselves and for their fellow classmates.

Students/co-researchers acknowledged that many students, especially students in poor, urban districts, had substantial reasons to complain about their schools and the serious problems they experienced. However, they also wanted students to remember that they are not helpless and have the power to shape their own educational experiences to a certain extent. A couple of Isabel's solutions stressed the need for students to take responsibility for their education. She wrote, "Solution #3: Students take accountability for their study time and maintain their assignments. Solution #4: Students can reach out to their teachers for help and seek other means of help. (Fall 2011, Isabel). Students/co-researchers determined that students must take responsibility for their education *and* the education of their *fellow students*. Students/co-researchers expressed a desire for students to work together to achieve collective academic and social success, which is contrary to individualistic and merit-based approaches in schools that frequently make students feel like they are competing with one another.

3.2.b. Blaming the Student

Similar to parents and teachers, students were also targeted and blamed for schooling problems. Students were labeled lazy, unmotivated, distracting, and disruptive. One group presented on some of the perceived problems caused by students. During his group's final presentation, Sam shared that students/co-researchers and community members had identified the following schooling problems: "Other students slowing down the learning process, getting caught up with the 'cool people,' teachers not teaching to full capacity because of other

distracting students, it boils down to being a joint effort with students, parents, and teachers to fix the problems” (Fall 2011, Group 2). The class also discussed adding administrators, the Board of Ed, the government, and community members to the list of people and groups needed to comprehensively address schooling problems.

As was illustrated by Sam’s quote and his group’s presentation, students/co-researchers blamed students earlier in the semester. By the end of the semester, they identified many other groups and people responsible for the actualization of ideal educational experiences. In both semesters, students/co-researchers also had a tendency to attribute self-blame, particularly at the start of each of the semesters. They often expressed desires that they had worked harder. Early in the fall semester, Theodore wrote in his reflective writing:

When I was living at home the encouragement was always incredible when it came to schooling. They provided me with all the tools to succeed. The problem then was me. I did not feel like education was important because my father owns his own successful business which will become mine after retirement. Now I'm realizing the importance of schooling. It takes more than just hard work to make it in this country. Education drew me back to college to be an example for my children.

He also said:

What influenced my schooling most was my upbringing in a suburban environment. What interfered with my learning was mostly my lack of focus. I didn't take it very seriously. What helped me learn was mostly my parents and homework and studying. I remember a time when I was in high school and my parents would really press me to do better. I always knew I was capable of doing so but really didn't apply myself as well as I should have. (Fall 2011, Theodore)

Isaac wrote reflectively, “When I went to high school here, it didn't really faze me taking the finals. I wish I wouldn't have treated it as a joke and actually studied and did my own homework, maybe I would have done much better and learned a lot more” (Fall 2011, Isaac). Like many of their colleagues, Theodore and Isaac expressed self-blame and regrets when they reflected on their schooling experiences and perceived failures.

Conducting research brought to light the complicated and damaging ways in which students and other people attribute blame when making sense of schooling failures. “Before Higher Ed, students blame others, and in Higher Ed, they take all the blame for their actions.” (Fall 2011, Theodore). Frequently, students, teachers, and failing schools are blamed for schooling failures. The troubling impacts of distributing blame are discussed in greater depth in the “Stop the Blame Game” theme section.

By the end of the semester, students/co-researchers noted that, as students, they could have held themselves accountable for certain aspects of their learning and growth, but there were numerous other problems impacting their learning that were out of their control, many of which are explored under other subthemes throughout the results sections.

3.2.c. Onus on the Student, Challenges made the Student Stronger

Students/co-researchers also reported an empowering, yet sometimes problematic, adage. While on one hand they stated that students are a product of their environment and need a healthy, supportive environment in order to grow and learn in healthy ways; on the other hand, they expressed the need for students to rise above their troubled settings. They searched for a balanced way to understand both of these messages. They praised students who could be better than their surroundings, those who could overcome the obstacles and were made stronger because of the challenges they surmounted, those who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps:

Isabel shared earlier in the semester, “After some procrastination and not allowing myself to be focused, I grew up, matured and realized that I need education to succeed” (Fall 2011, Isabel).

Early in the semester, Ashley wrote:

What I have learned about schooling experiences, basically, yeah, what I did was a mistake, and I shouldn’t have done that because of what I was going through, but I learned from it. I started to change myself, and I started to do very well actually. Right after high school I went to several other different schools and actually did very well, before I came here. And taking responsibility as a college student and making sure I was receiving the right education” (Fall 2011, Ashley).

Zaafir viewed his schooling strife in a positive light. He wrote, “My experiences taught me to become strong and fight the bad comments and move on with my life” (Fall 2011, Zaafir).

Tegan wrote reflectively:

My parents were working all day and I was able to go in and out of the house as I pleased. Even though I was as rebellious as any other teenager I knew school was important and I needed to graduate high school to make it as an adult. I managed to straighten up on my own and catch up with all my school work and pass my classes.

(Spring 2012, Tegan)

Julia shared at the end of the semester:

I’ve learned from participating in this process that every person has a struggle in education, if it’s from living in a poor community, home life, etc. Everyone has their own struggle, and somehow somehow if you just put your mind into your struggles and fix them you can do anything as long as you don’t give up. That’s exactly what my group

members did. They had struggles, but they got by them. They're now in college and doing well. (Spring 2012, Julia)

At the end of the semester, Isabel wrote, "I've learned from watching my classmates give their presentations that some of our experiences were pretty bad ones, but they are still here to share with others. Their experiences didn't break them, but made them who they are today" (Fall 2011, Isabel).

By the end of each of the semesters, students/co-researchers acknowledged that some of the problems in local schools were too severe for students to overcome on their own and that these larger problems prevented students from experiencing a quality education. Nonetheless, many of them still expressed the message that students were made stronger because of these problems they endured.

3.2.d. Sympathize with the Student

As noted in the "Blame the Student" theme, students/co-researchers sometimes expressed self-blame at the start of the semester, and even took full responsibility for their failures. As the research process progressed, they expressed a more comprehensive understanding of the factors impacting student learning, beyond solely the student's responsibility. For example, later in the semester, Theodore wrote reflectively that:

The factors that influenced me in my high school experiences were my social status. I grew up in a suburban area. I always knew if I floated through I could make it to the end of high school without too many problems. What interfered most with my learning was the pursuit of popularity and the way teachers didn't answer a lot of the questions I was asking. What helped me to learn was some of my fellow students who were dealing with the same problems. There was a time when all my teachers would say to me was to look

something up, when I couldn't grasp what the teachers were asking me to look for. So I would ask various friends in my class for help. (Fall 2011, Theodore)

While the attribution of student blame sometimes morphed into an attribution of shared student and teacher blame, students/co-researcher began to question the productiveness of blaming at all, which is explored in the “Stop the Blame Game” section.

3.2.e. Academic Versus Social Needs

Students/co-researchers noted that this theme appeared in many students' reflective writings, narratives, interviews, and class discussions about the challenges they faced as a student. When aiming to accomplish a sense of belonging and acceptance and a sense of achievement in school, students confronted a conflict between satisfying their social needs or academic needs. Many students experienced this phenomenon of a direct conflict between their academic needs and desire and social needs and desires, and it seemed that if social won, then academic suffered inevitably. In many schools, students determined that they could not be both a good student and be accepted by their peers. An implicit ultimatum existed. Often, the social pressure was described as overt or covert peer pressure:

Most of my stories will be negative as I was not interested in studies. But you go to school to learn, and you don't only learn knowledge but you also learn life lessons in school through your friends. In high school, teachers are really important as they help each student as much as they can. After coming to college, I learned your teachers are more helpful in high school. I was very far from academic as I was engaged more with my friends. Therefore, friends and peer pressure prevented me from learning or concentrating in school. My father never liked me hanging out with my friends because

they were a bad influence on me. I did not understand him back then but now I understand because I do realize they were a bad influence. (Fall 2011, Zaafer)

Zaafer gave into peer pressure despite his father's wishes, and he focused more on his friends than his studies. Peer pressure is explored further in the next section; however, in terms of the academic versus social needs conflict, peer pressure was an integral aspect. Peer pressure not only reinforced the academic versus social needs conflict but it also existed as a covert groupthink in that it was generally understood by the students that it was socially unacceptable to be smart. One of Dan's interviewees shared that "Most kids didn't do their homework, and I didn't want to feel like a nerd, so I didn't do it to try to fit in. The main bullies were girls" (Spring 2012, Dan). At the high school in the urban district Tegan attended, "Peer pressure was huge because kids were more worried about what they were wearing than their school work" (Spring 2012, Tegan). Isaac realized he chose his friends over his academics and shared, "I had many friends that also shifted my focus from school because I would cut class for other people's gym class, so we could play sports together" (Fall 2011, Isaac). Peer pressure was not the only force driving students to choose between their academic growth and social life, though. Students also felt compelled to focus on their friends over their school work when they experienced problems at home, when teachers were not "teaching to their full capacity," or when they confronted any other "reasons that slow down the learning process" like "getting caught up in the party scene, not really focusing on your work, going out a lot, just trying to fit in." (Fall 2011, Sam).

Students/co-researchers realized they had chosen their social life at the expense of their academic growth during their self-reflections, and many of them expressed regrets about their perceived choice. They determined that it is problematic that students often feel forced to choose between their academic growth and their social needs. Students must sacrifice either their studies

or their friends and family. As social beings, it was not surprising to them that many of them wanted to cultivate and develop relationships with their loved ones rather than sacrifice these support networks for the unforeseeable benefits of their schooling.

Students often expressed self-blame when they chose to meet their social needs over their academic needs. When reflecting on her schooling experiences, Ashley concluded:

For me, it was just a lack of motivation. I didn't really care too much about school. I guess because I was more distracted with what was around me, my friends, my social life period. Especially because when I got into my junior year, my grandmother and I were very close, like this (crosses fingers), and she passed away from cancer. That took a lot out of me, and I just couldn't do it. I just gave up. Because that part of me just felt like it was gone. (Fall 2011, Ashley)

Ashley's love for her friends and her grandmother exacerbated her academic struggles. Students' relationships and their social lives need to be supported in tandem with their academic ambitions. Their academic and social needs are not mutually exclusive. Education reform should explore ways in which students' academic and social needs can be recognized, supported, and developed harmoniously.

3.2.f. Peer Pressure

As mentioned in the previous theme "Academic versus Social Needs", students who felt the social versus academic conflict, and believed they had to choose between being smart or being accepted by others, often expressed that they chose to have friends over doing well in school. Peer pressure impacted students beyond the academic versus social needs conflict. Students who felt insecure or ostracized gave into peer pressure in order to gain social acceptance.

Milan shared:

It was hard to understand and learn English because my parents were foreign. I had low self-esteem so I was shy and quiet and worried about what people thought of me. People always bullied me because I was short, my background, and cause I was different. My peers always pressured me to do something stupid or just unsafe. (Spring 2012, Milan)

Even though Milan was not sacrificing his academic needs in order to satisfy his social needs when he gave into peer pressure, he was risking his safety and wellbeing. Students face great harm and danger to fulfill their social needs. Education reform should implement programs and practices that support students' social lives and their social development in their schools and communities.

3.2.g. Cruelty has lasting impacts on the student

This subtheme could have been placed under the overarching “Cruelty” theme; however, since it addresses an intimate and impactful aspect of students’ lives and their educational experiences, it seemed most appropriate to include it in the overarching theme that informs our understandings of students. Many students from local communities shared their experiences enduring cruel attacks throughout the “Cruelty” section. The key takeaway in this subtheme is that cruelty can wreak havoc on students and their well-being. Gabe noticed that his interviewees internalized the cruelty they experienced. “They got bullied because of their race and looks. Learning English was a Big Problem. This caused people to feel down and bad about themselves” (Fall 2011, Gabe). Students/co-researchers acknowledged that cruelty experienced in schools can be traumatic and can have lasting impacts on the students. “I have learned that the littlest schooling problem can really affect someone's learning for life” (Fall 2011, Zoe). Students

desired tools for combating the forces of cruelty in their lives, especially since cruelty has the potential to inflict life-long pain and suffering at times.

In order to improve schooling experiences for students, one of Dan's interviewees devised that she would create program or service that would "teach kids how much words and actions can really affect a person physically and mentally." Her message to share was "That bullying is wrong period. People can really be cruel and cause permanent damage." She believed that it was important to improve students' experiences in their schools. Knowing now what she did not know then, she said "I would not try to fit in and just be myself and not worry what anyone else had to say" (Spring 2012, Dan).

Researchers and scholars study and analyze the impacts of bullying; however, the cruelty students experience in their schools and community stretches beyond the definition of bullying. Students are ignored, silenced, neglected, ostracized, and marginalized as a result of social and systemic policies, practices, and structures. Students/co-researchers determined that education reformers should be equipped with a comprehensive grasp of the toxic and fluid presence of cruelty in their local schools and communities.

CHAPTER 4 – URBAN SCHOOLING PROBLEMS

Table 4.1: Urban School Problems

Urban School Problems (blues)	Fall 2011	Spring 2012
Urban/Suburban Disparities	31	50
Funding	30	21
Resources/Support	26	39
Value of Education	80	16
Dropout High	5	9
Moving	19	8
Overcrowding	14	27
Transportation	2	16
Food	0	9
Dangerous Spaces	39	13
Urban and suburban	36	43
Poverty	9	27
High-Stakes Testing	11	0
Business of Education	1	11

One group in the Fall 2011 class noted that the following problems were experienced in urban schools: “racism, lack of interest from students, large classroom sizes - too many students in classrooms, teachers seem to work just for the paycheck, lack of resources, little parental involvement, lack of interest from students, poor attendance on part of students.” They also discussed during their presentation that no group appears to be fully invested because there is no respect for the system, probably because the system is not actually serving any group. The system is not meeting anyone’s needs.

While students/co-researchers did note that problems existed in both suburban and urban schools, they also discovered significant disparities between suburban and urban schools (placing

the urban schools at a relative disadvantage, despite being only a few miles from state-recognized, celebrated suburban schools). Disparities that urban schools suffered from inequitably included:

- severe lack of resources, funding, and investment of stakeholders
- dearth of school support for students' academic and social challenges
- overcrowding in classrooms and schools
- low educator to high student ratios
- difficult and dangerous school transportation
- low access to healthy and affordable food
- unclean and unsafe schooling environments
- courses and electives offered lacked breadth and diversity
- focus on high-stakes testing and rote learning at the expense of developing critical and creative thinking skills
- unchallenging curricula do not encourage student direction and engagement
- no opportunities for community-based and experiential learning that prepared students for post-secondary life (such as engaging and challenging internships, hands-on project and inquiry-based learning, fieldtrips that raise global awareness and foster deeper learning, career specific courses, and access to college classes).

Problems in urban schools existed on many levels, and students/co-researchers reported that problems were more pervasive in poor and urban areas and inflicted pain and caused suffering in individuals and collective groups of people. Of the schooling experiences investigated, student researchers reported the following:

- prevalence of bullying and violence

- a lack of interest in student learning from all stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, school staff, administrators, community members, school board officials, political leaders)
- the silencing of student voice
- significant disparities between schools in the same county (particularly between schools in the urban districts and the suburban districts), which were listed previously.

4.1.a. Disparities between Urban and Suburban Schools

The consensus amongst the researchers and community members was unanimous.

Students/co-researcher wrote and reported that the schools in the urban school district were far worse than that of the schools in the suburban school district. They were shocked to discover the countless ways in which urban schools functioned dramatically and devastatingly subpar in contrast to suburban schools located just a few miles away. Isaac shared:

I have noticed that even though (suburban district 2), (suburban district 4), and (urban school district) are only 20 minutes (or less) apart, there are so many more differences in any aspect one wants to look at. Even though it's the same state (and the same county), the districts are very different and create a whole different type of environment for schools and children who attend the schools. I never knew there were so many differences between schools in the U.S. I don't necessarily think differently, but I can say I am more aware of the problems and circumstances that lead to students struggling in schools. Also, I learned about many different factors that influence a student that I would have never thought of. (Isaac, Fall 2011)

Sofi compared her schooling experiences in the urban district to the schooling experiences of her friends who had attended suburban districts:

I have always had a positive perspective about school even though my school wasn't as influential and successful as the suburban schools. The inequalities about my school were the curricula we did in every class due to the fact that they were not good in teaching us what we needed to learn. The atmosphere was horrible. Constant fighting, dirty halls and rooms. As I compared my school with the school my classmates went to, I noticed that their schools were in much better conditions than mine was. They had good teachers, clean rooms, and a positive atmosphere. I discovered that many other schools out of my community are funded a lot more than the schools that I went to. The amount per child was shocking to me. My main problem in school was that I couldn't get to learn anything new or something out of the ordinary. I wish my school changes in the future so other seniors won't go through what I went through. I think we just need better funding and some faith to change things. We need to spend more time dedicated to students and maintaining a clean place. (Fall 2011, Sofi)

Zoe shared her experiences in schools in various suburban districts in the community college county:

My interviewee went to a more suburban school. She went to (suburban district 3). They have a lot of money. Not really a lot of money, but their school is brand new, their resources are new. She knows a lot of people who went to other schools, and their schooling is different. From my own experiences, I went from (high school in suburban district 3) to (high school in suburban district 7), and it's a lot different. (In suburban district 3) All their books are new, all their classrooms are new, classroom sizes are small. Class time is a longer, so you learn more because it's block scheduling in (suburban district 3), and people have more time to process, because by the time you get

into a forty minute classroom, it takes ten minutes to settle down, twenty minutes to go over homework, you don't really learn anytime. I learned more going to (suburban district 3) because I feel the teachers were more engaged in the classrooms. They want the students to learn. Going to (high school in suburban district 7) they just threw everything at you and hoped that you did learn what you needed to learn. It's kind of like urban and suburban, not really, but kind of. (Fall 2011, Zoe)

Halima wrote:

In my own opinion no matter what happens or different views people have about school, it should be a place of learning, growth, fun. Lack of infrastructures, insufficient teachers, the content of curriculum is not covered well in order for the students to fully understand the content. The discoveries we had in our group shows inequalities between suburban and urban schools. In suburban schools things like textbooks, and infrastructure were well allocated whereas the urban barely have anything. In suburban they have smaller class sizes so that every kid will get enough tutoring needed but not in urban large classrooms (class sizes). Finally in suburban schools they have enough teachers and well certified teachers. In urban schools they do not have enough teachers. (Fall 2011, Halima)

There were exceptions, though. Zoe shared that she thought urban people were nicer and teachers cared more in the urban schools:

Suburban and urban schools are much different. I've been to both, but I would much rather urban. Yes, it has some down falls, but urban people are much nicer. The teachers really do work for their students. Suburban, from my own experience, they don't care

about students, just money. Suburban has more resources like supplies and more variety.

Learning is more important. (Fall 2011, Zoe)

Zoe expressed the hidden message that was revealed once students/co-researchers analyzed the disparities between the suburban and the urban schools. At suburban schools, “learning is important.” At urban schools, learning is not. Her conclusion is explored further in the “Value of Education” section.

4.1.b. Funding

To the students/co-researchers, it seemed indisputable that suburban schools had a lot more money. The urban schools were falling apart. One school is frequently in the media because its building is filled with mold that has been painted over repeatedly and pieces of the ceiling and walls have fallen onto the students and staff. Even the class trips are drastically different. Students/co-researchers were shocked to learn that students in suburban districts had visited Disney World (some suburban schools had hosted multiple trips to Disney World during the same school year), Japan, and other exciting and expensive destinations. Suburban students had engaged in meaningful, first-hand experiences with people from around the globe. To which Tegan (who attended a high school in the urban district) responded, “Our senior class trip was to Six Flags. All we got was the ticket to get in. That's it. After you got in, you were on your own” (Spring 2012, Tegan). Six Flags is a regional amusement park about a 30-minute drive from the urban district, and it is far from as exciting, impressive, rewarding, and celebratory as a trip to Disney World, which is the senior class trip destination for many suburban neighbors.

During her third interview, Halima’s interviewee reported:

My high school was pretty much a mixture of suburban and urban students, but a main difference between the two types of schools is the funding and opportunity that most

suburban schools have opposed to the urban schools where such is not readily available because of where its location is. It's a hard problem to fix be it that if there are not financial supporters or higher taxes to match the amounts in the urban schools to the suburban schools, the best option is to try for government funding for hardships to try to provide to all. (Fall 2011, Halima)

In the spring semester, students/co-researchers discussed how difficult the grant writing process is in the urban schools and the unique challenges urban teachers confront which make it harder for them than in suburban districts. During another group's final presentation discussing poverty's impact on schools, Shani shared:

Like (Suburban District 6) is well known for having things right from the jump. If you can't get the schooling grants, for your neighborhood or for the township, you're not going to be able to have those things. So it was the lack of some of the teachers who was up above them to do those grants because that's where the money is at. Unfortunately, we have a governor who doesn't want to give money, so you have to do the grants in order to get those things to upgrade your school. The schools do have grant writers but it's a process. They have to go online and get permission from the school district and it's just like a real nonsense process. And I never saw until last year, a teacher had one book and she had to make 30 copies of her assignments out of just one book because that's all she had in (the urban district). They did not have books for every student. (Spring 2012, Shani)

Overwhelmed teachers in struggling urban schools must search for finances, resources, supplies, and texts in the limited time they have to spare. This valuable time could have been spent supporting students.

Theodore shared that he and his group noticed that in affluent districts “education is more valued due to the funding that is obtainable due to the taxes in a suburban area. In urban areas, the taxes are usually lower” (Fall 2011, Theodore). Theodore and his group highlighted how affluent community members can afford to make education a priority because they collect more money in their local taxes and can finance a top-dollar education. Unfortunately, many areas in the urban district are impoverished. These struggling communities do not have enough money to maintain their school buildings let alone provide a quality education. Thus, the education they can provide is not valued. This message is analyzed further in the “Value of Education” section.

4.1.c. Lack of Resources and Support

The lack of adequate funding in districts that need it most is unconscionable. Students/co-researchers and community members familiar with the urban school district stressed the damage that these severe funding and staffing reductions have caused in these schools. Teachers, counselors, and support staff are overwhelmed and are unable to meet their students’ needs, and students attending urban schools not only do not have the lavish resources that students attending suburban schools have, but they also do not have the basic learning materials necessary (like updated textbooks) to master the content area studied. Theodore and his group examined these disparities closely, and he wrote that he was “thinking differently about problems in school due to the inequalities that take place in them...” When he and his group compared urban and suburban schools, they discovered that “books varied from high school to high school. The amount of activities also varied” (Fall 2011, Theodore). Urban schools lacked updated books, and sometimes urban classrooms had no books at all. Suburban schools provided a greater number and a vast variety of activities, services, and programs for their students.

Students/co-researchers in the spring semester agonized over how some suburban high schools provided each student with a MacBook while the urban schools had outdated computers that did not function most of the time. In the suburban schools, class sizes were smaller and were often taught by co-teachers, two licensed teachers, who educated the students collaboratively. In the urban schools, class sizes were larger and were often taught by one, overwhelmed teacher, possibly a teacher who lacked credentials or was working as a short-term or long-term substitute. Whether schools possessed necessary resources and proper support impacted schooling environments and students' experiences dramatically.

A recent report “Shortchanging New Jersey Students: How Inadequate Funding has Led to Reduced Staff and Growing Disparities in the State’s Public Schools” (July 2014) detailed how the underfunding of the School Funding Reform Act (SRFA) has negatively impacted the support students receive in their schools, especially students living in less affluent neighborhoods and districts. The funding shortcomings caused lower staff to student ratios that produced “larger class sizes, greater workloads for teachers, and a reduction in course offerings for students,” and “the poorer districts that suffered the most from a lack of funding experienced the “highest levels of workforce reduction” (p. 2). Therefore, between 2009 and 2012, in underfunded, underprivileged districts:

- Counselors received 55% more students.
- Nurses received 21% more students.
- There were 18% fewer STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) teachers.
- There were 47% fewer world language teachers.
- There were 44% fewer music teachers.

- There were 34% fewer art teachers.
- There were 21% fewer health and physical education teachers.

The shortage of funding caused reductions in school staff and student support, which has impacted students' schooling experiences in grossly negative and devastating ways. Many subthemes throughout the "Urban Problems" section exist as the aftermath of practices and policies that underfund and neglect schools serving children living in impoverished, marginalized, and disadvantaged communities.

4.1.d. Value of Education

In the urban district, the pervasive message regarding education seemed to be that school does not matter. The overwhelmed members of the school community, the lack of services programs, and resources, the physically and emotionally unsafe, unhealthy learning environments, and disengaged family and community members who did not communicate interest in student learning, and more, perpetuated hidden messages that students embodied – the lack of value for education, low expectations for students, apathy for learning, and disrespect of school and school members. As Emma stated, "Problems start with the way the school is, whether it's a lack of books or a lack of caring about school" (Fall 2011, Emma).

Tegan shared that, in her experience:

Students are not getting the proper education because when I moved (to the urban district) from (a district near Suburban District 4 outside of the community college county) it was my freshman year. I was an honor roll student but when I got to (the urban district) I just got discouraged with the way they taught, the teachers didn't care, security guards would wave you goodbye when you were cutting class and say 'all bring me back a hoagie, okay...?

She also shared that:

The township of (different New Jersey town outside this county) specifically the middle school I attended had an after school program and tutors to help with homework and testing. They encouraged kids to get good grades by rewarding students. Each year they had an award ceremony to honor students with good grades. They would give students a diploma and a prize. They also had pizza coupons and gift cards for good students. Even though my home life wasn't perfect the school managed to keep that separate and helped me to focus on my education. When I compare (former district) to (urban district in this community) I can probably draw a big line right through the middle, because as soon as my family made the big move to (this urban district) that's when my grades went downhill, along with my attitude towards school and education. (My high school in the urban district) did not reward kids for good grades; teachers did not encourage students to stay in school and security guards allowed students to cut class. Peer pressure was huge because kids were more worried about what they were wearing than their school work. The school didn't even keep an accurate school attendance.

She continued:

Moving from one place to the other helped me understand how the community played a big part in my education. There is a significant difference between communities that value education versus one that struggles with the school system. In my personal experience, I felt like (this urban) community failed me. I say this with great disappointment. I wish the city would put more effort into building a strong school system. In turn we would have more aspiring students. Education is the antidote to violence and street crimes. I believe this because I see it. Look outside (this urban

district) into (Suburban District 8) and (Suburban District 7), (Suburban District 6) or (Suburban District 4) just to name a few. Immediately you will notice a huge difference. My conclusion is the poorer a community the more room there is for crimes because a lack of funds to support law enforcement. Also there is not enough money for quality schools to provide outstanding education. (Spring 2012, Tegan)

Tegan also shared:

I can use myself as an example to support my theory. I was an aspiring young scholar when I lived in (a township nearby, outside of the county and off of local route near Suburban District 4). I had honor roll from first grade all the way until eighth grade. I loved going to school even though my home life wasn't all that great, with my parents working all day and my family moving from one place to the other. I was happy because I felt like school created a sanctum that helped me get away. (Spring 2012, Tegan)

Lastly, she explored why charter schools and private schools are so appealing, especially if children have parents who will advocate for them. "Why do parents choose private? They can demand a better education. They are the ones paying for it therefore they feel they have a right to protest and demand what they want" (Spring 2012, Tegan).

Teagan's journey through suburban and urban schools illustrates how important environment is to students. She performed according to the expectations set forth by her schools. In her suburban school, she was an honor student, she loved learning, and she valued her education. In her urban school, she no longer valued her education, and she suffered academically. Students cannot be expected to perform well in schools and districts that overtly and covertly communicate that school does not matter.

Issac shared his frustrations living with a parent who was disengaged and who was not invested in his schooling. He felt his mother communicated to him through her disinterest that his education was not important:

I had many home socio-economic problems that shifted my focus from school. Had many friends that also shifted my focus from school because I would cut class for other people's gym class, so we could play sports together. Didn't have much motivation from home because I lived with my mom and that wasn't a priority to her. One time I got in trouble because I had scratched up chalk and was blowing chalk on my friends' clothing. I got in trouble because the professor (teacher) said I had cocaine on my desk. Because I had a hat on and used to dress with baggie clothes. (Fall 2011, Isaac)

He continued:

My dad went to Spain and is a biologist, meanwhile, my mom didn't go to college. I spent my younger days with my dad and he gave me a very good foundation for school, always teaching me something. There was always something to talk about, and something to make me think. Usually we would play chess at night and he would always say, 'move each piece as if it was a decision or new path in your life. If you move the wrong way more than twice in a game, you lose.' I never had anything good to talk about with my mom. We always had our differences because I never understood her nor where she was coming from. I spent my high school years with my mom, which explains why I am where I am at. If I ever needed any help, I didn't have my walking dictionary like my dad to explain whatever I was having trouble with. (Fall 2011, Isaac)

While Isaac's father communicated the importance of education through rituals and his life choices, his mother did not. His mother was not a native English speaker, and the language

barrier was certainly a problem, complicating the lack of connection Isaac felt between his school life and home life:

My mom never was able to learn English so she would never be able to do anything related to school. Back to School Night to her never existed. She never knew what went on in my classes. I thought at the time that it was beneficial because I could make anything up on what was happening at school. However in the long run, it prejudiced me because I never took anything serious and did just enough to get by with a decent grade. There was always money problems with my mom. Somehow, somehow there was always a money shortage with her. I had to find ways to get money and help out with the bills ever since I was in freshman year. Before that all the money I would get as presents for my birthday had to be given to her to help out with bills. I never had a hundred percent focus on school. I believe if I would have come to the U.S.A. with my dad, my life would have been much different. (Fall 2011, Isaac)

Families, schools, and communities have an obligation to ensure that they are performing practices and rituals that support the education of every child and that they communicate consistently that their schooling experiences, learning, academic growth, and social development matter.

4.1.e. Dropout Rates High, Not Uncommon

Students/co-researchers reported that the messages that education and school are important and valued were absent until it was too late. Once students realized they needed their diploma, they did not think they could pull themselves up to a passing point due to their historically poor performance and felt that they had no other option but to dropout. They thought assemblies and multiple venues should spread the message that education matters so future

students would not have to suffer like they did. Schooling and education should become more empowering than oppressive in all communities, especially poor, urban communities.

During his interviewing, Leo learned about a student's difficult experience navigating the urban schools she attended, a story that, unfortunately, was all too common. He spoke with a friend who "attended (a high school in the urban school district in the community college county) in the 90s. She faced many problems from bullying, overcrowded classes, racist remarks, a lack of supplies, and poor teaching by teachers. All of these problems pushed her to drop out and get her GED." Providing greater detail, he shared that:

In (a middle school in the urban school district of the community college county) she was placed in gifted and talented classes. In middle school classes were more crowded. There were also more fights occurring in and after school. The kids from bilingual classes seemed to be in a world of their own and didn't interact much with the other kids, even like this student who spoke Spanish. There were often fights with these kids. She also noticed that while she attended classes like computer, music, wood shop and home economics, classes not offered at this school anymore, they didn't go on trips like they used to. Once she reached (a high school in the urban school district in the community college district), she could really see the changes. Some classes had kids sitting in the doorway because the class was too full. Some kids didn't receive textbooks until months into the semester. There were teachers that seemed fed up and didn't really bother teaching. Just about everything was different. Few meetings were announced to have parents involved in school activities. It seemed like parents were called in only when kids did something wrong. During this time, she became discouraged. After she was attacked by several girls, she dropped out of high school and decided to get her GED instead.

After what she went through in middle school and high school, she is now having children of her own and can see why a private school is preferred at times. Too many students in these schools, too much violence, kids are scared to go to school. Kids who want to learn are being attacked or become the attackers because they are fed up with being the ones picked on. Schools have stopped offering wood shop, music, and art classes that students use as an outlet. Books are given out late if at all. Teachers lack motivation to teach, slimming these children's chances of graduating. While more parents are aware, there are still not enough who know their rights. Until more parents start standing up and demand change, the schools will continue to function this way. (Spring 2012, Leo)

This student faced countless schooling problems identified throughout this paper while she struggled to earn her diploma. Like Tegan, she started her academic life as an honors student. As the social and systemic challenges mounted, she confronted acts of cruelty from all fronts and felt forced to leave high school without her degree. Students do not drop out because they are weak and dropping out is hardly a choice (Fine, 1991). Students are often forced out of schools. Some students leave toxic school environments because they desire self-preservation and hope to maintain the tenuous grasp on the remaining shreds of their dignity. There are a plethora of other conditions and forces at play in schools and communities that impact a student's ability to access and achieve the necessary components for a high school diploma. Local community and school members must be aware of these factors, and should rectify any problems that can be immediately solved, so that students can receive the support they need in order to graduate from high school. Alternative schooling paths, explored further in the "Multiple Schooling Paths" section, could also become a solution for students.

4.1.f. Moving a lot from School to School

School districts often exist as islands, segregated from other districts. One area that warrants exploration is for schools to investigate more effective strategies for supporting students who move frequently (regardless of whether they're moving from another school in district or out of district, across the state, country, or globe). Students who move from school to school can become disengaged, which impacts their learning and their ability to graduate. During her group's final presentation, Zoe shared:

I can tell the difference because I've been to nine schools. They all change a little bit. Going from school to school to school you really don't care anymore. I mean, personally, I didn't care anymore. I never unpacked anything because I knew I would be moving again. What have I learned from my schooling experiences? I have learned that moving around really does affect your schooling. You really stop caring about what's going on. You worry more about your at-home life. If you don't have your parents as a support system, and they just let you do whatever you want, you just don't go to school. It really brings everything down. I know a lot of people in the world now whose parents are divorced, and after your parents get divorced and you go through all of that, it's really hard to pay attention in school and do what really needs to be done. You just have to motivate yourself to do it and sometimes people just can't, but I tried my hardest. (Fall 2011, Zoe)

One of Isaac's interviewees struggled to find a school where he could feel successful amidst all of his moving:

He's half Puerto Rican and half Indian. He lived in (Suburban District 2), so he had a nice school. However, they had financial problems, so they had to move, and they moved

to Florida. Now, he only went to high school here for about a month, and was kicked out, and he ended up going to Florida. It was a brand new school, and there was a lot of prejudice there. Since it was a new school, and there was a rule book, but it wasn't really set in stone. They were in the ins and outs of it. So there were times when foreign people weren't able to express themselves as far as where they came from. They couldn't wear flags because they said it was demeaning to American culture. Now the white people would go there and wear Confederate flags and things like that, and they wouldn't get in trouble. So then it was like, the rules that they did have only applied to certain people. And he actually ended up getting kicked out of that high school, went to another one, and that pretty much went on and on and on for like four high schools. He felt like he didn't fit in anywhere he went. He pretty much didn't like it there because it was way too prejudiced. Even like the dean and the higher people (administration). They were very, very racist. (Fall 2011, Isaac)

Not only was the constant moving around a serious challenge to overcome, but this student also faced deep-seated racism. Schools across the nation must devise collaborative systems for supporting students who move frequently from school to school.

4.1.g. Overcrowding and High School/Class Sizes

During a Spring 2012 group presentation on schools in poor communities, the students/co-researchers showed a YouTube video of students taking over a local urban high school and surrounding city streets during a drill. The footage showed a crowded block packed with students screaming and fighting. It was reminiscent of videos posted of drills at Los Angeles schools when violence broke out, chaos ensued, and the police were called in to maintain order.

In the Fall of 2011, Sofi wrote about her experiences attending an overcrowded high school in the urban district:

What influenced me the most in a negative way would be the classroom atmosphere.

During my senior year, I had four classes (every day) and each class would be 88 minutes long. Each class would be filled with 20 to 30 students, and it would be crowded sometimes. It would always be noisy and annoying. Each class would be filled with drama, fights, and laziness. It was always hard to do your work, even to listen. Being around this type of atmosphere for eight hours a day made me feel low of myself and others. (A high school in the urban school district) was already known as a poor, obnoxious school. We don't need the students to keep making us look bad. Sometimes I said I wished I could have went to a white school. You would actually learn something and get respect for yourself. I didn't want to be characterized in the drop-out, lazy, deadbeat graduation class. I just wanted better for myself but thank God I got out! (Fall 2011, Sofi)

In overcrowded, urban classrooms, students battle for learning opportunities. Some students, like Sofi, survived and got out. Others were characterized as failures.

Overcrowding was not always a problem experienced in the urban school district, though. Valerie interviewed a member of the community who had a very different experience:

Our classrooms back in the 1970s were excellent. We had about 10 to 12 kids in our classrooms. It was easy to understand what the teachers were explaining. Our teachers back then used to take the time with each kid that was having difficulties with the class. It was easy because they had extra time to teach. All the school supplies were available to every child. Our classroom was very clean and organized. We were able to enjoy every

class. We didn't have the pressure that the new generation has to deal with, or at least it seems that way. (Spring 2012, Valerie)

This community member's schooling experience starkly contrasted with Sofi's experiences. Sofi, and other students who had attended schools in the urban district, concluded that their schools were overcrowded and reduced class sizes would have improved their schooling experiences.

4.1.h. Transportation Challenges (confusing and unsafe)

Students/co-researchers noticed that transportation was managed very differently in the suburban school districts as compared to the urban school district. In suburban school districts, school buses delivered children to their schools. In the urban district, children were forced to ride the public bus, oftentimes alone. Many students/co-researchers and community members expressed concern and discomfort regarding their witnessing of young children riding public school buses without parents or guardians. Families in urban districts also have to find funding for public transportation or time to collect free tickets that urban schools or the urban district provided in a confusing manner. Shani explained:

The very first time when (a high school in the urban area) was split, the parents were down at the Board of Education, and they were telling them on a fixed income for a parent or a parent who has low income, they cannot afford to send their kid to the other school on a bus. So they were trying to get them to have tickets but they said there was a problem with that because I guess New Jersey transit wanted them to pay a certain amount so they never gave them tickets. And that is a real big problem. (Spring 2012, Shani)

The whole public transportation ticketing ordeal was a nightmare from the start. One of the students/co-researchers in the Spring 2012 course, a parent, said school transportation in the urban district was still a problem and complained about the difficulty they had as a non-English-speaking family navigating the school transportation options. The urban schools provided tickets for public transportation but only on certain days during certain lunches. As a native English speaker, I thought I could call the state and elucidate the process for him. I called the state office (the New Jersey State Board of Education) and was told loudly and hurriedly to “just send my child to pick up public bus tickets during lunch.” However, there were only certain times during the week and month that bus tickets were distributed during lunch, so I asked for specifics. I was told that there were enough announcements made at school and that my child should be able to figure it out and was probably “acting dumb.” The process was confusing. Unfortunately, my persistence and desire to achieve a concrete, straightforward answer was met with growing anger and frustration on the other end of the call. I gave up on finding an answer to the transportation quandary.

Figuring out how to get student passes for public transportation was certainly confusing. Even worse, once students had access to public transportation, safety was still a serious concern. Children walking, biking, and riding public transport in the city area endured dangerous circumstances. The report “Safe Routes to New Jersey’s Disadvantaged Urban Schools” details the high rates of poverty, crime, violence, sex offender presence, and pedestrian and bike crashes in three of the poorest urban areas in New Jersey. Most of the pedestrian and bike crashes that kill or injure children occur when children are traveling to and from school, between the hours of 7am and 9am and 2pm and 7pm (Von Hagen, 2008).

Students/co-researchers expressed concerns about the inconvenience and confusion about public school transportation systems in the urban school district, and children's safety when journeying to and from school in dangerous urban areas. They concluded that public school transportation should not be a messy, perplexing service. Additionally, if students must use public transportation, the service must be free, safe, and easy to utilize. After all, children in the suburban areas did not seem to face these challenges. This disparity seemed reminiscent of the kinds of obstacles transportation posed during the days of legally enforced segregated schooling:

Of course you all know I'm old, so I had to interview old people. One of my interviewees, she was from North Carolina. I asked her what school did she attend, where was it located, did she consider it suburban or urban, what was her attitude towards her learning environment, was her teacher helpful in her learning experiences, and what type of issues did she encounter during high school, and if at the time she was in high school, if she could make any changes, what kind of changes would she make. The name of her high school was Dunbury, and it was out in the boondocks, as she said. And she basically had to catch two buses to get to school, and they had to walk at least two miles to the first bus stop because they didn't offer buses in the area where she was, to the black children. So she basically went to school during the time that segregation was around, and it was an all-black school that she went to for the first three years of high school, and finally in the last year of her high school, there became an end to segregation, and they were mixed together. But during that time she was in high school, she explained that when you go over to the white school, they had pools, they had a gym, with actual gym items to do gym. And their high school, they just had the outside, the 'okay, you guys just go outside,' so they never learned to swim in school. They never learned basic physical

education things such as soccer. There was no basketball. None of those things were available to her when she was in school. (Fall 2011, Rashida)

This North Carolinian's schooling challenges were exacerbated by unreasonably arduous transportation. Just traveling to and from school was grueling. We had hoped these horrible inequities detailed in her narrative were in the past. Unfortunately, as detailed throughout this paper, severe segregation exists today in the Central New Jersey community college area, and urban and suburban schools experience some of the disparities described in this narrative, set during legally-enforced segregation.

Students in the urban district do not have access to easy, convenient, safe transportation. Some parents and students are confused about the public bus system and the allocation of free tickets, and some students have to walk or bike through dangerous areas of the city in order to get to school. As Tegan argued, "A community that cares offers school buses for children living far from their schools. The community can also help by providing more law enforcement so that the streets remain clean of crime" (Spring 2012, Tegan). Students/co-researchers determined that, until their urban communities are provided with the same quality of school transportation and safe streets that suburban children journey, New Jersey state officials will continue to communicate that they do not care about the safety and well-being of urban children.

4.1.i. School Food Unhealthy and Expensive

In the spring semester, class discussions centered on the lack of attention given to meeting students basic needs in the urban school district. Students certainly did not feel a sense of safety and security in these schools. Moreover, despite the growing presence of children living in poverty and in food-insecure households, schools in the urban district were not feeding hungry students. Not all children who needed the free/reduced school lunch qualified, and even when

they did, the lunch provided was far from healthy. The general consensus regarding school food was that it is too expensive and families cannot afford it, and it is unhealthy. The students/co-researchers argued that children need nourished, healthy bodies in order to grow and develop their minds. They thought all students in poor, urban schools deserved to have free, healthy meals, and they did not understand why a first world country like the U.S. would not provide food to hungry children. “In Honduras, we had free lunches. It’s a third-world country and we had free lunch” (Spring 2012, Valerie). Maliha expanded, “Some countries provide free lunch in schools. Even in the US, different states have different school systems. One of our friends went to school in Ohio and never paid for lunch while in school. In New Jersey, we pay more taxes than other states, but we pay for school lunches and noticed problems in all of the schools” (Spring 2012, Maliha).

4.1.j. School Buildings/Learning Spaces are Unsafe

Recently a national news network aired a report on one of the schools in the urban school district. They surveyed the decaying building and showed footage of crumbling walls and ceilings and identified infestations of rodents, bugs, mold, mildew and poisons in the materials, ventilation system, and drinking water. Without question, this urban school is a dangerously toxic place where students attempt to learn. For years, the state has not addressed this unsafe, unhealthy, and unclean public schooling environment, and now there are talks of rebuilding it. Until repaired, school buildings such as this one seriously hinder student learning.

In their own work, students/co-researchers also determined that local urban schools are not as nice, safe, healthy, and clean as the suburban schools. Emma reported that by participating in the CPAR process she learned that: “Urban schools aren't maintained as well and don't have access to everything like electives, sports, clubs, etc.” (Fall 2011, Emma).

One actionable solution provided by a group in the fall semester was that “Every school should be inspected and made sure it's maintained well because if the environment is clean the students will want to learn more” (Fall 2011, Group). Some buildings are inspected and deemed in desperate need of repair, yet students continue to overcrowd the halls and classrooms. Students should not be expected to learn and excel in buildings that are poisonous and rotting. School buildings should reflect the state’s high regard for its students and the message that their education is important and valued.

4.1.k. Urban AND Suburban School Problems

Not every problem was understood as primarily an urban problem. There were certainly problems that were present in the suburban schools as well. One of Rashida’s interviewees “attended suburban school. Had a great experience in school. It was safe, clean, and competitive. Teachers were concerned about students and made sure they did not fail. Was bullied by the mean girls” (Fall 2011, Rashida). Unlike the urban schools, suburban schools tended to be clean, safe, and had school staff members who were not as overwhelmed as their colleagues in the local urban schools. Bullying was frequently named as a problem in both suburban and urban schools.

One of the students/co-researchers in the spring semester course liked the suburban district her daughter attended. The teachers were warm and available to the students. The building was nice, and students had all the materials they needed. Her only complaint was that the kids were cruel to one another. While her daughter was undressing at a slumber party, some of the girls took pictures of her and posted them online. Her daughter was completely unaware and learned about the violation of her privacy at school through the malicious rumor mill. Her daughter became depressed. Once Mom finally got her daughter to share, she contacted school administration and they forced the girls to remove her half-naked photo. Thanks to technology,

stories of public humiliation, on a global scale, were not unusual. While cruelty took different forms and impacted its victims in different ways, students/co-researchers noted its poisonous presence in urban and suburban schools.

Students/co-researchers noted that serious problems existed in both urban and suburban school districts. In some cases, the problems were unique to the community. Suburban public schools were far from problem-free. There were also shared problems throughout public schools regardless of where they were located. Maliha reported the following urban and suburban problems:

Family problems, poor communities (poverty), and overcrowding. Parents in affluent suburbs pressuring children to be the best just to brag to others that their child is better than your child. The pressure is hard on the kids. College friends in (urban school district) have different problems. Their family members don't care as much about their studies; parents work and don't have time to spend with children. Children should hear the benefit of education. We want to know why New Jersey public schools perform so differently (some high rank and some low rank) but have the same curriculum. Since public schools are for everyone, we should try to protect them. The government should take care of public schools, and we should support them. (Spring 2012, Maliha)

Students/co-researchers discovered that some schools and school districts were performing better than others throughout the state of New Jersey. They wanted detailed state reports to be posted and forums conducted to direct public attention to discrepancies in schooling outcomes. Families and communities deserved to be informed about these disparities, and transparency could aid districts, schools, and communities as they explore the possibilities for

implementing public schooling practices and policies that have improved students' experiences and achievements at other schools.

Perhaps public debate could also examine and analyze why some problems still seem worse in the urban schools. As Halima articulated, "I learned that there are a lot of problems facing most urban schools. It affects mainly urban schools. However, it also affects suburban but in a minimal amount" (Fall 2011, Halima). Ultimately, schooling problems impact everyone and warrant an engaged discussion throughout the state.

4.1.1. Poverty / Low Socioeconomic Status

Tegan's family moved to the urban district because it was more affordable than the suburban district. Unfortunately, moving to a poorer district meant attending an underfunded school, and she suffered as a result:

The reason we moved to (the urban district) was because we couldn't afford to live in (a suburban district outside of the county). I come from a low income family so most of my life I spent packing my things and moving from one apartment to the next. We couldn't afford a big apartment so I always had to share a room with my two brothers. So that played a big role in my education but never the less I remained an honor roll student. I was in honor roll all the way up to 8th grade when I graduated as a valedictorian in my middle school. However the reason why I managed to stay an honor roll student was because our community in (the suburban district) had a great school system. (Spring 2012, Tegan)

The urban district did not have a great school district, and it also lacked the funding and community resources that more affluent districts had. Moving to a school district that struggled financially posed numerous problems. More so, students often had to confront financial struggles

in their homes. Navigating the plethora of problems engendered by living in poverty can be an understandable and unfortunate distraction from school. Isaac shared, “First I interviewed a student with kind of a weird background. He’s half Puerto Rican and half Indian. He lived in (Suburban District 2), so he had a nice school. However, they had financial problems, so they had to move, and they moved to Florida.” (Fall 2011, Isaac). Isaac also mentioned that he “had many home socio-economic problems that shifted his focus from school.” He lived with his mom, a single parent struggling to make financial ends meet, and, as a child, he felt a lot of pressure to figure out ways to support his mom financially.

Leo wrote reflectively:

I think group discussions are going well. Every person in the group has gathered strong stories regarding the Educational Problems in Poor Communities, stories that are helping our topic build up with more meaning. The conversations shared about each other’s interviews have shown many perspectives and points of view on the differences and similarities between communities. The most common similarity has been overcrowded schools in poor communities. It seems that as the years go by, the numbers of students keep increasing, but so is the number of dropouts. Schools just don't have enough money to support the learning abilities in the schools. One of the biggest concerns is parent involvement. Many parents can't afford to take off work and go to schools to become involved in their children's education. But the way I see it, this problem has become a very complicated situation in this country and will continue to grow for years to come if something does not start to change. (Spring 2012, Leo)

Families living in poverty have fewer resources and must work much harder to make ends meet. They deserve opportunities to support their children in their communities and schools.

Isabel's group learned that even within a district schools can be segregated according to social class. An interviewee described how two schools in the same district were drastically different. One school served affluent families and one school served poor families. The interviewee had family members who lived on the border of these schools and they attended both schools. The family would discuss the differences between the "upper class" and "lower class" schools when they had family gatherings:

One of our interviewees from (a suburban district outside of the community college county), it's a little more multicultural there but still about 80% white, still more white people than black people. In (this suburban district) depending on what part you lived, you would go to a different school, which was considered lower class. The other part of (this suburban district) would go to the other school which was considered upper class. My interviewee attended the upper class school. They were actually right on the border so they could have gone to the lower class school but they wound up going to the upper class school, but there was a difference in the classrooms. The lower class had teachers but their curriculum was totally different than the upper class. They were slow learning, the lower class was slower learning than the upper class school. The upper class school went at a fast pace, some of them were even able to skip grades because the information that was taught from grade school on up, they were able to process that information faster. At my interview, they had a cousin who lived in the same area, which was on the borderline, and they ended up going to the lower class school. So them being the same

age, but on different educational levels was something for the parents to come together and talk about. They're still working in the school district to this day to find a way of how to even out the curriculum in both schools, you have the same high school grades, but they're on two different levels, so that's the problem with curriculum when it comes to education. When it comes to sports and different things like that, it's kind of the same, but when it comes to actual academics and educational information, the teaching and the learning is all different. (Fall 2011, Isabel)

As illustrated in Isabel's interview, living in an affluent community rather than living in an impoverished community not only ensures that a student will receive a better education, but also means that they may be fortunate enough to escape many of the injustices and dangers plaguing the lives of American children today. Very recently, a study was published that provided an overview of the current state of American children's health. The findings are devastating:

- The number of children living in poverty is at the highest level in 20 years.
- 73.5 million American children (24% of the total population) receive only 8% of federal expenditures.
- 1 in 4 children are living in food-insecure households.
- 7 million children are without health insurance.
- A child is abused every 47 seconds.
- 1 in 3 children are overweight or obese.
- 5 children are killed daily by fire arms.
- 1 in 5 children are diagnosed with a mental disorder.
- Racial and ethnic disparities are "extensive and pervasive."

- Government sequester cuts and underfunding of pediatric research “have damaged our global leadership in biomedical research and hobbled economic growth” (Flores & Lesley, 2014).

These findings are disheartening to say the least. We are neglecting our most vulnerable citizens. A greater number of children are suffering today, and they need schools and communities that will provide them with healthy food, safety, and security in addition to a quality education with holistic academic, social, and emotional guidance and support. Unfortunately, schools are not being recognized and praised for serving the needs of our little ones. Instead, schools must get these children to perform well on standardized tests in order to get the support and funding they need. Emails about the testing craze clog faculty mailboxes; teachers and school members frantically jump through hoops and complete exhaustive evaluations to prove they are doing a good job; and test prep consumes class time. All the while, students wait for meaningful guidance, compassion, and stability amidst the extreme madness and neglect.

4.1.m. High-Stakes Testing

Students/co-researchers reported that students were experiencing too much pressure and not enough academic and emotional support when preparing for and taking high-stakes exams. Many also shared that the content was a joke and preparing for these exams distracted from more meaningful learning. Students/re-searchers thought students’ stress and anxiety levels, engendered by these tests, were too high and very unhealthy. They also thought the pressure high-stakes testing added and the lack of academic and social support provided, when students struggled to manage the confusion and suffocating weight of these student and school evaluations, increased the appeal of dropping out and leaving school without a diploma.

Often, especially earlier in the semester, when students described their experience of failure in schools, the placement of blame was explored. Students took the New Jersey's state-mandated exam, the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), in their junior year of high school, and they were required to earn passing scores in English and Math in order to graduate. Because students perceived the exams as objective, equitable assessments, some students blamed themselves for failing them or not performing as well as they could. Others blamed teachers for not preparing them well enough. Some students described the tests or test-prep classes as a joke or a distraction from the more meaningful, engaging class the longed to take.

Theodore wrote reflectively:

When I was in high school the exam that was required was the HSPA. This test affected me in a negative way. I was a junior when I took this test. I felt this way because senior year came and I was put in remedial classes due to one basic test. There were parts of the test that were not explained in clarity. The experience that I took from this test was serious. It directly affected my senior year in high school, due to the fact of me not even trying to concentrate on it. I failed the math section horribly. The lesson that I learned was to take testing more seriously. It is really important to prepare for these various tests that are given. If I don't I end up right back in the basic classes, which is an embarrassment to me. (Fall 2011, Theodore)

Repeatedly, the lesson learned in school is that standardized tests should be taken seriously. Zoe wrote:

Oh, the HSPA. The big test that everyone takes so serious. Well when I was in high school, I was one of the students that didn't take HSPA as serious as I should have. I was diagnosed with thyroid disease in April my junior year. Although this was after the

HSPA was taken, I had been sick a long time. I was sick from the beginning of January all the way till April when I got my official diagnosis. This took a very big toll on my performance because I was always very tired and had strep like symptoms. The major thing that threw me off was I fell asleep right in the middle of the exam. All 3 days. My senior year, I retook the exam and passed with high scores. While waiting for my scores though, I had to take part in the SRA process. (SRA is a class designed to prepare students for a HSPA retake). It was the worst class to take, but I just wanted to graduate. (Fall 2011, Zoe)

As Zoe described, students' schedules are structured around the need for them to meet the high-stakes demands of the state test. Their curricular experiences revolve around this singular test. They are unable to participate in classes of their choice because they must pass this exam in order to graduate.

Sam wrote:

During the testing period in the spring of my 11th grade year I was not a happy person. In every class I had we would prep for the HSPA day after day until it was time. The day I dreaded the most, that Saturday morning when everyone here came to school at 8:30 for a test. This was not just any test, this was a test that basically determined what you would do for the rest of your life. It basically boiled down to how you do on the test. If you score high you have the ability to get into a highly recognized college. That highly recognized college would give you a nice diploma which would get you a good job. If you scored lower it is thought that you would go to a lesser-college. And all of this was measured by a darn test on Saturday morning. I felt this is not right! (Fall 2011, Sam)

Many students/co-researchers and community members expressed extreme stress, anxiety, and frustration regarding their HSPA exam. Emma reflected:

High school was not that long ago, so it's not that hard to think back on what I did in high school. Taking the HSAs was a stressful situation for everyone. Preparing for them was the worst. Knowing that if you failed you might not be able to graduate was scary for most. No one no matter who you were was happy to take the HSAs. I knew from the beginning I was not going to pass Math and I ended up not passing it. English in the HSAs were not too difficult, and I was able to pass it. The majority of my grade did not pass the Math, and we were told we did the worst in that section in years. The HSAs weren't a good or bad experience. I see it as an experience that most high schoolers have to go through. I learned a lesson that I need to take stuff more serious and not think negative about things. Maybe if I studied I would've been able to pass the Math part and not spend half my year in a HSA prep class wasting time when I could have been spending it in a class I might have enjoyed. (Fall 2011, Emma)

In the solutions section, Emma expresses the need to increase student interest in classes and school. The HSA is the epitomical opposite approach to increasing student interest. All of the class time spent preparing for this high-stakes test could be spent in more engaging ways. Students voiced that testing preparation is not meaningful learning. Unfortunately, New Jersey is replacing the HSA exam with the PARCC exam and will require public school students to pass annual high-stakes tests in multiple subject areas. The move to more high-stakes testing instead of less will likely result in decreased student interest and greater disengagement their schools.

4.1.n. The Business of Educating Children

Some students/co-researchers noted the odd positioning of public schooling within the pervasive corporate, capitalistic, “But how does it boost the economy?” culture of our nation. The idea is that if a program or organization does not make money, does not make someone rich, then it does not have value. The underlying message seemed to communicate that people in power think that if educational efforts, like public schooling, in America do not save money or make money, then these efforts do not matter and do not warrant financial, political, or social support. Forcing programs and organizations that are designed to improve people’s health, their educational, physical, emotional, and social well-being, to figure out a way to become profitable inevitably means that those individuals who require the most support will be dismissed because they burden and damper the system’s profitability. Gabe critiqued these American values and wrote that:

I learned in every school there is an issue and problem. This project strengthened my dislike of the school system in the U.S. This country says it's great, however, our schooling system, the future maker of this country, is horrible. Since racism is a strong issue, I know that racism is still strong in this country even though it's 'free.' There are solutions to these problems, however. Since we are human, there will be errors, and rules and laws won't be followed, and if it doesn't bring or save money, it will not work. (Fall 2011, Gabe)

He noted an interesting point. Some problems are ignored because they are free and do not cost anyone money. Racism does not appear to cost anyone anything, so stronger efforts to diminish its toxic presence are dismissed. If solutions cost money, then they will be ignored. The presence of the corporate and capitalist mindset in making decisions about public schooling,

especially regarding needy, impoverished urban districts, may undercut meaningful, productive solutions and improvements. Recently published articles explore how the business of education can destroy public schooling systems (Denvir, 2014), disrupt meaningful relationships, services, and alliances in local communities, and reallocate funding from poor, struggling communities to private companies (Fine & Fabricant, 2014).

CHAPTER 5 – PROBLEMS, SOLUTIONS, AND CPAR

5.1 Problems and Solutions

Table 5.1: Problems and Solutions

Problems and Solutions (oranges)	Fall 2011	Spring 2012
Problems	118	78
Problems are Private	2	1
Problems are Everywhere	24	7
Actionable Solutions	115	47
Education is the Solution	33	8
Cynicism	2	1
More Counselors/Teachers	23	14
More Student Support Services	45	44
Engaging/Meaningful Curriculum	36	5
Curricular Opportunities	36	4
Challenging Curriculum	33	1
Multiple Paths	9	0
Strong Leadership	0	1
Collaboration from All Parties	23	5
Presence of Caring Staff	9	6
Stop the Blame Game	3	0

Student researchers not only realized that schooling problems exist in complex ways, but they also began to think critically about solutions. Gabe wrote, “Well, I knew there were problems in schools. It's all in the news, and I went through it. Solutions, well, I haven't thought about any. Just thanks to this project I began to think about this” (Fall 2011, Gabe). Isabel reported in her reflective writing that “Schooling solutions are needed to maintain a healthy environment for students, teachers, and parents. Solutions are needed for everyone to grow.” She also listed a few solutions that various groups could begin to explore implementing, “Board of Education (change curriculum), at home (inform parents what goes on in classroom), school

(assembly explaining importance of education), drugs (keep drugs and alcohol out of school), not enough one-on-one (have tutoring program after school, have tutoring agency come and institute)” (Fall 2011, Isabel).

Students recognized the need for meaningful and appropriate solutions for all of the unique schooling problems. However, the process of supporting and implementing solutions was problematized as well. Rashida shared during her group’s presentation:

How did I feel about schooling solutions? I didn’t write anything, so I’m just going to tell you how I feel. Whether it’s urban or suburban, it’s always a financial thing. People come up with creative solutions all the time to the problems that students face in school.

However, it’s always an issue of implementing it because the finances aren’t there. That’s the first thing you hear when in all actuality issues can be addressed and there can be a solution right in the school without any money, in the form of mentoring, in the form of tutoring, or whatever the case may be. It’s always a solution that can be implemented; however, we don’t have enough positive people because the more positive people will always do what they need to do in order to protect their students while they’re in the school. (Fall 2011, Rashida)

Zaafir wrote:

School is a very important part of everyone's life. You don't only learn ABC's but you also learn life lessons, and many kids don't get this opportunity. As I was listening and sharing stories with my group mates, it made me realize how many other problems there are in school that I never paid attention to. My problem was I wasn't helped with my reading and writing, and I was made fun of. But my group mates had different problems like education was competitive, and problems with friends, teachers, or parents. Solutions

were hard to find for every problem as we had to keep everything under consideration.

(Fall 2011, Zaafer)

Despite the perceived resistance and obstacles faced when figuring out how to implement solutions, students/co-researchers thought it was possible to improve public schooling. With respect to solutions, one group in the fall semester shared that solutions “are able to be done and can really change the problems” (Fall 2011, Group 3).

5.1.a. So Many Problems, which is not okay

Throughout both semesters, students/co-researchers collected many examples of schooling problems. The lists of problems were intimidating and discussions about these problems were in-depth and iterative. Students/co-researchers’ understandings of these problems evolved throughout the semesters, but one understanding held fast. They determined there are too many problems in schools, and this is not okay. Sam wrote about reflective conversations he had with his interviewees and co-researchers. He had made a discovery, a realization regarding the schools in his community. With respect to schooling problems he experienced, he thought that “it was OK at the time, but in reality it was wrong” (Fall 2011, Sam).

Early in the spring semester, Abigail wrote in her reflective writing that “School systems do need improvement and there's much room for growth. In my opinion something as important as education should be taken more seriously and should be a top priority” (Spring 2012, Abigail). Considering all of the problems and solutions and the importance of education, students/co-researchers wondered why schools and students/ schooling experiences were not discussed more frequently and opening in their local communities.

5.1.b. Problems are perceived as intimate and private

One reason community members might not be anxious to converse about schooling problems in their neighborhoods is that they likely experienced intimate, troubling problems when they were in school. More so, they confronted these problems as children, and drudging up and making sense of the damage during those formative years can be difficult and unwanted. Students/co-researchers could relate to this reluctance. At times in their critical reflections and discourse, students/co-researchers expressed discomfort about discussing their schooling problems, other people's schooling problems, or problems in general, because they thought problems were intimate and private experiences:

Sharing my story to the class was very unexpected. I usually keep many of those experiences to myself and never shared them because of how intimate they are. I really don't know how I opened myself up for strangers. My reaction to hearing many stories from my classmates was very shocking. I didn't think many people would share their life story. (Fall 2011, Isaac)

Many students/co-researchers described problems as intimate and private earlier in each of the semesters. Throughout the semesters, they found it helpful to explicitly acknowledge and respect the intimacy of students' experiences with schooling problems.

5.1.c. Problems are perceived as timeless, ubiquitous, everywhere

Students/co-researchers also expressed that problems traversed time and space. Valerie shared, "These problems are still there. She's in her thirty's now and they're still there" (Spring 2012, Valerie). Dan wrote reflectively, "My interview went well. My interviewee was very informative. He discussed his problems in key detail. It went better than I thought it would... I

now realize these problems aren't new! The friend I interviewed graduated 14 years ago and also had similar problems” (Fall 2011, Dan).

Tegan communicated a shared experience of these widespread problems and a collective sense of suffering. “We all had so much to say about the problem we were exploring. I just think it is so important because it is becoming something that is familiar worldwide, because of our struggling economic problems. Everyone, even the middle class, is now suffering because of this economy.” (Spring 2012, Tegan). Tegan also wrote, “I enjoyed the presentation given by group two about bullying. That was very interesting because we all experience some type of bullying in our everyday life. It was interesting to see their research and interviews on how bullying changed people's lives as well as their own.” (Spring 2012, Tegan). Students/co-researchers recognized the potential for alliances across social classes and among diverse groups because many people seem to be suffering and would like relief. They thought people in local communities would be receptive to working together to find and implement solutions to problems that impact them all.

Halima concluded, “Schooling problems are pandemic. The only solution is to make sure legislators pass a law to make education their priority” (Fall 2011, Halima). Solving omnipresent problems seemed like daunting phenomena to resolve. Nonetheless, students/co-researchers argued that grand, collective, concerted efforts to solve these problems should begin immediately.

5.1.d. All the Actionable Solutions

By the end of each semester, students/co-researchers had lists of actionable solutions, i.e. solutions that could be actively implemented immediately. Abigail shared:

The whole process of research then solutions has me thinking on a whole new level. It makes me want to make a difference within my group's school problem and also other

school problems. I feel that solutions from all the presentations were actionable. The solutions I think should be looked into immediately are bringing back study hall for students and more references at school for teen moms. This way teen moms can have a little relief and can go to school and graduate, and a student can have less stress with homework and studying. (Spring 2012, Abigail)

Like Abigail, many students/co-researchers thought about schooling problems differently once they began to discover solutions that could improve students' schooling experiences. In her reflective writing at the end of the Spring 2012 semester, Tegan wrote:

Our team has come up with some school solutions that I believe would be very helpful. We believe that laws should be more enforced when it comes to schools and education. Parents should be given the day off to attend parent teacher conferences. Another solution we came up with is to provide funding for college students from poor areas and more funding to state colleges. I think these are realistic solutions because there are enough school budgets to enforce this.

She also wrote:

After I watched everyone's presentation as well as preparing for my own group's presentation, I found a few solutions that should be implemented immediately. First with my group, I think transportation is very important. The Board of Education should push to have more school buses available for those students that cannot make it to school by means of walking. Another solution I found that would be important is the one group three came up with, about having more daycares available for parents that wish to continue their education. I also think that solution for group 2 about bullying would be

important as well, to educate students on different cultures and countries that are different from their own. (Spring 2012, Tegan)

In class discussions, students brought up failed attempts at this, for example, forced lunch time with people from other cultures or trying different food from other cultures. These tactics were superficial and did not provide opportunities for students to really get to know one another. They agreed that schools needed to create programs that encourage genuine and sincere understanding, trust, and love among members of the school community. While presenting with her group in the fall semester, Sofi recommended that schools work to eliminate racism by “having an ethnic class, so they could teach about culture, religion, so everybody can fit in and learn about everybody’s culture. We also thought about strict rules towards demeaning others. Like monitoring classes, students in fights, bullying and cursing” (Fall 2011, Sofi). Gabe also wrote, with respect to ending the racism students experience in schools, “The solution we came up with was to make students learn about cultures at a younger age” (Fall 2011, Gabe).

Malina identified the following solutions: “explore better budgets for schools, fundraising, make college more affordable, encourage kids to reach higher studies, improve home life, parents and teachers need to have a more active role in children’s lives” (Spring 2012, Maliha).

As part of their Spring 2012 bullying presentation, James shared their actionable solutions, which included that:

Schools should have peer mediation groups so that the bully and the bullied can talk to one another and work out their problems. Schools should have assemblies to talk about bullying and the effects bullying has on each other. Teachers and parents should become

more involved in their kids' lives, ask them about what is going on in school, doing more activities together, and show them that they care. (Spring 2012, James)

Ashley wrote in her reflective writing:

Yeah, one of the problems, especially for the younger grades in high school, is drugs and alcohol. What I was thinking is forming some type of program, awareness club after school, to get kids together, maybe an education charity, working with youth to provide support for the drug and alcohol problems affecting all age levels to bring students the positive messages of personal care, trust, and drug use prevention. This would help by reaching out to students' minds and steering them to the right path in the right direction, to engage them in the right path and the right direction, to educate them about the dangers and the consequences of abusing drugs, to empower them with the truth and the hope. So that's what I was thinking about. I know it's a lot. (Fall 2011, Ashley).

The solutions students/co-researchers discovered and recommended could be immediately implemented. Many of these solutions encourage connectedness among students, teachers, parents, and other school and community members. Students/co-researchers also stressed the importance of cultivating open, respectful dialogue and programs that assist students while they work to understand societal problems and become informed and caring members of their community. Without these solutions, many students will continue to journey through their schools lost, confused, and isolated from people who could make a positive difference in their lives.

5.1.e. Education is the Solution

Expressing the need for collaborative efforts among all parties, Tegan also stressed the importance of recognizing education itself as the solution to schooling problems:

All in all, family support, a strong caring community, encouraging teachers and up-to-date schools are all factors that contribute to better education for a student. I strongly believe education is the key to success. In order for our children to become well educated we have to begin at home, in the community, and in the schools. (Spring 2012, Tegan)

Tegan echoed Horace Mann's (1849) axiom: "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men--the balance-wheel of the social machinery." If providing a quality education to all students will improve schooling problems, then solving schooling problems will not only improve students' educational experiences, but will also improve social injustices and stratifications, reduce poverty, and more.

Tegan realized that improving schools, improves society:

In my personal experience, I felt like (this urban) community failed me. I say this with great disappointment. I wish the city would put more effort into building a strong school system. In turn we would have more aspiring students. Education is the antidote to violence and street crimes. (Spring 2012, Tegan)

Perhaps states and school districts do not want to spend money on improving schools because they will not make money from this endeavor? Poking holes in the logic of "Business of Education" theme examined earlier, which explores the line of thinking that schooling solutions should not cost state money or should save the state money, is the discovery that states that have spent money and invested in students' education have also enjoyed a boost in their economies (Berger & Fisher, 2013). If improving schools promises to reap social and economic benefits as a result, federal, state, and local entities might think about implementing some of the solutions created by students who have first-hand experience navigating their problematic schooling systems.

5.1.f. Cynical about whether solutions will work

Some students/co-researchers questioned whether solutions could make a difference and whether they could make a difference. Some expressed discomfort with attempting to change schools because they have too many problems and schools were too broken to fix.

Shani wrote in her reflective writings about implementing their solutions:

Our group presentation was very good when we all got together and found out that some time or another we had a problem in school and (our) home life... I think we can always talk about it but can just our small group make a difference in this school problem? If I had more free time to just work on the problem of bullying, (to protect) the soft and easy-going students in classrooms or work places, I would make a law that would keep bullying out of the minds of the ones who think it is alright to bully the weak ones. Stop bullying a person because the way they act in the classroom, their education, fashion, styles, appearance, looks, skin, eyes, or hair. (Spring 2012, Shani)

Students/co-researchers identified that a lack of time and a lack of community interest could be roadblocks to collaborative work towards immediate, positive change. Hope existed even amidst the skepticism, though. Isaac wrote:

I see school problems will always be present and there are many solutions for these problems. However, no one is stepping up and bringing those problems to light.

Therefore, nobody is creating solutions to the problems. Many solutions are very simple and seem to be effective. Someone should at least try to put them to work to see for a fact if they are beneficial to society or if one creates a bigger problem. Then we can just take that solution away and try another one. (Fall 2011, Isaac)

Even when expressing cynicism, students/co-researchers communicated that they believed schools could be improved, which they ultimately viewed as an ambitious goal but not an impossible one.

5.1.g. More Counselors and Increased Time with Students

More guidance counselors and teachers are needed in schools in order support struggling students more effectively. More so, students need greater access to their counselors and teachers. Students/co-researchers tended to focus on the teachers' impact on students initially, earlier in the semester. They unanimously agreed that students' access to caring, qualified teachers is vital. One good teacher can impact a student's life in a meaningful, sometimes life-changing way. Reflective discourse and conversations with community members led students/co-researchers to the discovery of another important role in school community: the guidance counselor (which included counselors in a more general sense like support service staff members who provide counseling to students). School counselors make a big difference in the lives of students and are underutilized and under-hired.

Students/co-researchers identified the necessity to remove distractors from these high-impact positions in the schools. They were discouraged to learn that counselors who are extensively trained to support students and who have a great potential to make a positive difference in the lives of their students, often were glorified administrative staff overwhelmed by paperwork instead. For example, with so many students in need of greater academic, social, emotional, and behavioral support, state and school officials are hurting the students when they expect guidance counselors to spend significant blocks of time on programming or pressure teachers and other support service staff members to complete a lot of unnecessary paperwork. Ideal, effective, and meaningful priorities would include increasing counselors/teachers time

with students and reducing staff to student ratios. At the end of the semester, Rashida argued, and her co-researchers agreed, that, in urban schools there are “not enough support groups for students and equal opportunities did not exist. Proper counseling by teachers and staff was limited” (Rashida). Students in the urban schools confronted greater violence and abuse than their neighbors in the suburban schools and, because their school staff members were overwhelmed, they had even fewer opportunities to receive the counseling they needed. It was a bad situation made worse. Students/co-researchers viewed this solution as easily actionable and capable of producing immediate positive results.

Abigail, and her group, noted the need for “more available guidance counselors” who could support students various ways: “that would relieve the pressure from mental stress or coping skills, they could help find coping skills and how to handle responsibilities, and balance themselves, maybe balanced schoolwork and responsibilities at home if they have kids during high school” (Spring 2012, Abigail). Guidance counselors are often overlooked members of a school community. They have the potential to make immeasurably positive impacts in the lives of their students, if their schools provide them with space and time they need in order to be available to their students in a sufficient manner. Guidance counselors can create programs and groups that can provide academic and social support to students experiencing conflict.

Students/co-researchers in the fall semester also determined that schools needed more guidance counselors, and students needed more meaningful time with teachers and staff so that they truly felt supported and valued. One of Isabel’s interviewees shared that:

School was fun. Involved in a lot of activities, normal teenager, didn't have a lot of responsibilities. Racism was alive and well. There were only 20 African American students in the school. The teachers were very creative in their teaching (used hands-on

material, videos made by students and displayed). Teachers have to keep an open dialogue with the students and make sure they feel their thoughts and ideas are important and valuable. Wish fashion design was offered in the curriculum because it was in high demand. There should have been more counselors and peer leadership groups. (Fall 2011, Isabel)

Guidance counselors, teachers, and student leadership groups could work together to address racism, bigotry, bullying, and cruelty school-wide, so that the open dialogue and respect felt in the classrooms could translate to spaces throughout the school. During his group's final presentation, Leo reported:

We feel as though teachers should play a bigger role as well. Not just work but be aware of their home life and help them with drugs. Help students get on track. Because sometimes you know students just want to be listened to. Students just wanna be heard about certain issues or topics that they might not discuss with their parents or they're afraid to talk about with anyone else. Teacher should have a more active role in those students overall. (Spring 2012, Leo)

Leo also said, "in high school one of my classes it was a history class there was a teacher and the assistant teacher. I know it would be a problem to get two full-time teachers but she was more like a volunteer, a retired teacher. If you love teaching and you really love the kids, you can do that" (Spring 2012, Leo). The class discussed how effective it is, or would be, to have two teachers in each class. To which Asha responded, "but in my high school, there weren't any classes where we didn't have two or more teachers. So it's really weird to hear that schools don't have enough teachers. Because I mean every single last class, even one my classes was on nothing, we still had two teachers. I went to school across the bridge in (suburb in

Pennsylvania)” (Spring 2012, Asha). There was general agreement that two teachers in each class was ideal, as well as limiting classroom enrollment to 18 students. Daniel shared, “Schools should cap their academic classrooms at 18 students and should hire more teachers so there are two teachers in every class” (Spring 2012, Daniel).

5.1.h. More Student Support Services and Programs

Students longed for consistently supportive people, places, and programs they could visit to receive guidance and support. Similar to the increased availability of counselors, support service providers, teachers, greater access to academic, social, emotional, behavioral student support services and programs is needed. Also, schools should support *academic **and** social* needs together so they are not at odds. If schools lack services and programs that support students struggling with academic, social, emotional, and interpersonal problems, they can be encouraged to give up on their efforts to overcome personal challenges. Zaaifir shared how a lack of literacy support (and the lack of caring and compassion he experienced—a theme explored in the “Caring and Supportive Staff” section in a few pages) in his school led to his decision to give up:

That kind of did affect me in school a lot because there was times when I would go to class and I had a hard time reading because I had never had a school experience back home so it’s kind of hard for me to understand how to read, so every time I would try to read something in class, my teacher would pick on me on purpose. When I would read something, they would laugh at me, like ‘he doesn’t know how to read.’ I was kind of sad. While that was happening, I didn’t want to go to school anymore. And I felt like ‘to hell with this’ you know. Forget about it and walk away, you know. (Fall 2011, Zaaifir)

Zaaifir attended a high school in Suburban District 7, and he reminded us that not only

must there be more academic and social support offered to struggling students, but these services and practices must be performed with patience, compassion, care, and respect.

Zoe struggled during her last few years of high school because of health issues and expressed a need for greater support while she figured out how to manage all of her school work and her chronic illness:

Out a lot fall to spring of junior year because of undiagnosed hyperthyroidism. It affected my education very much. I was missing a lot of school. I began to miss school once or twice a week. It was very hard to concentrate when I had so many other things on my mind. My school work started to really fall. School has always been my main priority, but when you are diagnosed with a chronic illness at 17, you really don't care. My senior year, my thyroid levels fell, and I started falling asleep in class and not waking up for school. I did my worst senior year. I missed 50 days of school and went on home instruction for 3 months. Home instruction is far from the same as regular school. I went back to school and was so behind. I wanted to give up, but I didn't, and graduated! (Fall 2011, Zoe)

Schools need policies and practices that support sick children and refrain from punishing them because of their ailments. If students have to learn in home instruction, they should still receive a quality education. Creative solutions will likely be necessary so that high quality home instruction can be affordable for districts and logistically feasible.

Leah shared that:

One of the problems, especially for the younger grades in high school, is drugs and alcohol. What I was thinking is forming some type of program, awareness club after school, to get kids together, maybe an education charity, working with youth to provide

support for the drug and alcohol problems affecting all age levels to bring students the positive messages of personal care, trust, and drug use prevention. This would help by reaching out to students' minds and steering them to the right path in the right direction, to engage them in the right path and the right direction, to educate them about the dangers and the consequences of abusing drugs, to empower them with the truth and the hope. So that's what I was thinking about. I know it's a lot. (Fall 2011, Leah)

If created collaboratively, with the respectful inclusion of students, families, guidance counselors, teachers, administrators, and community members, these programs could have the scope and buy-in needed to reach students in meaningful ways. Students/co-researchers thought the support services and programs should meet the specific needs of the students and school community, so services and programs could be different from school to school. They did list ideas that seemed to be relevant to students regardless of what school they attended. One group in the fall shared that "Schools should encourage and give importance to clubs and activities that bring awareness to students about racism and discrimination." If standardized tests continue to exist as a measurement of a student's knowledge, they should not be the only measurement as they are limited in what they capture. The group also argued that "Schools should offer SAT, ACT, HSPA tutoring so students can get help to prepare for these exams" (Fall 2011, Group). In discussions and final presentations, students/co-researchers also identified the need for schools to provide comprehensive and consistent:

- tutoring services
- teacher availability for extra-support

- diversity training for teachers in an effort to increase compassion for students with disabilities or lower skill levels so they will be less likely to treat them with frustration (or consider them too much work to catch them up)
- programs to support teens who are pregnant or have children
- counseling services, support groups, and educational programs for students who are coping with abuse (physical, sexual, emotional abuse; drug and alcohol abuse; problems at home; etc.) and illness (mental, physical, chronic, etc.)
- support for students who are constantly moving from school to school
- support and educational programs that work to increase compassion and decrease cruelty related to identities (race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, sexuality, gender, difference, disability, weight, appearance, look, dress, possessions, etc.), with a respectful and open-minded understanding of the intersectionality of these sociocultural constructions as well.

5.1.i. Curriculum - More Engaging, More Meaningful to Students

In order to increase student engagement, school curricula must provide greater student choice, student voice, student direction; and curriculum needs to be more rigorous and provide greater opportunities for critical and creative thinking, and should support and develop students' writing more (essay, creative, formal, business, etc.).

As Leo discovered during interviewing, students who do not have access to a curriculum that takes into account their unique needs and interests will disengage. When the school one of Leo's interviewee attended reduced curricular opportunities and failed to connect with non-native English speaking students, student engagement decreased and opposition within the school environment increased:

In middle school (middle school in urban district) she was placed in gifted and talented classes. In middle school classes were more crowded. There were also more fights occurring in and after school. The kids from bilingual classes seemed to be in a world of their own and didn't interact much with the other kids, even though they were like this student who spoke Spanish. There were often fights with these kids. She also noticed that while she used to attend classes like computer, music, wood shop and home economics, these classes were not offered at this school anymore, and they didn't go on trips like they used to. (Spring 2012, Leo)

At the very least, schools must have the curricular materials and resources students need in order to engage fully in the coursework:

Our second actionable solution solved the problem of lack of resources. Not having proper resources makes kids not want to engage in school, like not having a textbook. A lot of kids are asked to learn information from textbooks, so it's important to have up-to-date textbooks because I know personally, I read the textbook, and if you're reading a textbook that isn't up-to-date, you're learning the wrong information. (Fall 2011, Zoe)

Emma shared that, even when students have the supplies they need and are provided with many opportunities, student interest in class curriculum is still important. Students are motivated when they are interested in the content:

Group members never had enough supplies, books, sports, or clubs. A lot of these things affect people whether some want to believe it or not. I never had those problems with school supplies or what the school offered. We always had enough of things and enough things to do. I was just never motivated to do what I had to do in class because of the lack of interest I had in high school. (Fall 2011, Emma)

Including students in the creation of curriculum, so that their interests are heard and respected, may be an effective way to increase student interest and ensure that curricula are more engaging and meaningful to the learners. All in all, students/co-researchers decided that the school curriculum needs to be equitable across schools (same access and opportunities provided to all students), that more electives and classes that explore and embrace diversity (cultural, ethnic, gender studies) should be offered, and that there should be curricular opportunities that prepare students for careers of interest. They also thought that class time should include engaging, hands-on projects (inquiry-based, student-led), and curriculum that is more rigorous and balanced (less rote memorization and test prep and more critical and creative thinking development and versatile literacy development – so that they can read and comprehend different formats and write for different purposes and audiences). With respect to high-stakes testing, like NJ’s HSPA (and PARCC), they viewed standardized tests as a measurement tool, one of many, and not a learning tool and test prep distracted them from more meaningful learning. They did agree that some information needs to be memorized but some needs to be experienced in order to gain meaningful, lasting knowledge and understanding. “For one of our solutions, we thought about having more projects and experiments in the classroom to make it more interesting, for the curriculum” (Fall 2011, Group). Again, they stressed more hands-on activities, creative projects, and inquiry-based, student-directed opportunities.

5.1.j. Multiple Schooling Paths with Influential Student Input

Public schools need to be designed so that students have multiple schooling paths that they can take and explore freely. Students must also have the freedom to choose their desired path, and they should experience greater opportunities regardless of the journey they choose. This process should be fluid and flexible. Students/co-researchers brainstormed that multiple

schooling options could include paths with education and training that prepares them for careers and college, like vocational-technical schools, but more rigorous. Students must have the freedom to choose and craft their paths and should not be forced by the school to follow a rigid, prescribed path.

Rashida shared:

I attended Adult Evening School and graduated with HS degree at the age of 25.

Experience was well worth it. The classrooms were no larger than 20 students per class. I found the teachers to be more helpful and understanding. I had one teacher whom I could say had a lot of faith in me and my ability to succeed. My teacher and mentor made herself available in and out of school, and I took full advantage of that extra help even though I didn't need it. (Fall 2011, Rashida)

Sam liked vocational-technical school in theory, and thought it could be a meaningful schooling path for some students, but he thought it should be more challenging:

I went to vo-tech, and it was a joke. I thought I would learn something, and it was a joke.

I went there thinking, yeah, I'm going to get out of work. This is going to be easy. But now, after doing this project, I realized how pointless it was for me to go there because it was almost so easy and uneducational, that I hated it. I started to not like it.

Sam shared that he went to vocational-technical school for Landscape Design and was initially very excited about it. Ultimately, he felt disillusioned. "No, it wasn't really landscape design. It was like that's a dandelion, that's grass. It was not landscape design at all. It was for... I wasn't happy with it" (Fall 2011, Sam).

Zaafir had a meaningful experience with vocational-technical school:

When I was a sophomore in high school, I always had trouble reading, and in class I was asked to read. My fellow classmates made fun of me because I wasn't good at it, and that made me go away from studies. I lost interest in studying. So in junior year I started to go to vo-tech and took construction classes. I got certified in GBC and graduated from high school. After high school I got a job in construction, and I didn't go to college for a few years. I wanted to go further with construction but all the jobs required some sort of degree and that made me come back to school. What's helping me learn is my future. Whenever I think about my future I want it to be simple and stress free about education. (Fall 2011, Zaafer)

Zaafer also wrote reflectively:

After that I graduated General Building and Construction, and that's what I was good at. I got good grades, passed the classes with an A. After I finished school, I went into the Army. Once I went into the Army, it hit me that education is what's most important in life. If you don't have education, you're going to fail. Let's say I go to the Army and lose my leg or arm, I need some sort of education to support my life. And that's my story. That's why I'm here today, in class. (Fall 2011, Zaafer)

Students/co-researchers determined that schooling paths should be as diverse and dynamic as the students who journey them. With creative, innovative, collaborative efforts among educators and community members, a complex web of opportunities could become a possibility. Students must be met where they are and be provided the freedom to move where they want to go and explore areas of interest to them. They should not be forced to follow a uniform plan that does not feel right to them.

5.1.k. Strong Leadership

Some students/co-researchers recognized the need for school and community leaders to step forward in education reform movements so that their interests are shared publicly. Also, schools and communities require strong leaders who care about students and their wellbeing, learning, and growth, inside and outside of the classrooms and throughout their communities. These leaders should foster and cultivate communities of care, compassion, and love for all people, diverse people. Primarily in passing comments during class discussions, students/co-researchers noted the need for strong leaders who hear and respect the needs of all people and work collaboratively with all parties in the schools and communities to implement solutions.

5.1.L Collaboration from All

Isabel wrote reflectively that “After this research process and coming up with solutions, any school problem can be addressed by coming together with the teachers, board of education, and other supporters to turn things around.” She also said “I have learned that succeeding in education is the common goal for everyone. Schooling problems can be solved by way of communication and developing a relationship with parents, teachers, and other classmates” (Fall 2011, Isabel). Problems impact everyone in the community, and everyone in the community needs to be involved in solving them.

Students/co-researchers concluded that all parties must collaborate consistently, tirelessly, and respectfully in order to create the best learning environment for all students. Each person’s role must be explicitly understood, respected, and valued. Participating parties include: community members, parents, students, school members, guidance counselors, teachers, support service staff, administration, and government officials. Halina shared, “It really takes a village to raise a child and also that pertains to schools. Consequently everybody, parents, students,

administrators and legislators should all come together and find solutions to the problem” (Fall 2011, Halina). Sam articulated, “We were trying to figure out what the main problem in schools was and we realized it isn’t just students or teachers, it’s really everyone, the curriculum, parents, the environment that the students are in, the socioeconomic disparities. This is what we realized from doing the research that we did” (Fall 2011, Sam). Improving community schools can be accomplished most effectively if all school and community members receive informed understandings of how their schools are functioning and the societal and systemic inequities at work. All groups must be invited to participate in efforts that aim to create positive change, and all voices should be respected and heard throughout these collective research processes. There should be healthy organizational approaches for addressing challenges, conflict, and difficult decision-making.

5.1.m. Caring and Supportive School Staff

Teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, all school staff members, must be present and aware of what happens in the school. They should not be overworked or distracted so they can be a part of the students’ experiences and not separated from them. Students/co-researchers noted that staff could monitor students socializing in classrooms and hallways, facilitate programs and assemblies to provide opportunities for school members to express how they care about students, and model ways to undercut impulses to bully and act cruelly toward one another.

Shani stressed the importance of school involvement in creating an environment of student acceptance. In her reflective writings she urged that:

We need all of the school to get involved with more programs that can stop bullying in schools... It always seems like no one cares until someone gets really hurt from the

bullying problem in schools. But I always will ask why is that in school that teachers are too distracted when the teachers should notice how all the students treat the quiet student? (Spring 2012, Shani)

The quiet students are easily overlooked throughout the busy school day. Schools could factor in time for faculty, administrators, and staff to focus specifically on ways to improve school community and the amount of care and love students feel. Without time and communal effort, this very important aspect of students' schooling experiences could continue to be neglected and cruelty could continue to reign in some students' lives.

When school and community members communicate the message that students matter, that they deserve a quality education, and that they are important and capable, students respond in positive ways:

One unique story I heard from my group member's interview was strange and motivating. It was about how one person used to get into trouble all the time and got expelled from any school he went to. He switched around three schools, and he finally studied in the next school. He tried to stay away from trouble. He was getting a C while other people in the class were getting F's. The teacher bumped everyone's grade by two letters, and he got an A while others got a C. That gave him motivation, and now he is almost done with college. I found it interesting because life changes for man by just changing his environment. I learned that if you want to change yourself for the better then you have to leave the environment and go to a good environment. (Fall 2011, Zaafer)

In the age of cyberbullying and a growing presence of cruelty, greater efforts must be made to establish communities of care inside and outside of the classrooms and schools.

5.1.n. Stop the Blame Game

At the start of each of the semesters, students/co-researchers had a tendency to focus on one problem and one solution. Sometimes a particular group was targeted and blamed for schooling problems, especially parents, teachers, and students, and to a certain extent school leaders and staff. The CPAR process challenged some of the students/co-researchers impulses to blame themselves and others. “Hearing other classmates’ stories was an eye opener. I could relate to their stories in certain parts of my life. Before higher education, students blame others, and in higher education, they take all the blame for their actions” (Fall 2011, Theodore). Sam reported that “We have discovered that the environment around students molded their academic outcomes, aside from learning disorders (those are internal and still molded outcomes in a unique way). It is frustrating to see that fingers are pointed in so many different directions. When in reality it is 90% everyone else” (Fall 2011, Sam). Theodore and Sam expressed the idea that blame is collectively shared. No particular person or group is to blame for complex schooling problems. Everyone is responsible for fixing these problems. Referencing group and class discussions about the destructive and counterproductive blame game and the need for a collective effort, which must include everyone respectfully, one group in the fall shared that: “We learned in group and class discussions that the finger is pointed at everyone for poor schooling” (Fall 2011, Group 3).

After months of reflection, class discussions, interviews with community members, notations of patterns and themes in their journal reflections and interviews, and the creation of presentations that amalgamated their findings, students reported the need for a comprehensive approach to schooling problems because, just like the human experience, they determined that schooling problems are complicated and complex and require a multifarious system of

resolution. In order to address the numerous, nuanced problems students experienced in their schools, student researchers determined that it would be beneficial if there were clear expectations for every member involved in the educational process (families, educators, administrators, political leaders, students, etc.) and a demonstrated collaborative, collective commitment to students' learning by performing their respective roles. These expectations are not meant to be fixed or restrictive. Their hope is that by publicly recognizing that learning is a social process that requires commitment on all levels then the blame game that currently dominates the discourse will be acknowledged as the ineffectual, distractive argument it is. They challenge the problematic process of blaming students, blaming teachers, and blaming failing schools, and then creating linear, fallible policies and reform measures based on this myopic perspective. Blaming students, teachers, parents, schools, etc. acts as a dysfunctional distraction from working towards positive change. Blaming does not inform the problem and does not create a safe, trusting space in which community members can co-create actionable solutions. Students/co-researchers determined that one of the worst culprits is the media. The media's perpetuation of the blame game is explored in greater detail in the discussion section.

In addition, students/co-researchers recommended an open-dialogue amongst collaborating groups that would make traditional expectations transparent, thus identifying and undermining harmful hidden social norms that have silenced marginalized community members in the past. Respectful expectations could be explicitly, collectively created to replace the deleterious ones.

5.2 The CPAR Process

Table 5.2: The CPAR Process

CPAR process (purples)	Fall 2011	Spring 2012
Critical Reflection on Process	60	51
Critical Consciousness	19	16
Interviewee Comfort	7	17
Stories Connect	40	40
Stories Painful	6	12
Bullying Label Veils	0	4
Citing other Research	0	3
Normalizing Schooling	3	6
Love	2	9
No judgment	3	12
Trust	1	4
Heard	15	13
Friendships	2	9
Nuance	25	8
Comfort in Opening Up	6	13
Positive Experience	35	33
Collaboration Beneficial	17	20

Throughout this section are themes I identified as being part of the research study process, which create a critical reflection of the process itself.

5.2.a. Raised Critical Consciousness – Conscientization

Some students/co-researchers thought about schooling differently after completing their participatory action research projects. With his group at the end of the semester, Sam presented, “We were trying to figure out what the main problem in schools was and we realized it isn’t just students or teachers, it’s really everyone, the curriculum, parents, the environment that the students are in, the socioeconomic disparities. This is what we realized from doing the research that we did” (Fall 2011, Group 3, Sam during final presentation). Some students shared that they experienced a growing awareness of schooling inequities in and around local school districts. At

the end of the fall semester, Theodore shared that he is “thinking differently about problems in school due to the inequalities that take place in them.” (Fall 2011, Theodore).

Students/co-researchers credited the CPAR research process for their raised consciousness. In Isabel’s reflective writings she wrote, “I’ve learned that performing research creates the opportunity to gain knowledge on focused areas that we didn’t even think about before the challenge of performing this research” (Fall 2011, Isabel). And one group in the fall semester shared that “Our problems were not seen as problems until we looked back on them” (Fall 2011, Group 3). Zaafer shared in his reflective writings that “Researching any topic is interesting. It makes the researcher aware of its surroundings. For example, researching about racism in school has made me and my classmates more aware of our surroundings” and that “I found it interesting because life changes for man by just changing his environment. I learned that if you want to change yourself for the better then you have to leave the environment and go to a good environment” (Fall 2011, Zaafer).

Moreover, some students/co-researchers no longer understood their own individual schooling experiences as “the norm” and instead recognized that schooling environments that are supposed to offer equitable access to all students in fact privilege some and marginalize others. Julia wrote:

The way I view my schooling problems now is that I thought I had it bad well at least about being bullied, until I heard the other groups’ presentations. The solutions that should be implemented immediately should be that the higher authorities should worry more about kids and their education they should try to get everyone on the same levels, and in (the urban school district) they should probably make another high school. I still

find it terrible that (the urban school district) doesn't really try to get their students the education they need. (Spring 2012, Julia)

Students/co-researchers also noted that there was a level of cruelty present in all schools; vicious bullying that engendered lasting impacts on the victims present in all schools. For Zoe, her raised-consciousness inspired a growing awareness of the racism, bullying, and cruelty her neighbors experienced in their schools. She shared, "I'm thinking differently about schools and problems in schools by discussing them in class. You never realize the different problems that people go through in school. One major problem that I noticed was racism. Racism has played a major role in children not doing well in school. Bullying goes hand in hand with racism. Children become afraid to go to school" (Fall 2011, Zoe).

Paradoxically, some social and systemic cruelties in urban and lower SES schools were more palpable yet inconspicuous. Cruelty was apparent in that students were more likely to experience violence, dropout, teen pregnancy, and other social maladies; however, prior to research, the dysfunction was identified as a sickness of the individual and not a result of a neglected urban or impoverished community. Schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods require more support, services, and resources than schools in affluent areas, yet students reported repeatedly that the schools most in need were the urban schools. They were the most overcrowded, unhealthy, and neglectful, and the most lacking in proper social and academic materials, opportunities, options, guidance, and support. Less obvious than a tangible bully, cruelty was evident in the absence of the equitable access to education federal law promises yet fails to demand.

Many students/co-researchers made discoveries about the ways in which these problems impacted people very close to them. Shani reported in her reflective writing about the research

process, that “All the research that each student has done was a great job. We even found out that one of our classmate’s family members was being bullied in school. (Before this research project) he didn’t even notice (this was happening) with his youngest sister” (Spring 2012, Shani). Asha shared during her group presentation that “I actually interviewed my boyfriend, and I found out something I didn’t know. He cut himself because he was bullied a lot when he was younger, and that would relieve it. He contemplated suicide, too” (Spring 2012, Asha).

Some students attended schools in more affluent areas, and they were made aware of the schooling inequalities. They did not understand how students could receive less than they had in schools just a few miles from where they lived. They also appreciated their schools and teachers more. Students who attended urban-area schools and schools in less affluent areas were troubled to learn that students in more affluent areas had some of the same problems (e.g. bullying) yet a remarkably better schooling experience. Julia wrote in her reflective writing that:

My group discussions are going well. I’m really enjoying hearing other people’s stories and their struggles. Like I said in my previous reflection I never knew that (urban school district)’s education was that bad, that no one really cares for their education. I am thinking differently about schooling problems because I never knew kids had such a hard time in school to actually learn. I wish I could do something to help these kids to get a better education. As far as the solutions go, we’ve talked about having two teachers in class to help the kids out more and to help the kids focus more in class, or to limit the amount of students in one class.

She also wrote that:

I’ve learned about my schooling experiences that I didn’t take advantage of what I was given in school. I took it all for granted and could’ve done a lot better in school. I just

didn't care for my education and eventually it caught up to me. In my school I received the help that I needed, I had books, computers, and excellent teachers. I had a lot of opportunities that kids in (urban school district) dream about. I just didn't care. (Julia, Spring 2012)

An important aspect of the collectively raised consciousness was that students, like Julia, from suburban districts also gained a greater understanding of the social and systemic inequities that urban students experienced. Emancipation is most far-reaching when those who are privileged and those who are oppressed experience conscientization (Freire, 2000). Positive social change requires that all members intimately understand injustices in their communities and feel compelled to remedy these unjust circumstances.

5.2.b. Desire for Interviewee to Feel Comfortable

In their reflective writings, students/co-researchers wrote extensively about their desire for creating a comfortable, conversational interview. They wanted to ensure they were respectful of the community members and their stories.

Tegan wrote:

It felt comfortable to be interviewed by my team mates. We have great questions and I found it easy to answer them. I had a tough time with school. It was difficult especially since my family was poor. For my own interview I think I will try to make my interviewee feel as comfortable as possible. I will start by asking simple questions about their life. Like what school they went to and what they didn't like about it. I will also talk to them about how my school experience was. I think this will ease the conversation, I am hoping if they hear a little about my life they will realize maybe theirs is not so bad. My

hope is that they will open up to me and speak about their experiences with school and their community. (Spring 2012, Tegan)

Students/co-researchers mentioned how they planned to re-create the comfort they felt while interviewing each other in our classroom. Tegan also shared:

All in all my strategy for this interview is making my interviewee as comfortable as possible. It really helped to interview ourselves prior to going and interviewing other people. I am hoping I can get a fascinating story from the person I choose to interview. (Spring 2012, Tegan).

One reward in making others feel safe to share was that students/co-researchers could experience a community member's powerful, meaning-packed story filled with themes that captured the complexities of a student's schooling experiences. Asha reported, "For me, being interviewed was fine because it was just like having a conversation with a bunch of friends. So now when I do interviews I have to make it more like a conversation versus asking a lot of questions" (Spring 2012, Asha). Students/co-researchers found it effective to approach interviews in the same manner as friendly conversations.

When reflecting on how his class interviews went, Milan wrote:

Everything went well. Everyone gave great answers. The challenging part is hearing with your ears what they have been through in the past. I felt really nervous about being interviewed. I personally don't like talking about my personal life because I don't know they'll react, but when I did, it felt good to have listeners to my stories. To prepare for my interviews, I will do a test interview to feel like they're ready for the questions. To make my interviewees feel comfortable, I will take them out to eat and relax. (Spring 2012, Milan)

Students/co-researchers were keenly aware of the vulnerability and discomfort some interviewees could feel when sharing their stories, and they wanted to alleviate their tension and anxiety in any way they could. They planned and prepared carefully ahead of time and offered their own stories and backgrounds to create an open dialogue and a sense of shared vulnerability.

Leo shared, “In order to make my interviewee feel comfortable, I will start a friendly conversation, leading to the topic I'm working on, and I will explain what I'm trying to get out of it. I'll let him/her know how it could help with the understanding of how things are done now, what works, and what can be improved” (Spring 2012, Leo). Leo also wrote:

Some things that I will do in order to make my interviewee more comfortable are as follows: First I'll introduce them to the topic we're discussing so they have an understanding of what it is we will be talking about. I will also try to not conduct it as an interview but more like a conversation to make things flow smoothly. I'll also ease myself into the much harder questions to make sure my interviewee can answer them fully and in detail. (Spring 2012, Leo)

Some students/co-researchers expressed that they wanted the interview process to be fun for their interviewees. Sofi wrote:

The critical thinking process made it a little easier for me to think about the interview. It also made it easier to think of questions to ask and picking the right people for it. I hope to gather a lot of information in my interviews regarding their experiences and opinions. I also hope it's fun for them and also for me. I'm planning to gather information about the school, its location and history. Then ask more about the people in the school and their personal experiences. I hope to get everything on paper but mostly try to remember

everything my interviewee tells me. Since I'm nervous about doing this, I hope I do a good job! (Fall 2011, Sofi)

Sofi also shared:

I felt good about the interview because I've known the person for quite some time now. I also felt comfortable and tried my best to ask a lot of questions. I think it went well because my interviewee was into the interview and answered all my questions. I wished I could have had more time to ask more personal questions. I need to improve in being more loud and expressing myself more. I got my interviewee to feel comfortable by sharing my opinions on my personal experiences. He mostly agreed with what I had to say and felt the same way about it. I'm starting to become even more open-minded about the solutions for my problems and also for my interviewee's problems as well. I have a good feeling that these solutions will impact and solve these problems. (Fall 2011, Sofi)

When students/co-researchers and community members opened up to one another, they become more hopeful and optimistic about their ability to implement solutions that could resolve intimidating, onerous schooling problems. They also noted tips for conducting improved interviews in the future. Gabe elucidated:

When I did the interview, I didn't feel like I was interviewing. It was more like a conversation. Sometimes I forgot to take notes. That way I made her feel more comfortable and made it easier for her to share because it was a conversation rather than an interview. The only thing I would change is maybe recording the interview so when I forgot to take notes I could go back. (Fall 2011, Gabe)

Some students/co-researchers did not want to record their interviews initially because they worried that it would make their interviewees feel uncomfortable. Some of them realized

later that a recording would have been helpful and thought it would be okay to ask permission to record in the future.

Zoe delineated:

I had a good feeling about conducting my interview. It was very easy to have a conversation about school with a friend. I feel like I gathered more information because we are friends, so she was more open to telling me things. I think all of it went well. I wouldn't change anything. We had a very steady conversation. She also answered all my questions detailed. I was able to encourage my interviewee to think and discuss schooling problems by explaining how I feel and giving her examples of stories that we discussed in my group. I think a little different, but we all connect in different ways. (Fall 2011, Zoe)

The exchange of stories created connections for many of the students/co-researchers and community members and made interviews feel like conversations between friends. Like Zoe, Isabel also experienced the power of sharing stories:

The experience in conducting this interview was very enlightening by the stories that were being told. I think the communication went very well between me and the interviewee. I wish I had a video camera to record the expressions of the interviewee. I was able to encourage the interviewee to discuss their schooling problems by sharing my own issues I was once faced with. As times change and advance to reflect this 21st century, there are plenty of technologies out here that can be used to address school issues and create positive solutions. (Fall 2011, Isabel).

Stories created a shared space where students/co-researchers could connect with each other and other members of their community, a phenomenon which is explored in greater detail in the next subtheme and in the discussion section.

5.2.c. Sharing Stories Creates Connections

People have shared stories to make sense of the world for thousands of years. Storytelling persists because it is a deeply powerful form of communication, and speaks to an inherent aspect of the human experience. Sharing stories is timeless, and it was a vital ritual in our CPAR process. As explored in the previous section, sharing stories improved the interview process. This section provides an overview of how students/co-researchers identified the connections that were bridged through the use of storytelling. Connections could exist as self-discoveries, a growing understanding of the circumstances that impacted oneself and others, and the positionalities of oneself and community members with respect to each other. Leo's reflective writing at the end of the semester, he wrote "I'm very happy I got the opportunity to work with my class' group. I think it was very interesting since we all had different backgrounds and stories of our own that got shared in the process." (Spring 2012, Leo). Storytelling enabled students to explore difference.

Daniel wrote:

It was good to hear what the other classmates had to say because to me it's always good to hear other people's experiences. By them sharing their experiences it made me appreciate where I came from and made me feel good because some people related to what I went through. It definitely made me think about those memories. It was refreshing though because there were some good times. It makes me think differently about my schooling making me realize how many other issues are out there. (Spring 2012, Daniel)

Isaac shared the initial discomfort felt in sharing their schooling stories and acknowledged that ultimately this practice created shared understandings and a communal space:

We all had some type of racist harm done to every single one of us except Cassie. While some had problems with the curriculum of their schools, others had more simple problems. There are many individual experiences that were very shocking and almost unbelievable. For example, the story from Zaafir. At first it was very awkward to talk about personal problems to classmates I had just met. However, after hearing everyone's story, one notices that we are not alone and that many other people have very similar issues. (Fall 2011, Issac)

Students/co-researchers reported the comfort they found in learning that others had experienced their pain and that they were not alone. Earlier in the semester, Milan wrote reflectively about the realizations he had after his group members and he shared their schooling stories with each other. After hearing about his group's problems, he discovered that "most of us experienced similar things. It made me feel upset and worried a lot. It made me think about what I've been through in my life. We might come from different backgrounds but had almost similar outcomes. I believe my school problems changed me as a person to help people in need" (Spring 2012, Milan). By reflecting on personal and communal stories, Milan redefined his capacity to effect change and his relation to others in his community.

Sam stated that exploring their stories investigating local schooling problems in groups taught him "that we all have shared the same experiences" (Fall 2011, Sam, Group 3 notes organizing the final presentation). Many students expressed this idea. They felt connected through shared narrative; however, the danger in focusing on sameness could be that unique

aspects of the lived experience can be overlooked. This is discussed in the Normalizing Schooling Experiences section.

5.2.d. Sharing Stories can be Painful and Uncomfortable

Sharing stories can create connections. However, as touched on briefly in quotes in the previous section, the process and experience of sharing one's story could be quite uncomfortable, too. The storyteller re-experienced painful emotions and memories and felt vulnerable, weak, and emotional in front of classmates they did not know very well.

Zaafir shared:

My story was about how I moved here with my family and cousins. I went through a lot of things while settling in this country. I did not know English nor how to read or write. After 2 years, 9/11 happened and I was always getting picked on as I was from Afghanistan. And I got sick of being picked on and it made me get into fights and made me a person that I didn't want to be or never thought I would be. Therefore, sharing this type of story brought me back those feelings and thoughts that doesn't give pleasure. I got very emotional and upset while sharing this story. (Fall 2011, Zaafir)

When groups conduct CPAR research, or any research that invites participants to share intimate experiences, they should be prepared to offer respect, understanding, and compassion to participants who become upset. Students immediately responded to Zaafir's story with compassion, and they expressed sincere disgust regarding the abuse he had suffered. They reinforced that he did not deserve to experience the cruelty he had.

Isaac felt Zaafir's discomfort and empathized:

We all had some type of racist harm done to every single one of us except (one student). While some had problems with the curriculum of their schools, others had more simple

problems. There are many individual experiences that were very shocking and almost unbelievable. For example, the story from Zaaifir. At first it was very awkward to talk about personal problems to classmates I had just met. However, after hearing everyone's story, one notices that we are not alone and that many other people have very similar issues. (Fall 2011, Isaac)

While sharing stories can make people upset, if handled with love and support, storytellers and listeners can feel empowered by the process. Sofi also acknowledged her own initial discomfort:

I noticed and watched that we all have been through some problem in school that impacted us in a big way. I learned that I could be a voice to students like me and by saying something, I could make a change. I was nervous at first to share my ideas and story, but I'm glad I got through it. It helped me a lot to express myself. I think that schooling problems today can be fixed or handled if we say and do something about it before it's too late. We need to find better funding for schools in our community before we do anything else! (Fall 2011, Sofi)

Students/co-researchers were also concerned that they would make others uncomfortable by asking to hear their stories, and they worried that their own story would create conflict or offend their listeners. Leo wrote reflectively:

Interviewing group mates was very challenging at first, simply because we didn't know where or how to begin. The most challenging part was asking questions that could make them feel uncomfortable and causing them to back out. When I was being interviewed, I felt that uncomfortable feeling for a little bit, and I also felt a little nervous because I didn't know how they would react or what they would think about me. But then I got

more comfortable after having the conversation, and I began to answer the questions more informative. (Spring 2012, Leo)

Some students/co-researchers found that it was uncomfortable to interview their classmates initially. Most students/co-researchers who expressed initial discomfort about sharing their own stories and hearing others' stories also described a sense of relief or comfort in this process. While sharing stories did ultimately strengthen the class community in both semesters, the initial discomfort must be handled delicately and respectfully, as was explored in greater detail in the "Power of Story" section in the first chapter.

5.2.e. Bullying Label Erases Underlying Prejudice

Throughout the overarching theme of cruelty, students/researchers described the various shapes and forms bullying took and acknowledged that students are treated cruelly for a variety of reasons. One unfortunate result of the focus on bullying in schools is that all acts of cruelty are lumped together as bullying. This all-encompassing title simplifies the complexities of acts of cruelty and erases deeper rooted stereotypes and bigotry (racism, classism, homophobia, sexism, ableism, bigotry, etc.). These poisonous perspectives can be harder to eradicate if they are not explicitly acknowledged and addressed appropriately. Students/co-researchers also discussed that anti-bullying measures were reactionary and not preventative. Students/co-researchers noted that students were rewarded by others for being tough, and they were often encouraged by adults and the media to hit or fight back, toughen up, and do not back down. These messages were confusing because being tough meant being a bully. Thus, the cycle of bullying or the cycle of cruelty was fed and continued. Students/co-researchers noted that combatting cruelty also required a collective effort from everyone. The message needs to be re-written such that students hear and experience the strengths of compassion, empathy, generosity, and love rather than the

toxic and weakening impacts of dominance and cruelty. They believed that education would be part of the solution. Students and communities nationwide need a quality education that enables them to experience love, respect, and acceptance in their communities and an understanding of diverse people. If schools continue to address bullying in reactionary, punitive ways, then these deeper issues will remain unaddressed and will fester. Thus, the bullying problem, the pervasiveness of cruelty, will remain intact.

5.2.f. Co-Researchers Integrated Other Research in their Discourse

Towards the end of the semester, students/co-researchers began to incorporate other research into their discourse in order to support their positions. During his group's final presentation, Leo presented, "And research showed that even with all that overworking, as far as the students being prepared in the United States compared to the schools in other countries the education level was still relatively low so, I mean, we even discussed that in class the one day, and that's alarming" (Spring 2012, Leo). Other examples of this phenomenon occurred during class discussions; however, I was not able to record them verbatim.

5.2.g. Normalizing Schooling Experiences

At times, students/co-researchers labeled students' and community members' schools, schooling practices, and schooling experiences as the same, normal, average, and like everyone else's. As mentioned in the "Sharing Stories Creates Connections" section, Sam stated that exploring their stories while investigating local schooling problems in groups taught him "that we all have shared the same experiences." (Fall 2011, Sam, Group 3 notes organizing the final presentation). When students/co-researchers and I shared our stories with one another, and brought in community members' stories to further inform our understandings of local schooling experiences, this practice created a sense of connection between students/co-researchers, a sense

of shared experience, which strengthened the relationships in our community and increased our trust in one another. While our story-sharing had a great positive impact on the building of our community, it could become problematic if we were to understand these moments as the same and not strive to understand the unique variables present in each experience. We did have conversations about the importance of identifying similarities and nuanced differences; however, sometimes the message “we all experience the same thing” appeared in discourse, which could normalize schooling experiences and complicate our understanding of how similar problems (being treated cruelly) are positioned differently in different contexts (urban, suburban, home, school, etc.) with different variables (wealth, privilege, power, poverty, illness, access, racism, classism, discrimination/bigotry of all forms, etc.).

For instance, early in the fall semester, Zoe wrote in her reflective writing that:

Me and my group members all noticed that racism is a very big thing when we went to school. Racism really affects how kids do in school. Another big problem we noticed was bullying. Kids get bullied a lot and are too afraid to tell someone what is going on. This affects their schooling because they are too afraid to be there. One major action that can be taken is bullying classes that all students must attend. I don't believe there were any unique experiences, from different schools. We all went to schools in New Jersey except Rose. She didn't really share much about school. It was interesting to hear about the other people's experiences in school. Everyone kind of has the same experiences. (Fall 2011, Zoe)

Zoe and her group identified racism and bullying as two separate problems plaguing local schools early in the iterative process of analysis, after they had shared their own schooling stories but before they gathered stories from the community. Students/co-researchers had a tendency to

label experiences as uniformly shared earlier in the semester, but some of them did note some of the nuanced differences as the semester, data analyses, classroom dialogue, and critical reflection progressed.

5.2.h. Love

In both semesters, students/co-researchers communicated their love and care for one another during their final presentations. At the end of the spring semester, during their introductions at the start of their final presentation, Shani opened with “This is my group here which I love all the way.” Valerie, who was in another group in the audience, responded with “I know.” The class exchanged heartfelt words to each other. Some students/co-researchers even wrote reflectively about the bond they felt with the members of their group and about how much they cared about each other.

At the end of the fall semester, when students/co-researchers told (or retold) stories about the cruelty they had experienced in schools or the abuse they endured elsewhere, other students/co-researchers chimed in with supportive messages like “I’d whoop anyone who would try to hurt you” or “I’d have your back.” Students/co-researchers communicated a familial care and protection for one another.

The creation of love, and loving relationships, was a product of the CPAR process. Love made the process more meaningful for the participating students/co-researchers, and love makes social change possible. “The transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change (Hooks 2001, p. 16–17)” (Guishard, 101). Paulo Freire (2000) also believed love was a required facet of emancipatory dialogue. “The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the

foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself... Because love is an act of courage, not fear, love is commitment to others” (p. 89).

5.2.i. Do Not be Judgmental of Others

Students/co-researchers discussed the importance of listening openly to others, in class and in the community. They often described the importance of truly hearing people, especially people who seemed different and not like themselves, and hearing others openly required judgment-free zones. Some students/co-researchers recognized and acknowledged that they have a tendency to make hasty judgments about people, and the CPAR process required them to fight those impulses. Some of the programs they recommended captured this message. Mateo shared that he and his group mates wanted to counteract bullying by starting “a mediation program where peers can share their stories and not feel alone and are not judged, where they can express their feelings and someone can actually listen to them.” (Spring 2012, Mateo). In order for the CPAR process to be respectful, effective, and meaningful for all, co-researchers must regularly and explicitly discuss how they check themselves and tendencies to pass judgment on others.

5.2.j. Trust is Important

The need for trust in the CPAR process was closely connected with the need for a nonjudgmental space. Students/co-researchers discussed the importance of creating a comfortable interview so that their interviewees would trust them and open up to them about moments in their lives that were difficult and emotional, moments they might like to forget. Some of the recommendations for school programs also noted the need for places where students could experience care and trust.

Ashley shared:

Yeah, one of the problems, especially for the younger grades in high school, is drugs and alcohol. What I was thinking is forming some type of program, awareness club after school, to get kids together, maybe an education charity, working with youth to provide support for the drug and alcohol problems affecting all age levels to bring students the positive messages of personal care, trust, and drug use prevention. This would help by reaching out to students' minds and steering them to the right path in the right direction, to engage them in the right path and the right direction, to educate them about the dangers and the consequences of abusing drugs, to empower them with the truth and the hope. So that's what I was thinking about. I know it's a lot. (Fall 2011, Ashley)

Students/co-researchers, like Ashley, expressed a desire to create spaces of trust for others that they could safely investigate problems in their lives. By insisting that participants do not judge others, as mentioned in the previous section, trust builds within the group. The CPAR process can inspire members to translate rituals and practices to other contexts where healthy, trustworthy relationships can flourish and thrive.

5.2.k. We All Need to be Heard, Acknowledged, Respected, and Accepted

In communities where children have traditionally been systemically silenced, ignored, abused, and neglected, students/co-researchers noted the importance of being heard, acknowledged, respected, and accepted. Sofi, who was particularly quiet at the start of the CPAR project and opened up comfortably by the end, touched on this need and her own role in achieving it. She wrote reflectively:

I noticed and watched that we all have been through some problem in school that impacted us in a big way. I learned that I could be a voice to students like me and by saying something, I could make a change. I was nervous at first to share my ideas and

story, but I'm glad I got through it. It helped me a lot to express myself. I think that schooling problems today can be fixed or handled if we say and do something about it before it's too late. We need to find better funding for schools in our community before we do anything else. (Fall 2011, Sofi)

Shani shared in her reflective writings:

The many stories shared in the group discussions came to be more interesting when we all found out that we had peer pressure in school and at home. As a group we learned to deal with the problem about being bullied in school and the pressure point at home. We notice that our voice needs to be heard from very important people in high working forces to get this bullying problem to stop. It's not just happen in the state of New Jersey but all over the world. (Spring 2012, Shani)

Mateo wrote reflectively about his group's presentation on bullying and one of their actionable solutions, and he stressed the power and importance of sharing stories so that people feel heard, acknowledged, respected and accepted:

With bullying we can start a mediation program where peers can share their stories and not feel alone and are not judged, where they can express their feelings and someone can actually listen to them. Parents should also go to meetings at school in which they can be informed about bullying and that it's a serious problem. Then they can ask their children if they need any help because most kids who are bullied don't like talk about it with their parents. (Spring 2012, Mateo)

In order for students' voices to be heard, acknowledged, respected, and accepted, there must be greater opportunities for students' voices to be present. Students must be invited to, and given an active, leading role, in shaping their educational experiences in their public schools.

Like the CPAR process demands, student participation in decision-making in their school must be respected and valued.

5.2.l. CPAR Built Friendships

While the “Love” theme and the “CPAR is a Positive Experience” subthemes also touched on positive aspects of the CPAR process, the “CPAR Built Friendships” subtheme specifically captured how students/co-researchers expressed that the CPAR process brought them closer together, forged friendships, and made members feel like they were family. Daniel shared:

What I have learned about the schooling experiences is that everyone went through different things that really opened up my eyes to issues that need attention. Issues such as lack of transportation to school and actually having to pay to get to a public school. What I have learned about working in groups is that it can be a beautiful thing that brings people closer. It doesn’t always work out like that but with this project it did and it was a pleasure to work with this group.” (Spring 2012, Daniel).

Many students/co-researchers in both semesters shared Daniel’s sentiment throughout the CPAR process.

5.2.m. Noted Nuance

When analyzing school experiences, students/co-researchers noted how similarities and differences existed collectively. Sam reflectively wrote mid-semester, “We have discovered that the environment around students molded their academic outcomes, aside from learning disorders, those are internal and still molded outcomes in a unique way” (Fall 2011, Sam). Students/co-researchers acknowledged that even when students experienced similar environments their experiences are distinctive because individuals are unique and perceive their world with respect to their exceptionality. After one of his interviews, Theodore wrote, “Interview went well. I am

thinking differently because we both went to the same high school but see things in a whole different way” (Fall 2011, Theodore). Zoe shared, “I have learned that everyone goes through something different that can affect learning. Not everyone has the same school life” (Fall 2011, Zoe).

Julia wrote reflectively, “I’ve learned a lot from working in groups, and I really liked this group work. I’ve learned about people’s life struggles and what they did to overcome it. I had a wonderful experience because every person in my group had different struggles. It really opened up my eyes and it made me appreciate everything I was given” (Spring 2012, Julia). Students learned and connected through their negotiated understandings of similarity and difference. One was not privileged over the other.

Daniel shared:

I believe the overall group experience went well. I really like our group and the topic we have. I normally don’t really like doing group projects because not everyone pulls their own weight, but with this group so far everyone has. The most challenging thing was being able to come up with the questions. That’s a good thing because everything else has been going good as far as the project is concerned. It was good being interviewed to express my thoughts. I felt as though I brought a lot to the table as did everyone else. Everyone’s insight was valuable and different; they all had their own unique stories. (Spring 2012, Daniel)

Zaafir noted:

School is a very important part of everyone's life. You don't only learn ABC's but you also learn life lessons, and many kids don't get this opportunity. As I was listening and sharing stories with my group mates, it made me realize how many other problems there

are in school that I never paid attention to. My problem was I wasn't helped with my reading and writing, and I was made fun of. But my group mates had different problems like education was competitive, and problems with friends, teachers, or parents. Solutions were hard to find for every problem as we had to keep everything under consideration. (Fall 2011, Zaafer).

Understanding distinct difference encouraged students to envision a grander picture of schooling problems, with greater complexity and detail.

5.2.n. Comfort Found in Opening Up, Sharing, Receiving Support

Students/co-researchers reported feeling comfort in being open with their group members and receiving support and validation from them. Gabe wrote reflectively, "Talking with my group members was interesting cause once we shared we talked more" (Fall 2011, Gabe). Once students opened up and shared, it became easier for them to share. They also noticed that when others were open, they became more open, and vice versa.

Abigail wrote:

Last class, we practiced asking questions that would help us with our Research Question. I had a great experience. I felt nervous at first. I did not want to make anyone feel weird when I asked then a question about their past. My group mates made me feel comfortable; they were open and honest about their experiences with our questions. At times I felt a bit confused because I wanted to try to stay on topic and somehow we would get off the subject. I found staying on the topic a bit challenging. However with practice I seemed to overcome it. (Spring 2012, Abigail)

Abigail also shared:

Now when it was my turn to be interviewed I became a little shy. I felt like I needed to be comfortable with these group mates before I would talk all about different experiences. I felt more and more at ease and I told my experiences with no shyness. It felt good to share something that might help us in the research of our question. Next time I will look for the answers in the stories I hear, interview people I know I can make feel comfortable. I will learn from this experience. (Spring 2012, Abigail)

Students/co-researchers and community members reported that the experience of opening up was comforting and reciprocated. This subtheme moved beyond sharing stories and addressed instances when students/co-researchers specifically acknowledged the process of opening up and feeling comfort as a result.

5.2.o. CPAR was a Positive Experience

Many students/co-researchers reported that conducting CPAR was a positive experience. They thought it would be beneficial to invite other students to create their own CPAR projects, and they believed, with enough people working together on these projects, communities and schools could implement the co-created actionable solutions and experience social improvements.

At the end of the semester, Leo wrote reflectively:

After doing this project I have realized schooling problems are a BIG issue and people should start taking more action into this matter. One can only do so much. But together, we can make a difference. The one solution that I think should be done immediately is to have parents and teachers working and getting to know each other and their children together. I think Participatory Action Research should be done more often, because you

can gather much more information by different people then you discuss it together, finding yourself learning from each other. (Spring 2012, Leo)

Abigail shared, “I think critical participatory action research is very important. It's a way to try to make a change in this world, in our case, the school problems that our class has researched through this project. I believe we can all make a big difference if we (gather our) actionable solutions and bring them to the school board or someone higher” (Spring 2012, Abigail).

Tegan wrote:

I had so much fun doing this class project. I think this was an unforgettable experience. Exploring poor communities is a problem we as teams can all relate to, so this team project resulted in great success. In my opinion our group presentation went better than expected. We all had so much to say about the problem we were exploring. I just think it is so important because it is becoming something that is familiar worldwide, because of our struggling economic problems. Everyone, even the middle class, is now suffering because of this economy. (Spring 2012, Tegan)

Below is dialogue from the start of a group presentation in the spring semester:

Malina: Good morning. I'm Malina. And she's Valerie. We did a project based on education and poverty. First of all, we want to say thank you to Professor Nichols. She gave us a wonderful opportunity to work on this group project. And here are our group members: Tegan, Valerie, Leo, and Daniel.

Valerie: And I just want to say, we had a really beautiful experience. It was nice to work.

It was teamwork. Everybody put their experiences together. So far, I want to thank you, it's the best class I've ever had. It was excellent. It was a great idea to do this.

Malina: Yeah, we had so much fun together. And we know so many things. And we know so many problems as well, about poverty and schools. Getting a quality education is every child's right. But in our society all children are not getting a quality education so we focused on those problems and we were trying to find out some solutions.

Valerie: Hopefully we can make a change, and like you said, we can take it someplace where we can make changes. Every kid deserves to have a really good education.

Tegan put this together in a PowerPoint. She did an excellent job.

Malina: Now Tegan will continue.

Students/co-researchers expressed how CPAR was beneficial for them, but they also could see how CPAR could be implemented to make a meaningful difference in their schools and communities.

5.2.p. Collaboration was Beneficial

The collaborative aspect of the CPAR process is essential, and students/co-researchers reported that it was beneficial to them in its own right. While many schools and educational settings focus more on the individual, students/co-researchers realized that there are benefits to working collaboratively in groups with a shared, collective purpose. Zaafer wrote reflectively, “Working in groups helps you to share and learn thoughts and experiences. It teaches you to be mindful about other's ideas” (Fall 2011, Zaafer).

Sofi wrote, “(Working collaboratively in groups) helped me share my opinions and thoughts and it made working with people easy and fun” (Fall 2011, Sofi). Gabe shared, “One thing I learned about working in a group is that we each can learn from each other and we can help out, and this project was a good way of doing that since we were all able to share our experiences and learn. If we are part of a group, we can find solutions and do something about that issue” (Fall 2011, Gabe). Theodore explained, “What I have learned from the research presentations was we had the same common problems. I learned how to work cooperatively in gathering and obtaining information to achieve a real common goal. To present the information in class was something different because we have better technology now. I haven't been to school in so long” (Fall 2011, Theodore). Halima noted, “I learned from the group and class discussions the importance of sharing stories. That together (through team work) things can be accomplished” (Fall 2011, Halima).

Zoe discovered, “Working in groups is a great learning process because you can gather a lot more information from other sources and compare” (Fall 2011, Zoe). Later in her reflective writing, she reiterated and expanded. “I have learned that working with a group you gather a lot more information than you would working by yourself. Collecting data is a lot easier when you have other things to compare it to. We were a little unorganized with presenting our data, but we got all of the information across” (Fall 2011, Zoe). While working in groups posed unique challenges, many students/co-researchers expressed a sense that they had learned more than they would have if they had worked on this project independently.

Abigail shared, “Research plays a very important role in this project. I had to research with my group as well as by myself. Then putting all the research together was a bit confusing but it worked out great. I learned lots from group discussions because we put all our interviews

and experiences together to come up with some type of solutions” (Spring 2012, Abigail). “In conclusion of this project I really enjoyed myself. It was a new and exciting experience to work on a problem with a group and to put more than one idea together. I always believed that two or more heads are better than one” (Spring 2012, Abigail). For Abigail and others, working with others required more work but reaped better results.

“Noting nuance” and the way in which “story can create connections,” Tegan also acknowledged the inherent challenges in working collaboratively:

I think it's very interesting to hear people's stories and experiences. That's why it was fascinating interviewing my group mates even though everyone had different experiences with the school system and their communities I found it easy to relate to each of their stories. The challenging part was trying to keep everyone on topic. (Spring 2012, Tegan).

Keeping the group focused and on topic was a challenge students/co-researchers frequently cited when they critiqued the CPAR process. Nonetheless, many of them expressed that the benefit outweighed these challenges. Collaboration is especially important when schools and communities work to improve problems. Maliha explained:

By participating in this process, we learned to work as a team and learned how to cooperate with others. My schooling experience was completely different. I did my schooling in India. Over there I had so much pressure for study. I don't want to pressure my children like that. Administrators should work to solve schooling problems. Everyone has problems and through education we overcome and solve these problems. (Spring 2012, Maliha)

Maliha noted how she and her group benefited from working collaboratively in their CPAR work, and then she transitioned into a thought that education itself is a process we utilize collaboratively to overcome societal problems. She added another layer to the “education is the solution” and positions education as the “collective we” and “the answer.”

Echoing Maliha’s sentiments, Leo wrote reflectively at the end of the semester:

I'm very happy I got the opportunity to work with my class' group. I think it was very interesting since we all had different backgrounds and stories of our own that got shared in the process. Everyone worked really hard doing their part in the project, suggesting ideas and useful information to be used in our presentation. I think our presentation was pretty cool. I think Tegan did a great job with the PowerPoint idea. Maliha's introduction was a great opening explanation to the topic. We all had a part explaining the problems we gained from our interviews and the solutions we came up with that we think should be looked into for fixing some of the problems. The other groups' presentations were also presented very well. You can tell they all worked very hard and summarized their problems and solutions in a presentable way. After doing this project I have realized schooling problems are a BIG issue and people should start taking more action into this matter. One can only do so much. But together, we can make a difference. The one solution that I think should be done immediately is to have parents and teachers working and getting to know each other and their children together. I think Participatory Action Research should be done more often, because you can gather much more information by different people then you discuss it together, finding yourself learning from each other.”

(Spring 2012, Leo).

Leo and other students/co-researchers concluded that greater opportunities for collaborative work could benefit people in numerous other contexts. Many students/co-researchers reported that CPAR process and collaborative work were beneficial and enjoyable. They also expressed a hope that the actionable solutions they created would be implemented in their communities. At the very least, they determined that the greater discourse about schooling reform and missions to improve schools should not target or blame any particular group and should be a collective, collaborative effort from all parties with a focus on improving students' schooling experiences rather than identifying failure (failing schools, bad teachers, poor test scores, etc.).

CHAPTER 6 – PROBLEMS SET THE STAGE FOR CPAR

6.1 Public Schooling Problems

Based on a national average of graduation rates in central city areas, about 42.5% of urban students do not receive high school diplomas (Swanson, 2004, p. 29). According to EPE Research Center 2008 data, America's Promise posted a press release that reported a 45.2% graduation rate. Appendix 1 shares the New York State Education data, reporting that about 60% graduate within four years.

I helplessly attempted to find ways to resolve these severe statistics while working as a special education teacher in a public high school in New York City. I asked struggling students to tell me what I could do to make schooling more navigable for them. Sometimes I could provide them with useful tools and support, but often neither the students nor I were equipped to articulate exactly what needed to change in order to improve the overall experience of earning a public high school diploma. There were too many variables and too much of the public school experience felt like an overwhelming, overcrowded hot mess. Certainly, it was not all bad. Countless moments of good, beauty, celebration, camaraderie, compassion, and academic/social/emotional growth existed. There was certainly room for improvement, though, as the graduation rate statistics illustrate. These strikingly high numbers act as a red flag to communities, educators, researchers, policy makers, signaling a problem; however, they fail to capture the unique individuals, their dynamic and complex lives, and the intimate factors that shaped their ability or inability to access and achieve that indisputably necessary high school degree. Their journeys to graduation were filled with covert obstacles, and achieving a high

school diploma is a journey that statistics illustrate is more challenging for certain groups of students (urban, special educated, American Indian, African American, Hispanic).

Christopher S. Swanson (2008) most recently reported the statistical severity of the urban-suburban divide in “Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytical Report on High School Graduation.” He found that “students served by suburban systems may be twice as likely as their urban peers to graduate from high school” (p. 1), an even more alarming discovery than analysis by the EPE Research Center that showed that “high school graduation rates are 15 percentage points lower in the nation’s urban schools when compared with those located in the suburbs” (p. 1). Swanson also noted that “the metropolitan locales with the most severe urban-suburban disparities (more than 25 percentage points) display a marked regional patterning. Three-quarters (9 out of 12) of those metropolitan areas are located in either the Northeast or Midwest” (p. 10).

Swanson (2004) has also highlighted shocking racial gaps in graduation rates throughout Northeast America when he reported that “fewer than one-third of American Indian, about 36 percent of Hispanic, and 44 percent of black students can be expected to graduate from high school” (p. 24). Graduation rates are significantly lower for school districts with “higher levels of poverty... and segregation, more students from racial and ethnic minorities, and more students enrolled in special education programs” and for students who attend urban schools (Swanson, 2004, p. 29).

More special education students do not receive high school diplomas than any other categorized student population (Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002, p. 3). Sources estimate that between 29% and 50% of students with disabilities do not receive a high school diploma (Valle & Connor, 2011, p. 33). Racial inequities are still relevant in these numbers considering that African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students are vastly overrepresented in special

education programs (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009, p. 2; Salend, 2010, p. 21; Valle & Connor, 2011, p.34) and are more frequently placed in segregated schooling environments (Valle & Connor, 2011, p.34).

Education policies and reform efforts that demand greater accountability, standardization, and a focus on testing have created a plethora of problems in our nation's schools. Teachers are performing prescriptive pedagogies that prepare students for standardized exams; students' voices are continuously silenced by teacher-centered pedagogies, and students' creativity and critical thinking are stifled (Dimitriadis, 2005; Meier & Wood, 2004; Schargel & Smink, 2001; Taubman, 2009; Zhao, 2009).

The top-bottom management of urban public schools disempowers students, teachers, and administrators, because they are blamed for their school's failures; however, they cannot control their schools' or communities' access to resources or improve conditions in the greater community that impact learning outcomes. Nor can they negate political decisions made at the "top" that do not take into account the diverse needs of each unique public schooling system (Grumet, 1988; Neill, 2004).

Public urban schooling systems also require students, teachers, and administrators to acquiescently engage in practices and value systems that do not acknowledge or respect—and may even conflict with—their own personal values, perspectives, and identities (Apple, 2004; Bettie, 2006; Grumet, 1988; Willis, 1977). Students who do not perform the acceptable institutionalized identities receive negative and stigmatizing labels (Wortham, 2006), and are pushed out of, or leave, school prior to graduation (Fine, 1991).

Researchers Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota (2006) blame punitive reform efforts like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) for exacerbating schooling problems because they do not

address “underlying weaknesses in these schools” and instead contribute to “rising dropout and failure rates by holding children and youth accountable for meeting higher educational standards, while little is done to expand and improve educational opportunities” (p. xiv). Thus, students can embody a sense of responsibility for failures that are deeply systemic and politically fueled by educational reforms that have not taken into account their interests and needs, particularly those belonging to historically marginalized and oppressed student populations.

Exploring the distinctive experiences students and teachers have in their public schools versus youth-centered programs, both of which implement differing curriculum and pedagogies, may provide valuable insights about learning in varying contexts. According to the participatory/cooperative inquiry paradigm, experiences are embedded with epistemological information (Hero & Reason, 1997; Kasl and Yorks, 2010).

6.2 The Purpose of Our CPAR Study

I entered the Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) process and facilitated CPAR projects with community college students/co-researchers so that we could analyze our schooling experiences collaboratively through community-based narratives and retellings of experiences. Thus, we collectively unpacked the knowledge hidden within these lived educational moments.

By analyzing these experiences, we are able to provide communities, students, teachers, administrators, and policy makers with a better understanding of the practices that support, and practices that oppress, students in public schooling systems. Our findings can inform public policy and education reform efforts, and curriculum, pedagogies, and praxis in local urban public schools and youth-directed programs. Our CPAR study purpose will be revisited and reiterated in the method section.

6.3 Providing a Space for Student Voice in Collaborative Research

Scholars have stressed the importance of providing spaces for individuals who usually are silenced in educational systems to voice their perspectives and experiences (Delpit, 1993; Fine & Weis, 2003; McLaughlin & Tierney, 1993; Weis & Fine, 1993, 2005). In the first edition of *Beyond Silenced Voices*, Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (1993) argued that educational policies, discourses, and practices enact a process they called “the structuring of silence” (p. 1). In the revised edition of *Beyond Silenced Voices*, Greg Dimitriadis (2005) argued that, in the twelve years following the naming of the phenomenon:

‘the structuring of silence’ has only become increasingly pronounced, with the emergence of high-stakes testing and other market-driven imperatives. More and more, standardized tests scores are the currency in which and through which schools are deemed ‘effective’ or ‘ineffective.’ Disconnected from the lived realities of teachers and students, these tests are largely driving day-to-day life in our public schools. *Accountability* has become the watchword for policing what education can mean for youth in state-funded institutions. The tragedy here, of course, is that affluent students can often attend private schools, where student-centered learning is often enabled by material privilege. As always, those most marginalized are under constant surveillance (pp. 233-234).

To counteract a system of education that is particularly harmful to marginalized populations, e.g. students labeled at-risk attending urban schools that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has deemed failing, scholars and educational leaders are creating programs that aim to encourage and empower oppressed, ostracized, silenced, and ignored youth, specifically urban youth (Ares, 2010; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cannella, 2008; Dimitriadis, 2005; Gallagher, 2007; Goldman, Booker, & McDermott, 2008; Goodman, 2003; Morell, 2004; Morrell, 2008;

Rogers, 2008; Torre & Fine, 2006). These programs are student-centered and adhere to the critical participatory action research (CPAR) epistemology. Teachers and researchers act as facilitators, and students' voices are heard through collaboratively created works of art and research for the purpose of enacting social change.

6.4 Critical Participatory Action Research (Critical PAR or CPAR)

Critical PAR (CPAR) is an epistemology that is “rooted in notions of democracy and social justice”, draws on “critical theory (feminist, critical race, queer, disability, neo-Marxist, indigenous, and poststructural),” and “engages research design, methods, analyses, and products through a lens of democratic participation.” Furthermore, situated as the union of social movements and public science, co-researchers of CPAR projects “document the grossly uneven structural distributions of opportunities, resources, and dignity; trouble ideological categories projected onto communities (delinquent, at risk, damaged, innocent, victim); and contest how ‘science’ has been recruited to legitimate dominant policies and practices” (Torre et al., 2012, p. 171). The CPAR epistemological approach to the research process invites members of the community to engage actively as co-researchers because they carry meaning-packed experiences of the systems they navigate intimately. Community members, ideally a diverse mix of individuals who have experienced systemic oppression and individuals who have experienced systemic privilege according to Paulo Freire, have first-hand knowledge concerning how these systems operate, knowledge which may be challenging to access at first as their self-awareness regarding the oppressive and privileging nature of these systems may be repressed (Freire, 2000). CPAR “recognizes that those ‘studied’ harbor critical social knowledge and must be repositioned as subjects and architects of research (Fals-Borda, 1979; Fine & Torre, 2004; Martín-Baró, 1994; Torre, 2005)” (Torre & Fine, 2006, p.271) and equips community members with the tools they

need to engage in an active investigation and dialectical inquiry of the covert oppressive forces that are woven into the cultural, social, and political systems of their world. Researchers train community co-researchers so that they use various research methods to critically and collectively examine problems and create solutions (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright et al., 2006).

Charting its historical path, CPAR is the espousal of Kurt Lewin's Action Research design, engendered in the 1940s (Udas, 1998), and critical theory, i.e. the Frankfurt School of critical theory (Miskovic & Hoop, 2006). CPAR researchers integrate one or more critical theory perspectives into their epistemological approach, which may include feminist critical theory (Cahill, 2004; Cahill, 2007; Cahill et al., 2010; Dentith et al., 2009; Fine, 2012; Smith et al., 2010; Torre, 2009; Torre & Ayala, 2009; Torre & Fine, 2006), post-colonial and critical race theory (Cahill, 2004; Cahill, 2007; Cahill et al., 2010; Cerecer et al., 2013; Fine, 2012; Guishard, 2009; Torre, 2009; Torre & Ayala, 2009; Torre & Fine, 2006), critical pedagogy (Miskovic & Hoop, 2006; Udas, 1998), critical literacy (Miskovic & Hoop, 2006; Morrell 2004; Morrell 2008), and critical mathematics (Terry, 2010), amongst others. CPAR differentiates itself from other action research models by requiring that research subjects (co-researchers) fully participate in all stages of the research process (positing questions, planning and implementing design, collecting and analyzing data, reporting findings, etc.). Congruently, the researcher performs the roles of co-researcher, teacher, facilitator, and learner; however, the researcher never becomes the decision-maker. The co-researchers must have control over the direction of the entire research process (Udas, 1998).

Inspired by the work of critical theorists, such as critical pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970), social science researchers in the late 1960s recognized the utility of PAR in efforts to shift academia's position from observer of oppression to facilitator of consciousness-raising about the

existence of oppression, which led to locally-constructed understandings of oppression, the oppressors, and the oppressed and collective, locally-focused, emancipatory, action-focused solutions. “Paulo Freire (1982) used ‘conscientization’ to describe the developing awareness that occurs among people engaged in self-inquiry. It is the implicitly empowering process in which a group of people become aware of the nature of their disenfranchisement, the mechanics through which inequity is perpetuated, and their ability to change their circumstances (Fals-Borda, 1991)” (Kidd and Kral, 188). Paulo Freire (2005) defines conscientização as “the *development* of the awakening of critical awareness. It will not appear as a natural byproduct of even major economic changes, but must grow out of a critical educational effort based on historical conditions” (p. 15). While conscientização is an inherent goal in the emancipatory, and even potentially liberatory, CPAR process, some CPAR project facilitators strive to achieve and record demonstrable conscientização among the co-researchers participating in the study (Cahill, 2004; Cahill, 2007; Guishard, 2009).

6.4.a PAR Studies that Informed Our Study

Within the past decade, quite a few community-based researcher teams have conducted CPAR projects and published their findings. The following is a descriptive listing of ten recent PAR studies.

Following a feminist Freirean model, Caitlin Cahill conducted a PAR project with a group of young women researchers in the Lower East Side of New York City. They named themselves the Fed Up Honeys and developed the project ‘MAKES ME MAD: *Stereotypes of young urban womyn of color*’. These co-researchers became upset about a report that portrayed a young working class woman of color as a helpless victim of her circumstance, doomed and destined to become a hazard to society, unless a non-profit organization intervened to help her

from herself. They investigated the phenomenon in which privileged people, organized as the noble non-profit, define working class womyn of color as “at-risk” and in need of rescuing because of their living conditions, i.e. their lack of resources. This paternalistic treatment and disempowering stereotyping of working class womyn of color damaged their self-understanding. They wrote a collaborative autoethnography that retold the story of the working class woman of color in their lived experiences, implemented a provocative sticker campaign that called into question damaging stereotypes, and created a website and report to disseminate their findings (Cahill, 2004; Cahill 2007).

The Opportunity Gap Project, facilitated by Maria Torre and Michelle Fine, included a diverse mix of more than 100 students from urban and suburban New Jersey and New York high schools who researched schooling inequities in their communities for three years. The youth co-researchers investigated the path of desegregation from *Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)*, to present (Torre, 2009, 110). Substantiating current research on the frightfully re-segregated nature of public schooling today, they found schools with predominately white students receive greater privileges, resources, and funding than schools with predominately non-white students. (Our study’s findings, located in urban and suburban communities in Central New Jersey, support those reported by the Opportunity Gap project, which is noted in detail in the discussion section of this paper.) Building from work accomplished in the Opportunity Gap project, in a Social Justice and the Arts Institute, thirteen young people (13-21 years old) and “invited community elders, social scientists, spoken word artists, dancers, choreographers, and video crew” (Torre, 2009, p. 110) collectively reviewed the Opportunity Gap Data in the project *Echoes of Brown: Youth Documenting and Performing the Legacy of Brown vs. Board of*

Education. The co-researchers disseminated the Opportunity Gap Project data and findings in their deeply informative and empowering performance art piece titled Echoes.

Madeline Fox and Michelle Fine conducted a large-scale CPAR project called Polling for Justice, in which more than 1,000 New York City youth completed surveys about their experiences with the City's education, criminal justice, and health care systems. Researchers found that individuals were experiencing oppression and were being unfairly targeted, according to their perceived race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and more, and the intersectionality of these identifiers. For every indicator they studied, the "youth who had scored as 'highly dispossessed' by educational, housing/family, criminal justice, and health care policy reported much higher rates of negative outcomes" (Fox and Fine, 2012, pp. 14-15). The results from this study, as well as follow-up projects they co-facilitated since, provided evidence-based support for ending the discriminatory profiling practices, known as Stop and Frisk, utilized by members of the New York City police force.

Immigration policy discourse and debate can be fiery and polarizing in the United States. Across Utah, youth researchers have given voice to those individuals who are usually targeted fiercely in these discussions: the undocumented workers and students of the U.S. The Educate project explored higher education opportunities for undocumented students. This team of high school students created a blog to inform the public about their rights and regularly conducts workshops across Utah for underrepresented students and families. The Dreaming of No Judgment: Mi Pleito Against Stereotypes project identified racism in the discourse legislators used when discussing immigration issues. The youth research team conducted focus groups and gathered "poignant stories of discrimination and systematic denial that ranged from racial profiling by police and guidance counselors, to being denied access to housing and educational

opportunities” (Cerecer et al., p. 219) from young people of various ethnic and racial backgrounds about their experiences with stereotyping. “Using data collected from these interviews, youth researchers created a video-docudrama that reenacted scenes from the stories they heard. Encouraged by the power of collectively telling stories and naming oppression, they used research to let others know that they are not alone” (Cerecer et al., p. 219). Furthermore, the youth co-researchers created a Myspace page so that they could share their findings, the video-docudrama, and games that other students could play to “test discriminatory practices” (Cerecer et al., p. 219).

The Youth Affordabili(T) Coalition (YAC) of 22 youth organizations hold Boston’s public transportation accountable to “young people’s educational, health, and economic needs” (Powers & Allaman, p. 2). In this PAR project, co-researchers surveyed and interviewed youth, which helped them determine that students’ public transportation pass hours needed to be extended, and service cuts and fare hikes were reduced.

Youth United for Change (YUC) implemented youth-led research process, youth participatory action research (YPAR), and the co-researchers designed the research that led to the restructuring two large Philadelphia high schools “into smaller schools in order to hold those spaces more accountable to the young people at the schools and their needs” (Powers & Allaman, p. 3). These co-researchers continue to resist top-down changes that do not serve the city’s youth by making their voices heard in public and political discourse regarding local education reform.

FIERCE empowers LGBTQ youth of color in New York City and “uses leadership development, cultural expression, media, and arts to engage youth in social justice activism.” (Powers & Allaman, p. 3). With a collectively created survey, the group identified areas of

concern for city LGBTQ youths and recommended ways that policymakers could provide greater support to these individuals.

As part of a six-week summer PAR seminar, seven African American males developed their critical math literacies during an investigation of the number of African American men incarcerated, as compared to the number of African American men in college, between the years of 2000 and 2007. The data acted as “mathematical counterstories” and the “mathematical counterstory-telling” represented “students’ attempts to contradict dominant understandings of Black men’s experiences in universities and prison in California, while simultaneously creating new understandings of how these institutions are experienced” (Terry, p. 97).

Forty-one young Irish women (seventeen to nineteen years old) co-constructed their physical education curriculum in an urban high school. Data was gathered from individual and group conversations with the youth co-researchers (curriculum designers) and project artifacts (photographs, posters, reflective diaries, etc.). Their findings “suggest that participatory approaches to research and curriculum-making can serve to promote students’ meaningful engagement in the critique and the reimagining of their PE and physical activity experiences” (Enright and O’Sullivan, p. 203).

For six summers, 1999 to 2004, urban students, parents, and teachers collaboratively investigated concerns they had with their schools and community in the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) summer seminars, co-facilitated by Ernest Morrell at the University of California, Los Angeles. Co-researchers crafted research questions based on their concerns, collected and analyzed data, and created research reports and multi-media presentations of their findings, which they presented to audiences of regional and national

conferences and “university faculty, local and state politicians, teachers, community members, and parents” (Morrell, 2008, p. 162).

There are countless other CPAR projects that have been conducted within the past decade, and in decades prior. Additional CPAR projects are even referenced in other areas of this paper; however, this list provides a glimpse into of the kind of work that is being done to empower the oppressed. These projects provide meaningful artifacts and evidence that justly should be included in discourse because they ensure that the community members who are most impacted by reform efforts have contributed their critiques regarding the quality of public service provided to them and offered their recommendations for policy reform. Public policy changes must include the voices of the people who have been systemically oppressed, people historically silenced and ignored.

6.4.b Grounding Our Study in the Research

The current research on schooling problems and CPAR projects conducted recently, detailed in previous sections, informed and grounded this study. In an effort to develop a local understanding of public schooling problems and to respect student voice in this endeavor, I integrated CPAR projects into two remedial English classes at a central New Jersey community college. In the following sections, I will provide a demographic context of the community college and surrounding areas, which includes a recent report of the severely segregated makeup of New Jersey schools and demographic information of the public school districts in the county, the community college, and the remedial English classes that participated in this CPAR study.

CHAPTER 7 – A CENTRAL NEW JERSEY COMMUNITY

7.1 Segregated New Jersey

Alan Karcher published a book titled *Multiple Municipality Madness*, in which he detailed the history behind the small state with excessive and tightly drawn local governances. Not surprisingly areas of New Jersey were often redistricted so that privileged people and groups could maintain power and control in their communities. Paulo Freire (2000) noted the dangers of hyper-districting such as this when he wrote:

the more a region or area is broken down into ‘local communities,’ without the study of these communities both as totalities in themselves and as parts of another totality (the area, region, and so forth)—which in its turn is part of a still larger totality (the nation, as part of the continental totality)—the more alienation is intensified. And the more alienated people are, the easier it is to divide them and keep them divided. These focalized forms of action, by intensifying the focalized way of life of the oppressed (especially in rural areas), hamper the oppressed from perceiving reality critically and keep them isolated from the problems of oppressed women and men in other areas. (pp. 141-142)

New Jersey’s numerous municipalities segregate its citizens. Segregation exacerbates social stratification and inequitable access, such that affluent families send their children to generously funded schools with greater resources, support, and opportunities (paid for by local taxes) than impoverished families who send their children to under-funded schools that lack resources, support, and opportunities. Co-researchers and community members who participated

in this CPAR study reported experiencing stratification and resulting inequities firsthand in the results sections of this paper. Also harmful, and detailed by Freire, is that segregation makes emancipatory efforts even more difficult because people are essentially living in their tiny bubble of a tightly-drawn, carefully districted community and are not aware of how their community is privileged or oppressed with respect to others nearby, statewide, nationally, or globally.

Despite New Jersey's tendency to segregate at the local level, as a state, its laws fervently embrace desegregation and efforts to provide equitable services to all citizens. The Institute on Education Law and Policy at Rutgers University and the Civil Rights Project at UCLA jointly released a report, authored by Paul Tractenberg, Gary Orfield, and Greg Flaxman, in October of 2013 titled "New Jersey's Apartheid and Intensely Segregated Urban Schools: Powerful Evidence of an Inefficient and Unconstitutional Education System." It provides a devastating quantitative portrait of the severely segregated nature of New Jersey's public schools. While New Jersey was "one of the first and only states, through statutes, constitutional provisions and implementing judicial decisions, not only to bar segregation in the public schools, but also to affirmatively require racial balance wherever that was feasible" (Institute on Educational Law and Policy, p. 3), enabling the state to strive to diminish *de facto* segregation as well as the federally mandated *de jure* segregation, the state has not implemented its uniquely strong and judiciously-minded law for the past 40 years.

Some schools in poor urban districts have received much-needed funding thanks to litigation like *Robinson v. Cahill*, 118 N.J. Super. 223 (1972), and *Abbott v. Burke* (1985 was the ruling of the first case but there have been numerous court opinions for *Abbott v. Burke* over the past 30 years). However, there have been no efforts by the state to create racial balance across its public schools. Thus, Professor Gary Orfield, a leading researcher on the nation's

school segregation and high school dropout, has labeled New Jersey's public schools as "hyper-segregated" (p.3) and the report identifies New Jersey schools as "apartheid" schools (zero to 1% white students) and "intensely segregated" schools (zero to 10% white students) throughout the state. The authors provide a disclaimer regarding the naming of the "apartheid" schools. These are not schools that are required by law to exist and function as segregated locations of learning for poor black and Hispanic students; however, with black and Hispanic people making up close to half of the state's population, desegregation has miserably failed considering 26% (1 in 4) of black students and almost 13% (1 in 8) of Latino students attend apartheid schools (p.6). In these community schools, the students rarely encounter white students or students who are not poor. Furthermore, 78.5% of black students and 77.4% of Latino students (almost four of every five students respectively) attend a majority-minority school where minority students are 50-100% of the school's student population, again leaving limited opportunities for these students to interact with white and middle class students.

The urban district investigated in this study was reported to have 66% of its students living in poverty and all of the schools in its district were considered intensely segregated schools by standards of race and poverty (p. 10). The authors also note that New Jersey's schools are more segregated than the neighborhoods. Therefore, the racial imbalance is even more severe in children's learning environments than in their neighborhood communities. To this the authors remark, "One has to ponder what demographic quirks or educational policies have led to that unexpected, and presumably remediable, result" (p. 15).

The segregated status of New Jersey's public schools is ignored when poor urban schools are labeled as "failing" by the state and federal government and are punitively attacked, further disempowering the school community:

The basic approach of standards-based reform and state and federal (No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top) accountability policies has been to identify, focus urgent attention on, and to sanction ‘low performing’ schools and their students and teachers. A great many apartheid schools cannot offer equal preparation for students and are very disproportionately sanctioned as ‘failing schools.’ Often this adds insult to injury. Normally, however nothing is done about the extreme segregation by race and poverty (and sometimes language background) these schools face. These schools are not equally distributed across New Jersey. Again, the more urbanized counties have disproportionate numbers. (p. 11)

The authors provide a list of solutions:

1. Integrated regional magnet schools, like those that have been successful in Connecticut.
2. All of New Jersey’s choice public schools and charter schools should have goals and procedures that promote racial and socioeconomic diversity.
3. Any low-income housing built in the future should occur in communities that do not have apartheid schools, and “all state and local legislation and policies should be screened to ensure that they promote, rather than impede, racial and socioeconomic diversity of communities and their schools” (p. 23).
4. New Jersey should consider consolidating districts.

Paul Tractenberg, Gary Orfield, and Greg Flaxman (2013) also recommend that New Jersey review the successful consolidation of Morristown and Morris Township in creating the Morris School District. Morristown was a district with predominately black students and Morris Township was a district with predominately white students. 40 years ago, the state commissioner of education mandated that these districts consolidate for the sake of racial balance. The racial

diversity is often cited as a reason for the district's great academic success; it sends "93% of its students on to post-secondary education" (p. 24).

As noted previously, the state has a history of redistricting excessively so that counties are filled with tiny municipalities that have control over their school districts, transportation, alcohol sales, and more (Karcher, 1998). Not only would this consolidative move be fiscally beneficial to the state and local governments, it would also support efforts to re-desegregate public schools and fulfill the New Jersey law dictating that racial balance be achieved wherever feasible.

While these solutions may be promising ways to counteract de facto segregation, the authors do not include student voice and student choice in desegregation efforts. George Noblit stressed the importance of giving students a role in making desegregation a meaningful movement in their schools and communities. Noblit (1979) wrote, "In the second generation of school desegregation we need to know what 'stuff' youth find important in constructing their social and academic identities and how we can structure and plan extracurricular and co-curricular activities to facilitate desegregation" (p. 63).

In the results sections of this present CPAR study, students/co-researchers' findings reinforce the need for Noblit's recommendation in their own local schools. Like Noblit, they emphasized the importance of including students in public schooling reform efforts and programs that support desegregation movements. They noted a desperate need for multicultural understandings and a greater communal acceptance of people from diverse backgrounds, especially those perceived different from their own.

7.2 Schooling “Options”

Unfortunately, Tractenberg, Orfield, and Flaxman’s (2013) report quantitatively illustrated a portrait of a dysfunctional public schooling system overall. Primarily White, middle-class students populated high-achieving districts and attended “a high school where everyone was expected to go to college and the school was effectively organized to make college success very likely” (pp. 25-26). Conversely, primarily poor Black and Hispanic students populated struggling and failing poor urban districts with a high school “experience where college success for students was rare and where even the very best students found themselves massively behind if they got to college, regardless of their potential talent and intense desire to succeed” (p. 25).

The CPAR study detailed throughout this paper captures this phenomenon and more. Students attending suburban districts with primarily middle-class White students experienced a very different schooling environment than the students who attended schools in the poor urban district. It appears as though students in the central New Jersey community college county have two schooling “options.” Some public schools serve affluent, White, suburban students, and others serve poor, Black and Hispanic, urban students. If the statistics are not enough to convince New Jersey officials that serious schooling injustices result from this state of extreme segregation, hopefully they will have trouble ignoring the embodied human experience of these devastating numbers. These numbers signal the desperate failure of the vision cutting-edge legislators had and the unrealized potential of the state’s educational promise to all of its citizens, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic position.

7.3 School District Demographics in the Central New Jersey Community

bell hooks’ (2003) description of the re-segregated state of communities and schools across the country could have been written for this specific community:

Throughout the United States segregated schools are becoming more the norm. As class mobility and a racist real estate market make predominately white neighborhoods more common, especially in areas where expensive new homes are constructed, schools are being built to meet the needs of these neighborhoods, inner-city schools or schools in small cities or towns close to downtown areas tend to be the ones that have ethnic diversity. Most are predominately black, Hispanic, or are composed of a non-white ethnic mixture. This ipso facto racial segregation is usually seen as having nothing to do with institutionalized racism but rather is deemed more a class issue. The old racial segregation in education is being reinscribed, complete with schools deemed inferior that are composed of our nation's non-white poor and working class; those schools receive less funding and, as a consequence, lack resources for needed supplies.

Tables 7.1-3 and Figures 7.1 and 7.2 provide demographic information about the school districts in the Central New Jersey area surrounding the community college. Table 7.1 offers an overview of the racial makeup of the public school districts in the Central New Jersey area surrounding the community college. Many of the students/co-researchers who participated in the present CPAR study attended schools in these districts.

Table 7.1: Racial/Ethnic Breakdown of School Districts

8 Suburban School Districts
*(*last three districts border the urban district)*

District	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	2 or More
1	18%	10%	32%	40%	1%
2	57%	6%	5%	32%	1%
3	17%	3%	4%	76%	0%
4	16%	6%	12%	62%	4%
5	10%	2%	4%	82%	2%
6*	16%	16%	15%	47%	6%
7*	4%	18%	21%	54%	1%
8*	4%	46%	13%	33%	3%

Urban Public School District:

District	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	2 or More
1	1%	58%	38%	2%	0%

Data provided by Education Law Center: <http://www.edlawcenter.org> and based on 2012-2013 school year.

Areas of note: Suburban District 1 has a larger Hispanic community than the other suburban districts. In the 2012 -2013 school year, 32% of the students enrolled in Suburban District 1 were Hispanic. Students/co-researchers and community members reported that suburban District 2 has experienced growth in the Asian communities, primarily with more and more Asian Indian and Chinese families moving into the area. Asian students are in the majority in Suburban District 2's public schools. In the 2012 -2013 school year, 57% of the students enrolled at Suburban 2 were Asian. Suburban Districts 3-5 are the least diverse of the suburban districts, with enrollments of 76%, 62%, and 82% white students respectively. Suburban Districts 6-8 border the only urban district: Urban District 1, which can explain why the racial/ethnic demographics of Suburban Districts 6-8 are slightly more diverse than their neighboring districts, which are Suburban Districts 3-5. The Urban District is by far the most segregated.

Paul Tractenberg, Gary Orfield, and Greg Flaxman (2013) categorized schools based on their lack of diversity. These titles could be used to describe this district as well. Urban District 1 is one percentage point shy of being considered an “apartheid” school district, which requires zero to 1% White students. It can, however, be considered an “intensely segregated” school district (zero to 10% white students), having only 2% white students enrolled in its district. The Education Law Center reported that 97% of the students in Urban District 1 during the 2012-2013 school year were Black and Hispanic.

With respect to free and reduced lunch (noted in Table 7.2), the suburban districts appear to have higher numbers of students who qualify for this service when they have higher numbers of Black and/or Hispanic students enrolled in their districts. For example: Suburban District 1 had 43% Black students and Hispanic students enrolled and 31% Free/Reduced lunch; Suburban District 3 had 7% Black students and Hispanic students enrolled

and 3% Free/Reduced lunch; Urban District 1 had 97% Black students and Hispanic students enrolled and 89% Free/Reduced lunch.

Table 7.2: Special Programs in School Districts

8 Suburban Public School Districts
*(*last three districts border the urban district)*

District	Free/Reduced Lunch	Limited English	Special Education
1	31%	10%	11%
2	5%	2%	10%
3	3%	0%	13%
4	13%	4%	15%
5	3%	1%	13%
6*	20%	3%	14%
7*	33%	2%	15%
8*	39%	2%	16%

Urban public school district:

District	Free/Reduced Lunch	Limited English	Special Education
1	89%	12%	14%

Data provided by Education Law Center: <http://www.edlawcenter.org>. Free/Reduced Lunch and Limited English data based on 2012-2013 school year and Special Education data based on 2008-2009 school year.

There is a strong positive correlation between the total percentage of Black and Hispanic students enrolled in a district and the percentage of students who qualify and participate in the free and reduced lunch program, which is often used as a signifier of low socioeconomic status (substantiated in Table 7.3 and Figures 7.1 and 7.2). The Correlation (Pearson's r) between (1) the percentage of Black students and Hispanic students and (2) the percentage of students with free/reduced lunch is 0.986. The Spearman's Correlation, taking into account small sample size, between (1) the percentage of Black students and Hispanic students and (2) the percentage of students with free/reduced lunch is 0.979. Both calculations have a $P < 0.0001$. This statistically significant correlation suggests that as the percentage of Black students and Hispanic students attending suburban and urban schools increases, so does the percentage of students on the free/reduced lunch program. Therefore, in this New Jersey county, there is a strong correlation between race (the summation of Black and Hispanic) and low socioeconomic status (poverty), as illustrated in Table 7.3 and Figures 7.1 and 7.2.

Table 7.3: Correlation between Race and Poverty

Correlation (Pearson's and Spearman's) between the Percentage of Hispanic and Black Students and the Percentage of Free/Reduced Lunch in the Districts Surrounding the Central NJ Community College

District	Percentage of Black Students and Hispanic students	Percentage of Free/Reduced Lunch Students
Suburban 1	43	31
Suburban 2	11	5
Suburban 3	7	3
Suburban 4	18	13
Suburban 5	6	3
Suburban 6*	31	20
Suburban 7*	39	33
Suburban 8*	59	39
Urban 1	97	89
Pearson's Correlation Coefficient = 0.986 Spearman's Correlation Coefficient = 0.979088 Pearson's and Spearman's P < 0.0001		

Figure 7.1: B/H Students and F/R Lunch in 9 Districts

Figure of Table 7.3 – Percentages of Black Students and Hispanic Students Enrolled *and* Percentages of Students with Free/Reduced Lunch in the Eight Suburban Districts and One Urban District

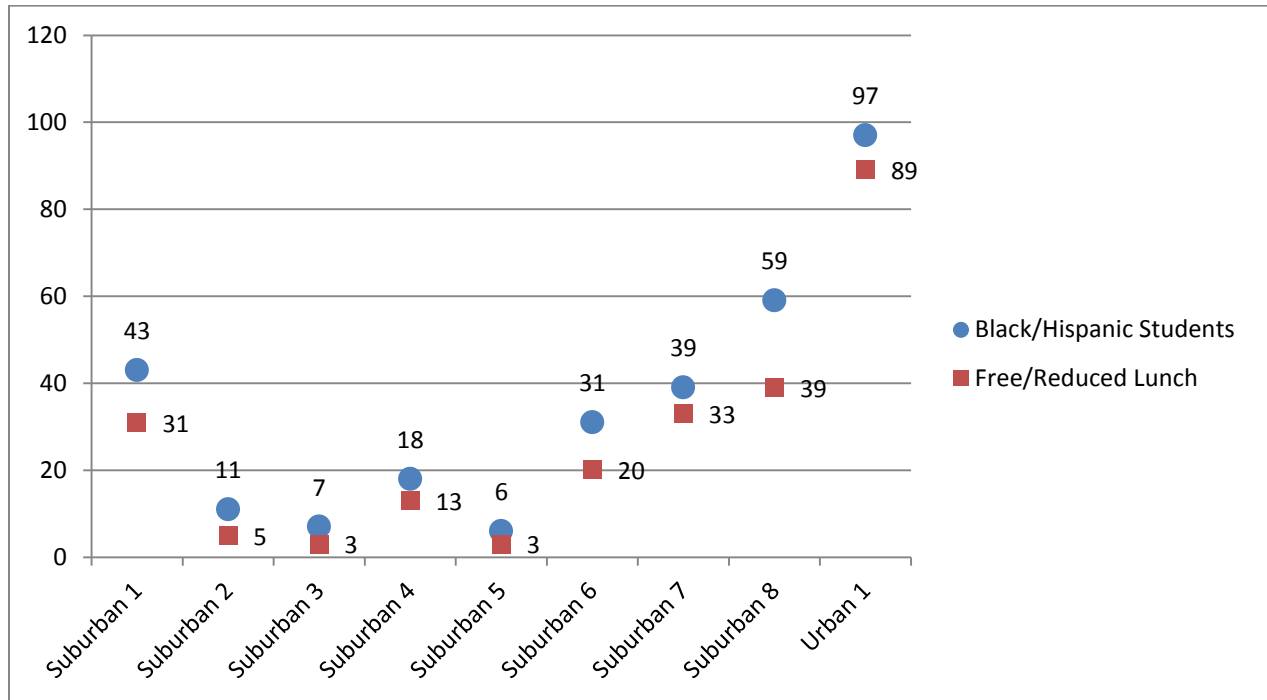
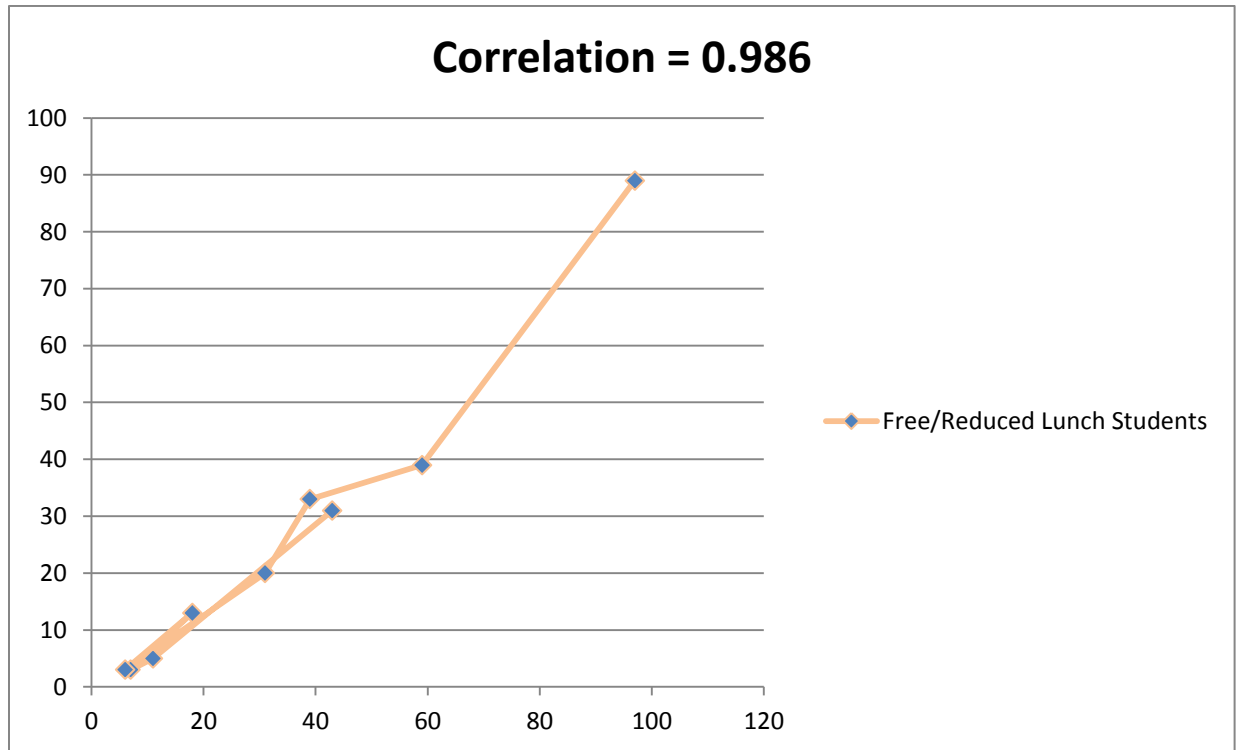


Figure 7.2: Correlation between Race and Poverty

Figure of the Correlation (Pearson's r) between the Percentage of Black Students and Hispanic Students and the Percentage of Free/Reduced Lunch in the Districts Surrounding the Central NJ Community College



Limited English is highest in the districts with the highest percentages of Hispanic students. Suburban District 1 had 32% Hispanic students enrolled and 10% of its students spoke limited English. Urban District 1 had 38% Hispanic students enrolled and 12% of its students spoke limited English (Table 7.2). All of the other suburban districts had 15% or fewer Hispanic students enrolled and 4% or fewer students who spoke limited English.

Special Education (also noted in Table 7.2) is a tricky service to analyze because it is often utilized by privileged students for the purpose of achieving special accommodations and modifications as well as students who are disenfranchised. “Sleeter asserts that the disability category of learning disability was conceived and formed to respond to political, military, and economic pressures to supposedly increase educational standards for all American children in an effort to ensure America's dominance and supremacy in the world while also protecting White middle- and upper-class children from school failure” (Blanchett, 2010). In this article, Blanchett states emphatically that she agrees with Sleeter’s position. Special Education is a complicated service because, depending on how it is delivered, it can privilege and it can oppress. Special Education services appear to be delivered at about the same proportions throughout the urban and suburban districts; however, how they are delivered is not clear and is gravely important.

The statistics provided by the Educational Law Center illustrate interesting growth and movement in services provided at schools in Urban District 1. Noted on their website but not in a table, Free/Reduced Lunch grew significantly from 65% in the 2010-2011 school year to 82% in the 2011-2012 school year and to 89% in the 2012-2013 school year. Special Education fluctuated between 11-14% in the 2002-2009 school years.

7.4 Community College and Participating Classes' Demographics

Tables 7.4 and 7.5 provide demographic information for the community college located in Central New Jersey. The data was taken from the Central New Jersey community college website.

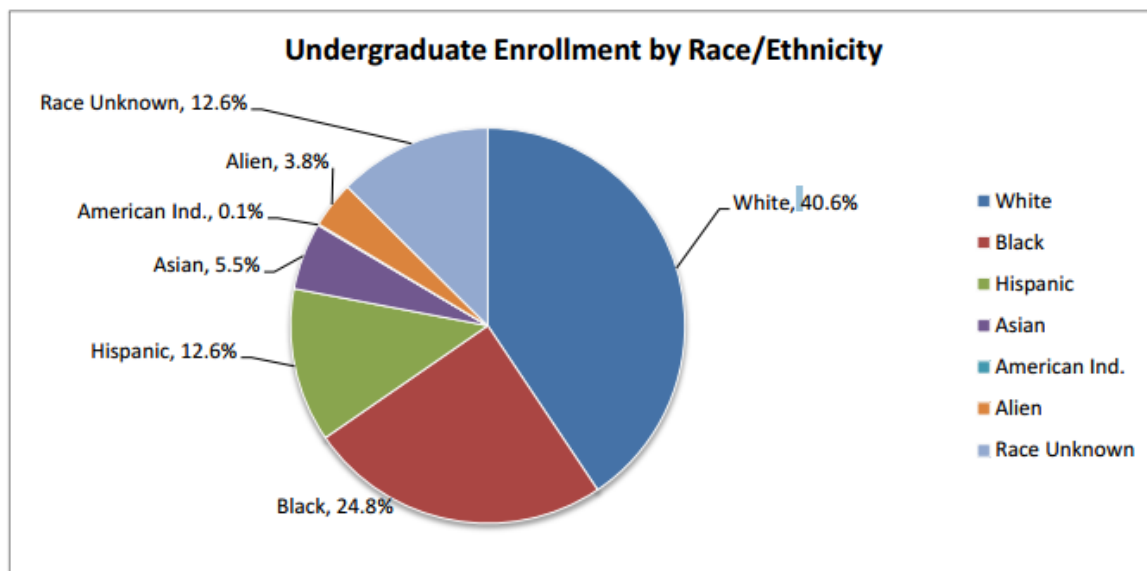
Table 7.4: Community College Race/Ethnicity

Central New Jersey Community College Demographics – Race/Ethnicity

Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity, Fall 2011																
	<u>White</u>		<u>Black</u>		<u>Hispanic</u>		<u>Asian*</u>		<u>Amer.Ind.</u>		<u>Alien</u>		<u>Race Unknown*</u>		<u>Total</u>	
	<u>Num</u>	<u>Pct</u>	<u>Num</u>	<u>Pct</u>	<u>Num</u>	<u>Pct</u>	<u>Num</u>	<u>Pct</u>	<u>Num</u>	<u>Pct</u>	<u>Num</u>	<u>Pct</u>	<u>Num</u>	<u>Pct</u>	<u>Num</u>	<u>Pct</u>
Full-time	1,588	41.4%	876	22.8%	533	13.9%	207	5.4%	6	0.2%	190	4.9%	439	11.4%	3,839	100.0%
Part-time	2,221	40.1%	1,449	26.1%	652	11.8%	310	5.6%	5	0.1%	163	2.9%	742	13.4%	5,606	100.0%
Total	3,809	40.6%	2,325	24.8%	1,185	12.6%	517	5.5%	11	0.1%	353	3.8%	1,181	12.6%	9,381	100.0%

*Note: Asian includes Pacific Islanders and Unknown includes 2 or More Races.

Source: IPEDS Fall Enrollment Survey



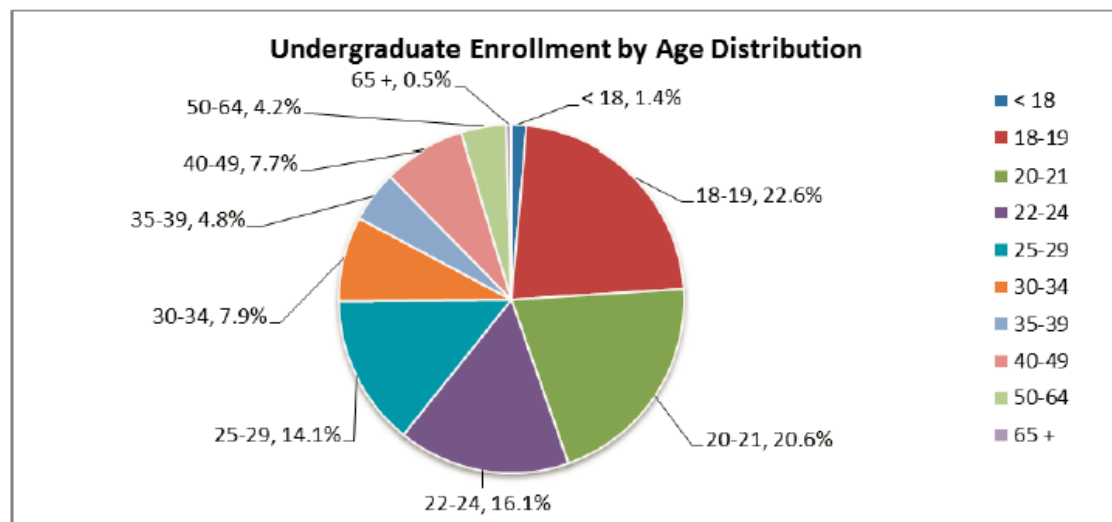
Data taken from the Central New Jersey community college's website.

Table 7.5: Community College Age Demographics

Central New Jersey Community College Demographics – Age

Undergraduate Enrollment by Age, Fall 2011													
		<u>LT 18</u>	<u>18-19</u>	<u>20-21</u>	<u>22-24</u>	<u>25-29</u>	<u>30-34</u>	<u>35-39</u>	<u>40-49</u>	<u>50-64</u>	<u>65+</u>	<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Total</u>
Full-time	Num	22	1,612	997	411	317	149	121	143	65	1	0	3,839
	Pct	0.6%	42%	26%	10.7%	8.3%	3.9%	3.2%	3.7%	1.7%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Part-time	Num	114	504	940	1,095	1,006	589	331	580	325	48	10	5,542
	Pct	2.1%	9.1%	17%	19.8%	18.2%	10.6%	6%	10.5%	5.9%	0.9%	0.2%	100.0%
Total	Num	136	2,116	1,937	1,506	1,323	738	452	723	390	49	11	9381
	Pct	1.4%	22.6%	20.6%	16.1%	14.1%	7.9%	4.8%	7.7%	4.2%	0.5%	0.1%	100.0%

Source: IPEDS Fall Enrollment Survey



Data taken from the Central New Jersey community college's website.

Table 7.6: Remedial English Class Demographics

Demographics of the Participating Remedial English Classes – Racial/Age Percentages

	Racial Grouping		Age Class	
Semester	Racism Reported	Racism Not Reported	18-29	30 and older
Fall 2011	83%	17%	75%	25%
Spring 2011	79%	21%	71%	29%

Table 7.6 gives a very basic demographic overview of the two remedial English classes, in order to illustrate how reflective the remedial classes' demographics were of the community college as a whole. The students/co-researchers and I did not engage in pointed discussions, lengthy or otherwise, regarding how they identified racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, or temporally. At times, these identifiers did become topics in conversations about how their public schooling experiences were shaped. For example, conversations about the presence of racism in their schools, and their positioning within it, were frequent, as were conversations about how recently students/co-researchers graduated from high school. Many students noted that either they could speak about high school easily because they graduated recently or that they were not sure if their experiences were relevant because they had graduated from high school a long time ago. The rough percentages in Table 7.6 were informed by the stories and details students/co-researchers shared in their reflective writings and in class discussions and presentations. This table is based on students/co-researchers self-reporting of racist attacks and their understandings of their age in terms of whether they positioned themselves as old (graduated many years ago,

more than a decade) or young (graduated recently, within the decade) in their writings and conversations in class.

The reason why I identify race in terms of “racism reported” and “racism not reported” is because, while students/co-researchers shared being called racist names and being treated as though they did not belong because of their race, they did not all share whether and how they specifically identified themselves racially and ethnically. I did not collect the racial/ethnic demographics of the community college students in my remedial English classes, particularly because in my efforts to welcome them as co-researchers, I did not want them to feel like I was clandestinely studying them. Taking the students/co-researchers' lead in class discourse, race was explored more through a lens of racism than race. As a result of this approach in this study, “racism reported” and “racism not reported” categories were created based on their experiences of racism and how they were positioned according to how others viewed them racially.

The “racism reported” category signifies that these students/co-researchers reported being racially and/or ethnically targeted, positioned as a minority (often non-White or un-American), and ostracized within their schools and communities. Many of these students/co-researchers shared that they (or their parents and families) were not born in the United States and were not native English speakers. The “racism not reported” category signifies the students who reported that they had not experienced racist attacks and did not personally experience targeted racism in their schools. Students/co-researchers reported that discussions concerning the positioning of other students based on their perceived race and the presence of racism in their schools were novel experiences for them. They often stated that they had not experienced any attacks in their schools or communities based on their perceived race, noted that they attended White, affluent, suburban schools, and spoke about race in terms of something other students had experienced in

negative ways but that they had not. I certainly do not want to suggest that someone who has not experienced a racial attack is Caucasian or White. One story shared in the results section described the violent attack of a high school student because she was identified as White. Nonetheless, these categories capture some of the patterns and phenomena present when students/co-researchers and community members wrote, reflected, and discoursed about race and racism.

When contrasting tables 7.4 and 7.5 with 7.6, it is important to note that, while the proportions of younger and older students in both of the classes are fairly reflective of the community college demographics, the classes' race/ethnicity demographics are not as reflective of the community college's demographics. The community college has roughly 40% students who identify as White and 60% students who identify as Black, Hispanic, Asian, Alien, American Indian, and Other. Our remedial English classes consisted of about 20% students who reported they had not experienced racism and had attended affluent, White, suburban schools and 80% students who reported being the victims of racist attacks and positioned as non-White and un-American. Students/co-researchers wrote and shared frequently about the overt and covert racism they had experienced in their school communities.

The greater proportion of "racism reported" than "racism unreported" students in these two remedial classes is troubling. In the future, researchers could investigate racism experienced by students in remedial college courses. They could also assess how K-12 public schooling in local communities teach literacy and language (reading, writing, and English) to students of color and prepare these students for college-level work. In the results sections of the present CPAR study, students/co-researchers shared about the lack of academic, social, and emotional

support they received in their local schools. Many of these students had also experienced racism and had attended urban schools.

CHAPTER 8 – DISCUSSION

8.1 Reflective Summary of the CPAR Process

Facilitating the CPAR process was overwhelming. While promising to be an emancipatory process, initially and through much of the semester, it was less of that and more of a painful process as the students identified the grave injustices present in the surrounding school districts, and I was the instructor and facilitator who had encouraged them to dig deeper, often into a state of despair. Fortunately for all of us, CPAR is not solely a problem-finding process. It is a problem-solving process, so there was a bit of light in the darkness. The students in these two classes identified a litany of problems and carefully and thoughtfully crafted solutions respectively. CPAR is even more than a problem-solving process: “It is a process through which problems may be solved, the process itself having value” (Udas, p. 607). While it was a grueling process, it was also a transformational and meaningful process. As noted in the results section, many students/co-researchers reported that they thought the CPAR process itself had value and thought it would be beneficial for more students to participate in this process.

8.1.a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) as Critical Pedagogy

Other researchers have worked with students and community members outside of the formal classroom when implementing the participatory action research projects. This study is unique in that it was implemented as part of a community college remedial reading class curriculum grounded in critical thinking. The CPAR project was integrated into the remedial reading curriculum.

There were advantages and disadvantages to constructing the study in this way. Advantages included: access to students who have experienced oppression and injustice, ease of integrating the CPAR epistemology into the course curriculum, and commitment on behalf of the students because the CPAR project was a required aspect of the course. While schooling problems are everywhere, it was quite difficult to find a group of people in the community who were interested in spending their free time investigating these problems with research methods and collectively creating a recommended action plan for solving these social injustices. Ideally, the initiative to conduct a CPAR project comes from the community. With this impetus, it can be more meaningful as a social justice movement. It can also become a lasting entity of the community itself, like the projects discussed in the CPAR literature review which continue to challenge political and systemic changes that threaten to disempower and oppress citizens in those communities.

CPAR does not have to be initiated by community members. In fact, Ken Udas (1998) argued for “Participatory Action Research as a Critical Pedagogy,” and he made a strong case for participatory action research curriculum. It is more promising than curriculum molded by high-stakes, accountability-focused reform that reinforces, and even exacerbates, the disenfranchising and silencing structures and practices of a seemingly broken public schooling system.

CPAR is not a panacea by any means, but it does provide students with what they are asking for in a curriculum. Students/co-researchers found that students wanted a curriculum and schooling practices that respected and heard them, their unique positions, needs, concerns, questions, and dreams. CPAR is student-led and inherently welcomes student voice. Students/co-researchers also learned that students wanted schooling curricula to be more hands-on and project-based. In fact, subthemes regarding students’ desired schooling curricula detailed in the

results sections reiterate that curricula needs to be “more engaging, more meaningful to the students... needs to provide greater student choice, student voice, student direction; and... needs to be more rigorous and provide greater opportunities for critical and creative thinking, and should support and develop students’ writing more (essay, creative, formal, business, etc.).” CPAR curriculum, if implemented as it is designed, could in fact satisfy what students are requesting. However, CPAR would have to be delivered appropriately, in a space that truly welcomed collaborative, student-led, inquiry-based, project learning in order to meet all of these areas.

Disadvantages to conducting the CPAR project as part of the community college remedial reading curriculum included: the absence of student ownership over the formation of the CPAR study as the CPAR project was required; an unclear understanding of whether the commitment to the project was a result of student empowerment, conscientization, and enjoyment of participating in an inquiry-based, learner-centered, student-led, community-grounded project, or whether students participated and reported raised awareness to social problems because they were doing it in order to complete a required component of the course curriculum and earn a passing grade.

Also, as the primary researcher of this study, conducting a CPAR project for the purpose of completing my dissertation and earning my PhD, I found it quite challenging at times to record all of the complex and dynamic details (for example, all of the students/co-researchers’ interactions and transformative moments) during the CPAR process while teaching it, along with the other important facets of the curriculum. My students needed the literacy tools provided in the course curriculum so they could overcome literacy-related challenges in preparation for future college courses that required reading really, and for countless important moments of their

lives that required them to be literate. With about 15 to 25 students enrolled in each semester's remedial English course, many of whom struggled with reading and writing, I felt torn between being the best researcher I could be, by recording all the phenomena I was observing as part of the CPAR process, and being the best pedagogue I could be, by ensuring my students were developing their skills as readers of the world. The pedagogue always won out. I recorded as much as I could as a researcher, and between my notes and the CPAR work of 25 students across two semesters of CPAR researching, I had an overwhelming amount of data and findings by the end of the study, sufficient for one or more dissertations. However, the struggle to perform the role of the researcher and the teacher while implementing a CPAR project in a formal, graded college course, along with other areas of the curriculum that must be covered, warrants examining, as this framework creates unique challenges.

8.1.b Objectivity, Validity, and Generalizability

In "An Epilogue, of Sorts," Michelle Fine (2008) delineated how participatory action research studies can be scrutinized to determine whether they are objective and valid, and whether they offer generalizability. She explicated that "Strong objectivity is exercised when researchers work diligently and self-consciously through their own positionalities, values, and predispositions gathering as much evidence as possible, from many distinct vantage points, all in an effort to not be guided, unwittingly and exclusively, by predispositions and the pull of biography" (p. 222.) I have included my own positionalities, values, and predispositions in autobiographical sections of the Preface and Discussion. The students/co-researchers and I wrote reflectively throughout the CPAR process in an effort to work through the biases we brought to this study. In writing this paper, I strived to be as transparent as possible about our research process, while working to respect the anonymity of our location and participants. Our goal in

gathering a lot of data and evidence from many people in the community was to create a comprehensive, collective understanding of the schooling problems that exist in the local schools surrounding a Central New Jersey community college.

With respect to validity, the CPAR epistemology recognizes that, when aiming to understand how oppression, marginalization, and social stratification functions in and among communities, the community members are the experts of such concepts. Their community-based knowledge and experience is needed in order to effectively dissect the oppressive practices at play. Expert validity and construct validity are measured by the effectiveness to which the community members and CPAR co-researchers work in harmony to design a study and identify and name meaningful constructs that capture the phenomena at work. Fine explained that “renaming constructs, restoring integrity to self, refusing shame and returning the analytic and political gaze back on inadequate educational systems—this is the work of construct validity” (pp. 225-226). Much of our CPAR work and many of our discussions redirected students/co-researchers from damaging, hegemonic messages that perpetuated self-blame and the loathing of neglected, impoverished communities and community members to counter-narratives and the inspection of systemic neglect that made failure inevitable in struggling communities.

A more detailed picture of school failure, particularly one that respects the transient nature of some communities, would require constant, locally-based participatory action research efforts. We have only begun to unpack the schooling problems in the area. Nonetheless, the problems the students/co-researchers unveiled and investigated in this CPAR study are severe and destructive, and their findings support other researchers’ discoveries in other CPAR projects conducted in other areas of the state. Thus, theoretical generalizability is demonstrated. It appears that aspects of social oppression experienced in Central New Jersey communities are

also experienced in other areas of the state, which is explicated in greater depth later in this chapter. Fine also defined “provocative generalizability” as the “researchers’ attempt to move their finding toward that which is not yet imagined, not yet in practice, not yet in sight. This form of generalizability offers readers an invitation to launch from our findings to what might be, rather than only understanding (or naturalizing) what is” (p. 229). Our hope is that our work will inspire our readers to act. The students/co-researchers reported that they could envision our CPAR discoveries and solutions making a difference in their community. With collective effort and a skilled use of imagination, communities can implement meaningful solutions to egregious educational injustices and social inequities.

Moreover, Fine emphasized:

Provocative generalizability, joined with strong objectivity, asserts that researchers and readers, performers and audience, victims, people of privilege and witnesses: we are all positioned in unjust settings. And such existential truth obligates us to be present, feeling and thinking critically about how unjust distributions of resources and opportunities affect our comfort and discomfort, our dependencies, privileges, joys, our moments of shared pain and potential collective actions. We have no choice, but certain obligation, to act. (p. 230)

As the students/co-researchers stressed emphatically throughout the results sections, achieving meaningful social change and improved public schooling will require a collective effort from everyone. We all have a responsibility to work collaboratively to right the wrongs and improve public schools in this community, and beyond, so that all students, regardless of their social position and perceived difference, receive a quality education and experience positive and meaningful schooling experiences.

8.2 Our Findings Support those of the Opportunity Gap Project

The CPAR co-researchers in this study discovered problems, and recommended solutions, that were similar to those identified by Opportunity Gap Project (a link to PowerPoint content is cited in the References section). Throughout this section, I will identify their findings, which were copied and pasted directly from their PowerPoint presentation of the Opportunity Gap project, and contrast them with our findings in this CPAR study.

Researchers in the Opportunity Gap Project recommended that “policies, politics, and practices” address “finance inequities K – 12, uneven distribution of qualified educators, differential access to rigor within high school curricula, high-stakes testing, and increases in college tuition and cuts in financial aid offerings.” More specifically, they noted disparities and gaps in “in school finance (across districts, and salaries of faculties/class size across school levels), in access to credentialed educators, rich curricular materials, and library, computers, and advanced science equipment” and “students' access to teachers and principals who participate in regularly scheduled, on-going professional development that ensures they have access to current and effective practice in the areas in which they teach; students' access to teachers who know them well” (Opportunity Gap Project PowerPoint, March 2003).

CPAR students/co-researchers in this study had analogous findings and recommendations. They also reported that inequitable funding was a serious problem. Schools in poorer communities, particularly the urban district, lacked funding and did not have the materials, opportunities, and support that schools in more affluent communities had. Schools in affluent suburban districts had smaller school and class sizes, and some classrooms even had two licensed, highly qualified teachers co-teaching the class. Students in urban districts had not experienced a collaborative team-teaching model in their schools.

Researchers in the Opportunity Gap Project discovered a “gap in the proportion of students who enjoy access to rigorous curriculum that is culturally relevant” and in “student and educator perceptions of engagement, being known, and willingness to ask for help.” They also reported that privatized supports could be made publicly available to improve “differential access to private tutoring and SAT prep; exposure and support for anticipating and planning for college – visits, assistance with applications, counseling, help with essays, financial aid forms, etc.; and family connections/pressure for access to high level courses, internships, clubs, college, summer opportunities.” Additionally, they recommended that states collect “stratified random samples for standardized testing (stakes for schools, not students)” (Opportunity Gap Project PowerPoint, March 2003).

Students/co-researchers in this CPAR study also discovered a lack of consistency in the rigor and challenge of school curricula across local districts. They reported that high stakes testing preparation differed as well. Students in overwhelmed schools did not feel prepared for these exams. They also thought high-stakes testing distracted teachers and students from being able to create and experience meaningful learning. These anxiety-inducing state standardized exams created problems in their schools and in their lives. Students considered these learning measurement tools to be a joke.

The Opportunity Group Project recommended that schools, districts, and communities collect and analyze “persistence/dropout/cohort survival graduation rates” and implement “school-based respect for culture, belonging, speaking one’s positions, alienation, community civic engagement (service, voting, belief in affecting change), participation in extra-curricular opportunities (school trips, drama, art, clubs, band, sports, student government), award distribution within the school, portfolios of student work for public review, race/ethnically

stratified senior interviews (focus groups), and race/ethnically stratified graduate follow-up (in Fall and Spring of following year)” (Opportunity Gap Project PowerPoint, March 2003).

Students/co-researchers in this CPAR study spoke passionately about the need for reducing college tuition and increasing financial aid. Many students, especially students from impoverished communities, cannot afford to attend college or cannot afford to pay back the loans they took out in order to earn their college degree. Immediate attention must be made to make college financing more affordable.

As a result of participating in this CPAR study, students/co-researchers determined actionable solutions that would immediately improve schools, which included:

- more guidance counselors, teachers, and support service staff who have increased student time, communicate that they care, and truly hear and act on students’ needs;
- more school programs that support students’ academic, social, and emotional needs and aim to improve compassion and acceptance for diverse groups of people in the schools and communities;
- school curriculum that is culturally-relevant, challenging, hands-on, project/inquiry-based, engages creative and critical thinking (critical theory thinking), comprehensively develops literacy skills , and provides opportunities for student choice and multiple schooling pathways;
- a more democratic and transparent decision-making process in schools and districts that would include families, parents, students, and community members voices; and
- collaborative involvement from all parties (families, parents, students, community members, teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, school staff, government officials, and more) in a collective effort to improve all children’s schooling experiences.

While not all of our CPAR findings match the Opportunity Gap Project's findings perfectly, inarguably there were similar discoveries that reinforce the presence of shared deficits and communal needs in neglected communities and school districts across the state of New Jersey.

8.3 Conclusions

8.3.a Media's Destructive Role: Blaming and Bullying

In the media and public discourse, identifying a scapegoat appears to be the traditional and current way of managing the labyrinthine problems that pervade public schools. Students have been blamed and identified as delinquents and dropouts in the past and present. Bad teachers, protected by bad unions, are the current culprit and are frequently credited with creating today's educational mess. Bad schools in poor neighborhoods are blamed and closed down so that private organizations can collect the funds that would have been distributed to the struggling local community (Denvir, 2014; Fine & Fabricant, 2014).

Governor of New Jersey, Chris Christie, has fought aggressively to hold teachers accountable by intensifying evaluation processes, dismantling and negating rights to collective bargaining and tenure, pushing for a merit-pay system, rewriting teaching standards, and redefining teacher quality. Student researchers were less concerned about whether or not any of the approaches in the current, myopic political agenda were actually viable solutions and were more concerned with how the illogical approach that focusing strictly on one group could possibly address and fix the plethora of social and academic problems infecting public schools and communities at large.

At the beginning of the research process, many students blamed disinterested teachers for their schooling problems. The media echoed this incrimination with the recent release of

documentary film *Waiting for Superman* (Ayers, 2010) and fictional film *Bad Teacher*. By the end of the research process, students acknowledged that, while bad teachers did exist, they were only a small part of a much more complicated problem.

Worthy of note, good teachers exist in the media, too, and they are the saviors in the broken system, expected to overcome and solve serious societal problems singlehandedly. These unrealistic expectations have been reinforced in films like *The Freedom Writers*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *Stand and Deliver*.

Students/co-researchers determined that the media, ubiquitous and influential, not only shapes public perception of public schools, teachers, and students in provocative and unfounded ways, but also perpetuates a culture of cruelty in which the bully is celebrated for being strong and the victim deserving of violence for being weak. Judging someone else and cutting someone else down makes the aggressor more powerful. During a class discussion about the media and pervasiveness of bullying, students/co-researchers analyzed the media's role in being a bully and encouraging others to bully. Tegan remarked, "Sometimes people bully without even knowing. They'll see a person dressed a certain way and make a joke about it and hurt that person's feelings. Like, 'Oh, why is she dressed like that?' Sometimes you can bully without knowing" (Spring 2012, Tegan). The class struggled with how to negate people's desire to cut another person down in order to build themselves up. They understood this as a human response to being oppressed and treated cruelly. People are hurting and suffering, and there is comfort in knowing that others are suffering, too.

They wanted to flip the script, though, like their CPAR projects. Rather than living in a state where children's basic needs are not met and they only receive a quality education if they are fortunate enough to live in an affluent community, they wanted to imagine new possibilities

for their community. They knew they could not change the toxic media messages that poison healthy human relations and people's sense of self-worth, but students and community members could be educated to think critically about these messages and the damage they cause.

Students/co-researchers wanted more students to have the opportunity to engage in CPAR projects so that they could experience a growing critical awareness about the oppressive forces that are at work in their lives in covert and manipulative ways. They also reiterated that education is the solution, and they argued that communities need to demand that their children receive a quality education. Desegregating their schools and eliminating schooling inequities and injustices will require collaborative, dedicated, democratic involvement from all parties (family, school, and community members, and more).

Students/co-researchers called for an immediate end to the blaming and obsessively limited focus on fixing one group (bad students, bad teachers, bad school staff, bad parents, bad community members, bad administrators, bad school board members, bad government officials, bad political leaders) or one aspect of schooling (bad test scores). Not only did they believe that pouring all efforts into targeting teachers (or any one group) was an illogical solution that would not effectively improve greater schooling problems, but they recognized that this vendetta distracted the public from addressing the larger issues concerning the disparities between schools and the need for commitment to student learning from all stakeholders. Thus, the focus on bad teachers and bad schools has a silencing effect. It distracts from meaningful reform efforts and delegitimizes other serious schooling maladies that require immediate attention and action in order to end the unnecessary pain and suffering students experience in their public schools.

8.3.b Everyone is Overworked and Overwhelmed

Students/co-researchers determined that improving public schools would require a collaborative community effort in improving not just the schools but also the community (safety, crime, transportation, etc.). Public schools and the communities in which they are located are not mutually exclusive; they are symbiotic systems. As Jean Anyon (1997) wrote, “Attempting to fix inner city schools without fixing the city in which they are embedded is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door” (p. 168).

One of the students/co-researchers’ biggest concerns about the possibility for a collaborative effort in school reform, which would require student, parent, school, community, and political involvement, was that all of these people and groups are severely overworked and overwhelmed, especially in communities that are struggling the most. Due in part to an overwhelmed system and overworked people, Asha reported, “I have learned that a lot of the schooling problems are not being noticed by teachers, parents, and congressmen” (Spring 2012, Asha).

One of Julia’s interviewee’s shared that “when he was in school his parents weren’t around they were always busy at work. His classes were overcrowded making it hard for him to concentrate, and he didn’t have the right help in school to succeed” (Spring 2012, Julia). Being overworked means parents, teachers, counselors, school support staff, administrators, community members, government officials, etc., do not have the time they need to support students properly. The lack of time translates to a lack of care: “I’ve learned that a lot of higher authorities for some reason do not care. Some teachers don’t care to make a difference in their community, nor do they really try. Classes are overcrowded. It also makes a big difference in a child’s life when their parents aren’t around like they should be” (Spring 2012, Julia).

Most students/co-researchers agreed that, probably because of the ongoing economic recession, there is a general climate that people are being overworked. Students are feeling overworked, too, and for what purpose? “And research showed that even with all that overworking, as far as students being prepared in the United States compared to the schools in other countries, the education level was still relatively low... We even discussed that in class the one day, and that's alarming” (Spring 2012, Leo).

Students are overwhelmed by the all-encompassing demands and stressors in their lives, too. “One of the interviews that I did, he was okay in high school, but he had to deal with bullies as a freshman, so that was hard for him, because he had to deal with not just bullies but teachers, and things at home” (Fall 2011, Ashley).

Leo eloquently wrote:

Every person in the group has gathered strong stories regarding the Educational Problems in Poor Communities, stories that are helping our topic build up with more meaning. The conversations shared about each other's interviews have shown many perspectives and points of view on the differences and similarities between communities. The most common similarity has been overcrowded schools in poor communities. It seems that as the years go by, the numbers of students keep increasing, but so is the number of dropouts. Schools just don't have enough money to support the learning abilities in the schools. One of the biggest concerns is parent involvement. Many parents can't afford to take off work and go to schools to become involved in their children's education. But the way I see it, this problem has become a very complicated situation in this country and will continue to grow for years to come if something does not start to change. (Spring 2012, Leo)

As Leo detailed and students/co-researchers discoursed at length, many schooling problems exist because parents, teachers, families, students, schools, and communities are overworked and overwhelmed, so how can these people and groups find the time and energy needed to work together to demand social justice and implement meaningful solutions? If our nation truly cares about improving our public schools, students/co-researchers concluded that paid time off must be provided to families and community members so they can fulfill familial, communal, and civic duties (such as participating in parent-teacher conferences and voting) and engage in critical dialogue and collaborative efforts to improve their community schools and their children's schooling experiences.

8.4 Suggestions for Future Research

The CPAR projects we conducted in our community college classes provided a great breadth of data and detailed information about schooling problems in the districts surrounding the Central New Jersey community college. Co-researchers reported the value of implementing participatory action research in communities where members have been traditionally silenced and oppressed. Participants were hopeful that by naming the problems and identifying actionable solutions, entities with the power to implement these solutions could be encouraged to take action. If school districts and federal, state, and local governments want to improve public schools, and other sociopolitical systems that provide public services, then reform efforts must include incorporating community-based research into the public discourse and decision-making processes. Without the inclusion of all voices and all members impacted by educational reform efforts, serious covert and overt problems will likely persist and reform efforts will fail once again. As the co-researchers stressed throughout this paper, meaningful educational reform necessitates the inclusion of all community members in an egalitarian co-investigation of local

problems and in the co-identification and co-implementation of collectively created actionable solutions.

Therefore, local communities would benefit from future studies that empower its members to become co-researchers and lead the research process. These studies must be authentically grounded in the community and must legitimately give power to a diverse group of community-based co-researchers. If local communities welcome the participation of all citizens (especially the oppressed) in their reform efforts by implementing longitudinal CPAR projects, they can continue to assess the efficacy of their co-created actionable solutions and can tweak them if needed and address new problems that arise. Also, because citizens' needs in each local community can differ, locally grown CPAR groups can afford to spend their time and efforts investigating the idiosyncratic aspects of their local social problems. These unique needs can be scrutinized more deeply and thoroughly by local groups than state and federal groups that examine social problems on a larger scale. The intimate inspection of the functionality of community services can also aid in the discovery of more appropriate solutions for that particular community at the given time. For example, two bordering districts might discover that they both have to improve literacy skills development in their communities after conducting CPAR projects; however, the ways in which the problems and needs manifest themselves in each of these communities could be vastly different because of a variety of variables. One community might determine that it already provides great literacy development support but could realize it is lacking reliable transportation to these services. The other community could determine their problem is a lack of effective communication. It could have cut literacy development services it thought citizens did not value but could discover that citizens had not known these services existed and would have taken advantage of them if they had known. Funds could be reallocated

or financial support explored to support initiatives that community members co-created to address their local problems.

Ideally, local governments will respect and support CPAR groups, their findings, and their recommended actionable solutions. This might now always be the case, unfortunately. Democracy can be messy and slow. Groups and individuals with power might not be interested in sharing their power. Self-interests might be more appealing or desirable than collective interests. CPAR projects are also a lot of work, and co-researchers and citizens might become disillusioned if their actionable solutions are continuously ignored. Once again, these are problems inherent in a democratic system. Only the citizens and co-researchers can surmise whether their efforts are making enough of a difference to continue.

Technology and digital media have drawbacks, some of which were identified in this paper. However, they can be utilized to spread the word about CPAR groups' identified problems and recommended solutions. Establishing a public and global discourse about the oppression felt in local communities may aid in emancipatory and liberatory efforts in newly imagined and yet to be celebrated ways.

One advantage of CPAR remains. If CPAR projects are effectively conducted in classrooms, schools, and communities, then local community members will experience conscientization and a growing awareness of the social problems impacting their lives. They can manage personal and communal navigation of oppression, including the mitigation and emancipation of self-guilt and self-blame resulting from covert factors beyond their control. They will also have company; they can become a member in a CPAR community of people who are repositioning themselves and their understandings amidst systemic oppression. Conducting research that investigates social problems and societal injustices has the potential to break spirits.

However, CPAR provides communities with the tools and support needed to heal wounds and co-construct reimagined and improved systems. Classrooms and schools consist of broken, silenced, and frustrated students, and CPAR could be their vehicle to reach a raised critical consciousness and an empowered understanding of the complex, hidden obstacles they circumnavigate constantly.

As students/co-researchers determined at the end of this CPAR study, the critical participatory action research process itself, could be a solution to horrifying schooling injustices. Students/co-researchers thought other students would benefit from conducting their own CPAR projects in their own schools and in surrounding neighborhoods. Their findings could shape educational reform in their local communities and states. At the end of the spring semester, Leo wrote reflectively:

After doing this project I have realized schooling problems are a BIG issue and people should start taking more action into this matter. One can only do so much. But together, we can make a difference. The one solution that I think should be done immediately is to have parents and teachers working and getting to know each other and their children together. I think Participatory Action Research should be done more often, because you can gather much more information by different people then you discuss it together, finding yourself learning from each other. (Spring 2012, Leo)

This CPAR study contributes to the field of Education because it provides local understandings that are necessary for effective schooling reform in this Central New Jersey County. New Jersey has some of the most progressive and ambitious laws and statutes regarding desegregation and equitable access to state services, yet these laws are not enforced. Large-scale federal and state laws and reform will not save the schools and students in these communities.

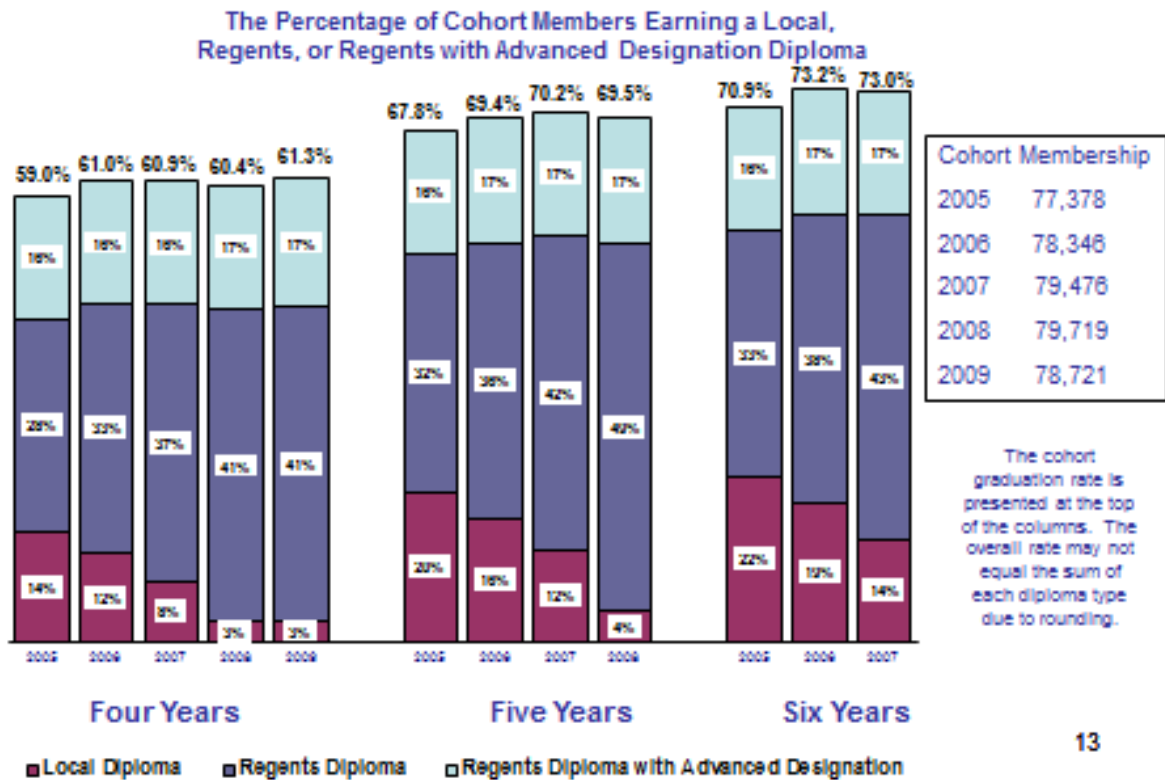
People must first become aware of the injustices. However, these discoveries are only meaningful if they are experienced organically and intimately. Critical participatory action research creates spaces within schools and communities for members to investigate local problems in collections that can transform into coalitions for effective social justice and change.

APPENDIX 1: NYC GRADUATION RATES

Slide from NY State Education Department's PowerPoint Presentation of Graduation Rates posted on its website: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/pressRelease/20140623/home.html>

2009 Cohort Graduation Rates Summary Slides

**The four-year graduation rate for New York City has increased slightly.
A decreasing percentage of students earned a Local Diploma.**



APPENDIX 2: CPAR RESEARCH PROJECT OVERVIEW

Our Group Research Project

Our semester-long research project is a group project. It is grounded in the critical participatory action research (CPAR) process. Throughout this research process, we will think critically about the information we discuss and gather, and we will work collaboratively in groups in order to understand the diverse perspectives and experiences concerning the problems in our community's schools. At the end of the semester, our goal will be to create actionable solutions that can solve the problems we have investigated and that can improve the schools in our community.

Research Process:

1. **Journal about our personal experiences**—NJ graduation requirement process, taking the HSPA, SRA, AHSA, etc.
2. **Interview students in our community**—concerning the NJ graduation requirement process, taking the HSPA, SRA, AHSA, etc.
3. **Analyze the data**—personal experiences, journals, interviews, and class discussions.
4. **Final Project & Presentation**—Groups will present findings from journals, interviews, and class discussions in final projects. Final projects will represent the data collected, the discoveries, and the recommended actionable solutions.

***Critical reflection** will take place throughout the process in journaling and class discussions.

Materials you will need:

1. Composition notebook for journaling
2. Audio/video recording equipment (optional)

Work you will complete throughout the semester:

1. 8 Journal Entries:

You will write in your personal journal throughout the semester. You will be assigned eight journal assignments. Course journal assignments will include writing narratives about your personal experiences taking the HSPA and AHSA, and writing ongoing, critical reflections about the research topic and process.

2. 2 Interviews:

You will conduct two interviews (recorded or unrecorded conversations) with other students about their experiences taking the HSPA and AHSA. You will also engage in ongoing, in-class, critical discussions about your interviews and the interview process.

3. Presentation of Final Project:

At the end of the semester, you will present a group project (PowerPoint, artwork, performance, etc.) that illustrates your group's data, discoveries, and recommended actionable solutions for the research problem.

APPENDIX 3: CRITICALLY REFLECTIVE WRITING PROMPTS

Throughout the semester, students/co-researchers had a few opportunities to reflect on the process without prompts. These were the formal prompts that were assigned every couple of weeks.

1. Reflect on your schooling experiences and your experience of access to quality education (particularly obstacles and roadblocks you experienced in your schools).
2. Reflect on your group's schooling problem. What is your experience with this problem? After sharing your stories with the class, answer the questions: What was it like to hear the stories your classmates shared? How did they make you feel? What did these stories make you think about? How do you think differently about your schooling problem?
3. Reflect on who you could interview to find out more about the problem your group is investigating. Make a list of 5-10 people you could talk to, and write about why each person would be a good person to interview. Think about your research question and the interview questions your group created, and write about why each of your potential interviewees would be good people to talk to about your group topic. Write about the advantages and disadvantages of each potential interviewee. Use the "Possible Solutions" structure from the "Sample Problem-Solving Outline" in Critical Thinking (pp. 266-267) to help you analyze and evaluate your potential interviewees.
4. Reflect on what it was like to interview your group mates. What went well? What was challenging? What was it like to be interviewed? What will you do to prepare for your interviews? What will you do in order to make your interviewee feel comfortable and in order to gather detailed stories?

5. Reflect on your group discussions: How are your group discussions going? What interesting information are you gathering? Have you learned anything new about your topic? How are you thinking differently about your schooling problem? What solutions have you discussed?

6. Reflect on the group research process: What have you all learned from participating in this process? Please answer at least five of the questions below:

- ☐ What have you learned from participating in this process?
- ☐ What have you learned after reviewing your reflective writings?
- ☐ What have you learned from group and class discussions?
- ☐ What have you learned from conducting interviews?
- ☐ What have you learned about your schooling experiences?
- ☐ What have you learned about schooling problems?
- ☐ What have you learned about schooling solutions?
- ☐ What have you learned about research?
- ☐ What have you learned about working in groups?

APPENDIX 4: SAMPLE RESEARCH/INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Examples of Research Questions and Interview Questions CPAR Groups Created

These are the research and interview questions Spring 2012 groups posted online so that other class members could follow their progress. The Fall 2011 groups' questions are not provided here because they did not post theirs online and instead kept them in their folders and added to and edited their written copies at multiple points in the semester.

Spring 2012, Group 1 Questions:

1. What problems did you or your kids face in an overcrowded school?
2. What specific type of problems did your or your kids encounter when there wasn't enough support from parents?
3. What problems do students who migrated from another country encounter?
4. How was your home life throughout school?
5. Do you think any changes could have been made in your home life to improve your school experiences?
6. Do you think any changes could have been made at school that would have improved your home life?
7. Why do you think some parents choose to put their kids in private schools over public schools?
8. What were some major issues in your school? Did anyone try to help resolve the issues?
9. The environment that you were in at home and in your community, how did it affect your education in both a good way and bad way?
10. Did higher authorities in your school try to help you out in any of your struggles? If so how? If not, why not?

Spring 2012, Group 2 Questions:

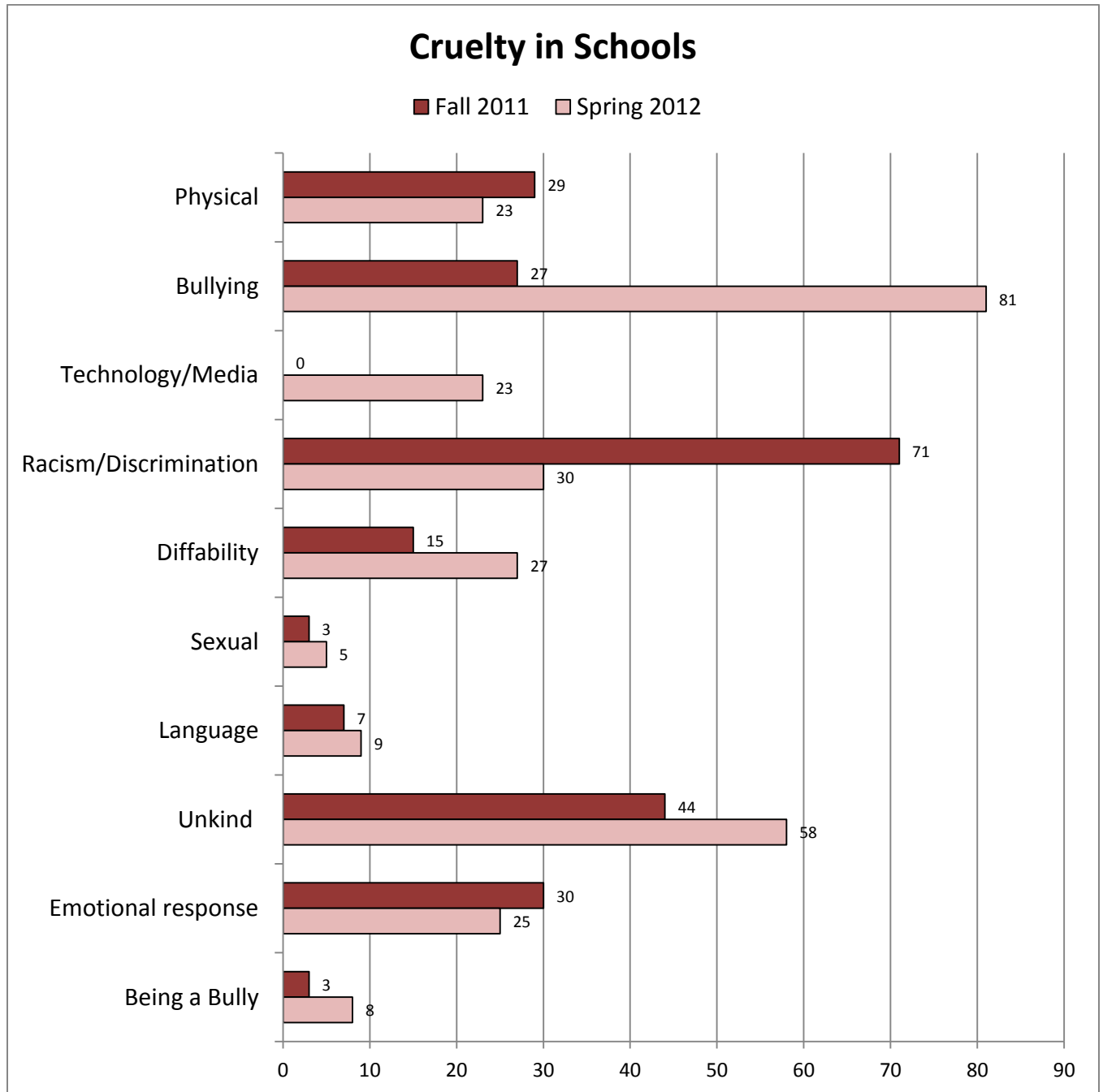
- 1) How was your high school experience?
- 2) Outside of your social group, did you feel pressure to change or hide who you really were?
- 3) Within your social group, did you feel pressure to change or hide who you really were?
- 4) When did you feel accepted in your high school?
- 5) When did you feel unaccepted in your high school?
- 6) Did you experience bullying at your high school? If so, were you bullied, were you the bully, or did you observe bullying?
- 7) How did bullying or your experiences in school affect you after high school? How did you cope with your issues?
- 8) Was it easy to discuss your schooling issues and challenges with your family or friends?
- 9) How did any disabilities, such as learning disabilities, affect your experience of high school? Were you bullied because of your disabilities?
- 10) Did peer pressure affect you? Academics, sports, friends?
- 11) Were there sexist bullying acts in the sports at your school?
- 12) Was there any sexual harassment in your high school?
- 13) How would you improve high schools?
- 14) What message would you share with people who have experienced these problems?
- 15) How would you change your high school experience if you could?
11. If you could go back in time to change the way your education was given to you, your parents support, or any issues that involved you and your education, What would you change and why?

Spring 2012, Group 3 Questions:

1. How overworked did you feel while you were in high school?
2. Did you have high expectations to meet? High standards?
3. What made you feel stressed and anxious while you were in school?
4. What did you do to cope with any stress and anxiety you felt?
5. What was your sleep schedule like when you were in high school?
6. How did your school workload and stress affect your sleep?
7. Did you have to take anything to stay awake and alert in class?
If so what was it?
8. Why do you think some students feel overworked, stressed, and anxious while in high school?
9. Did you experience any physical or health-related issues or problems while you were in school?
10. What jobs, sports, extracurricular activities did you participate in while you were in school?
How did your participation in these activities affect your stress level?
11. Did feeling overworked, stressed, or anxious affect your relationships with the people around you?
12. Did you feel in any way that you were living a double life? One person in the daytime and another person at night?
13. What do you think should be done in order to reduce the stress and anxiety students feel while they are in school?
14. If you could change anything about your high school experience, what would you change and why?

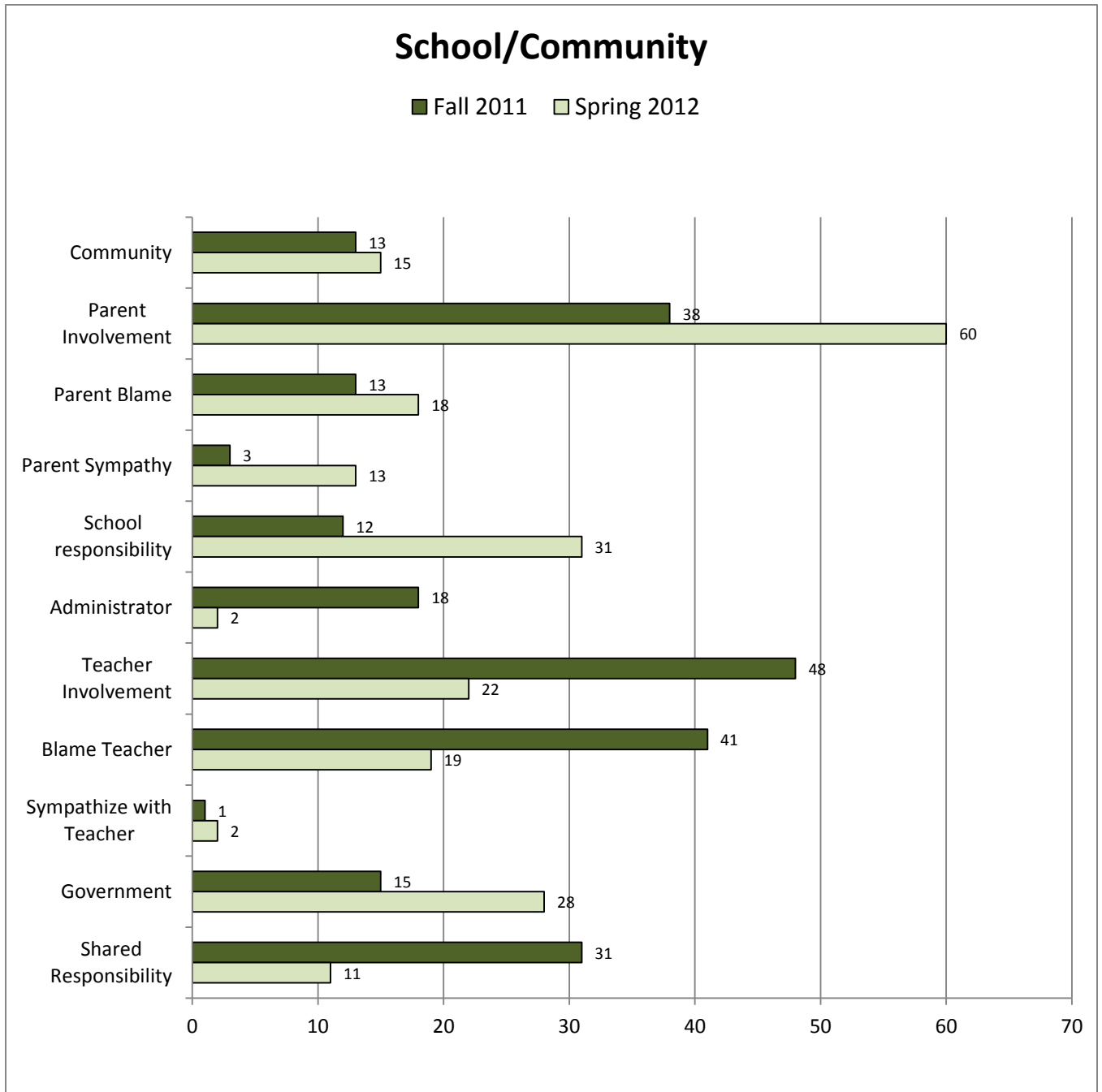
APPENDIX 5: CRUELTY IN SCHOOLS TABLE AND FIGURE

Figure A.1: Cruelty in Schools



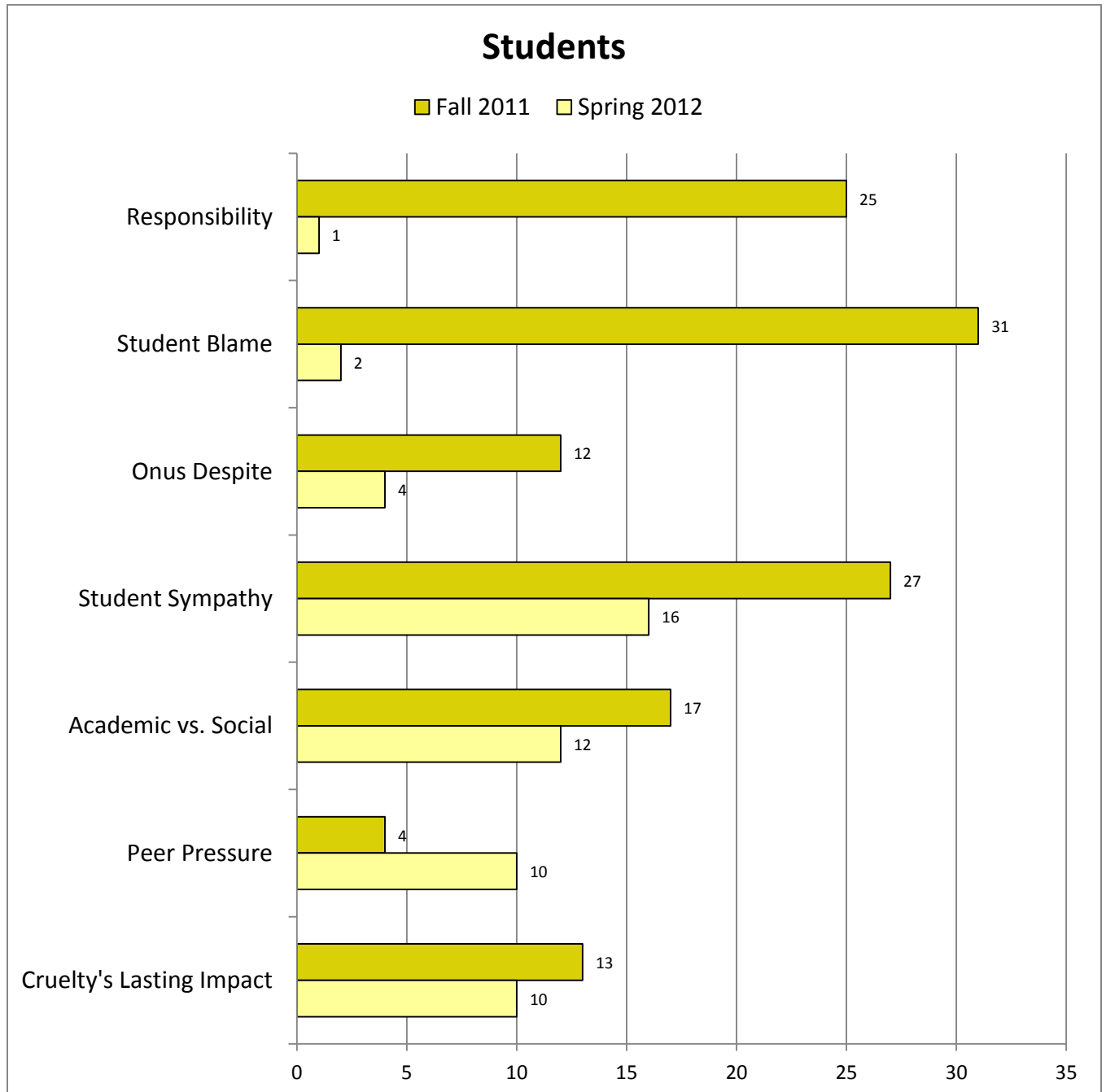
APPENDIX 6: SCHOOL/COMMUNITY FIGURE

Figure A.2: School/Community



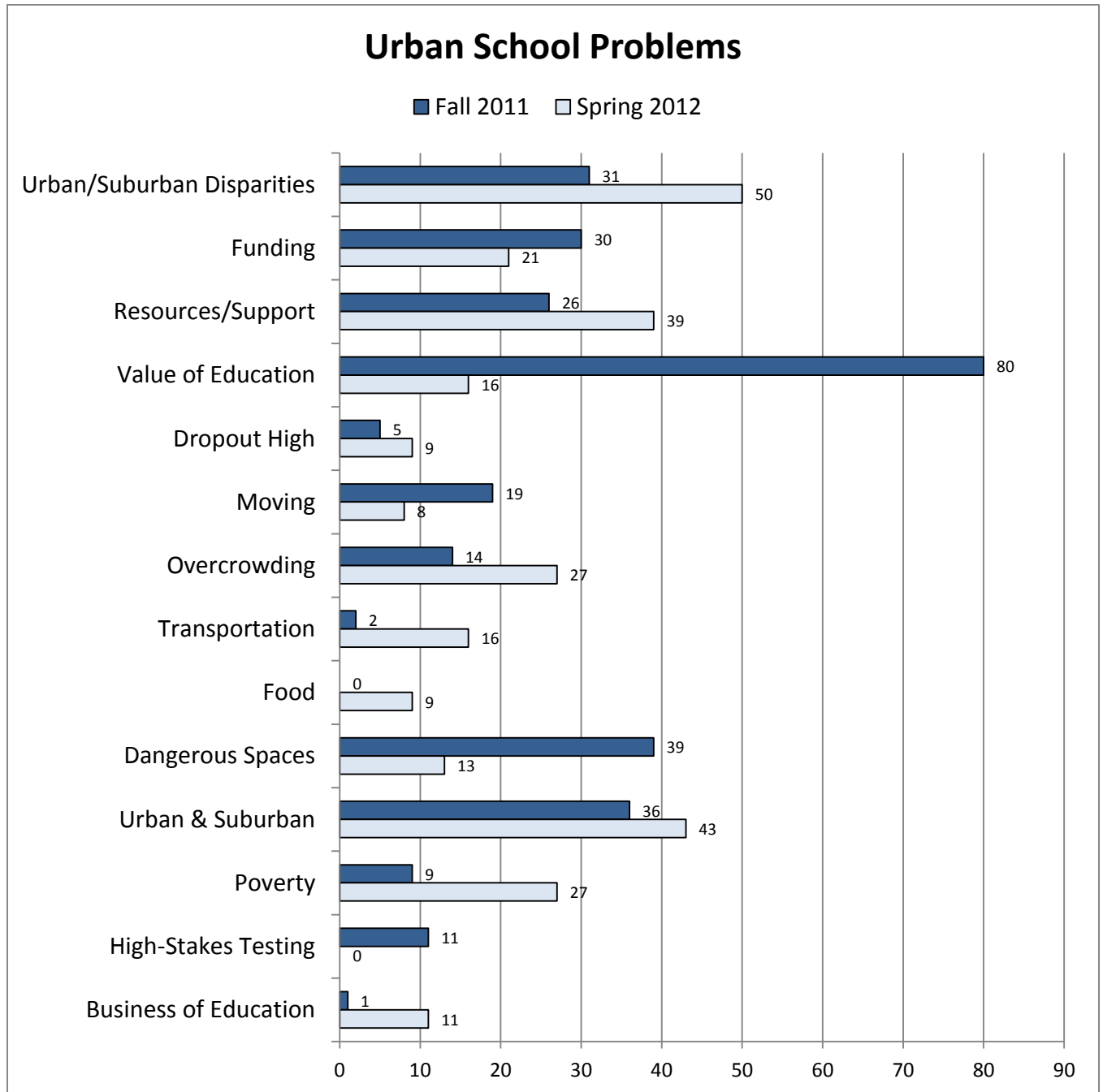
APPENDIX 7: STUDENTS FIGURE

Figure A.3: Students



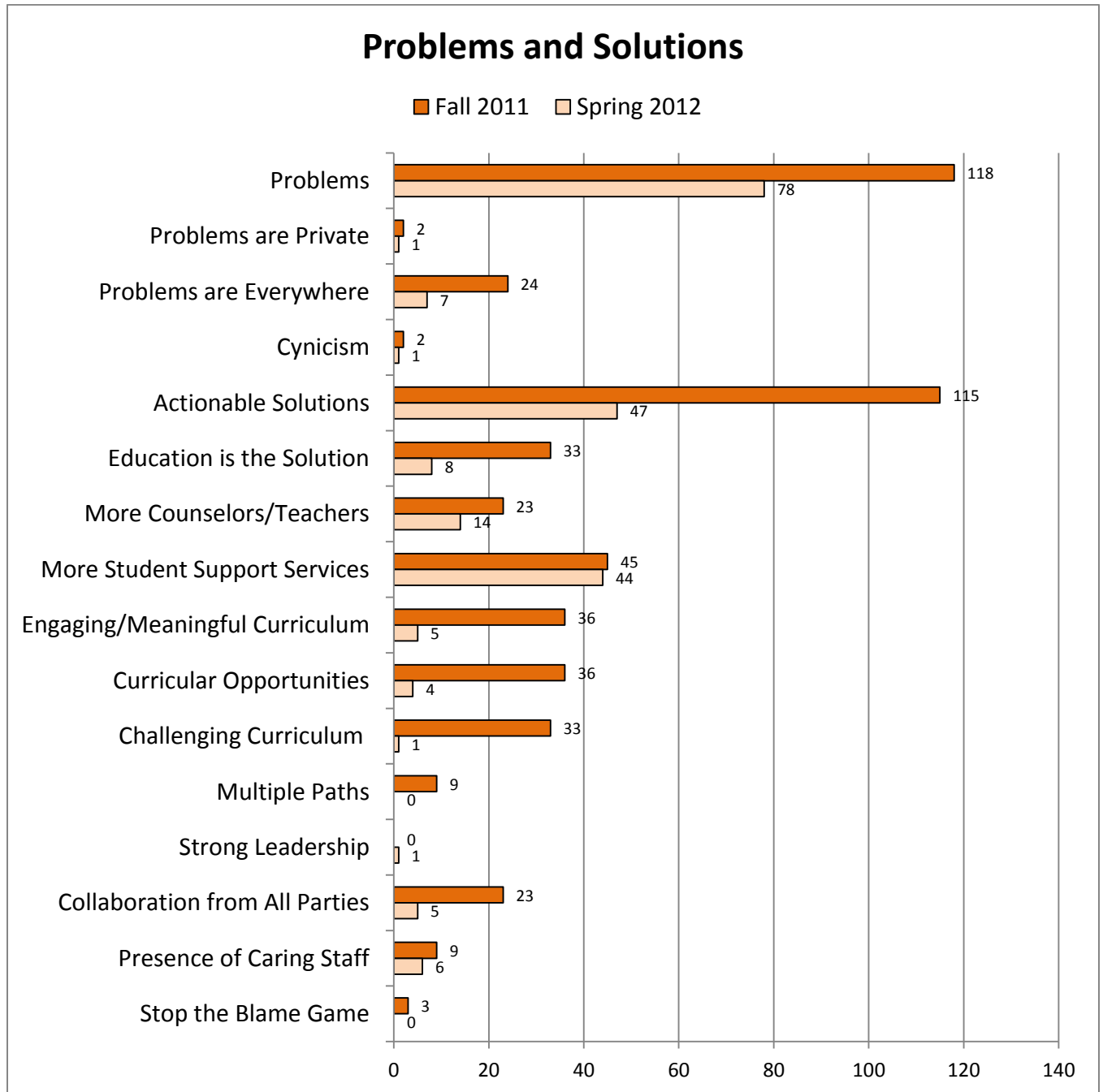
APPENDIX 8: URBAN SCHOOL PROBLEMS FIGURE

Figure A.4: Urban School Problems



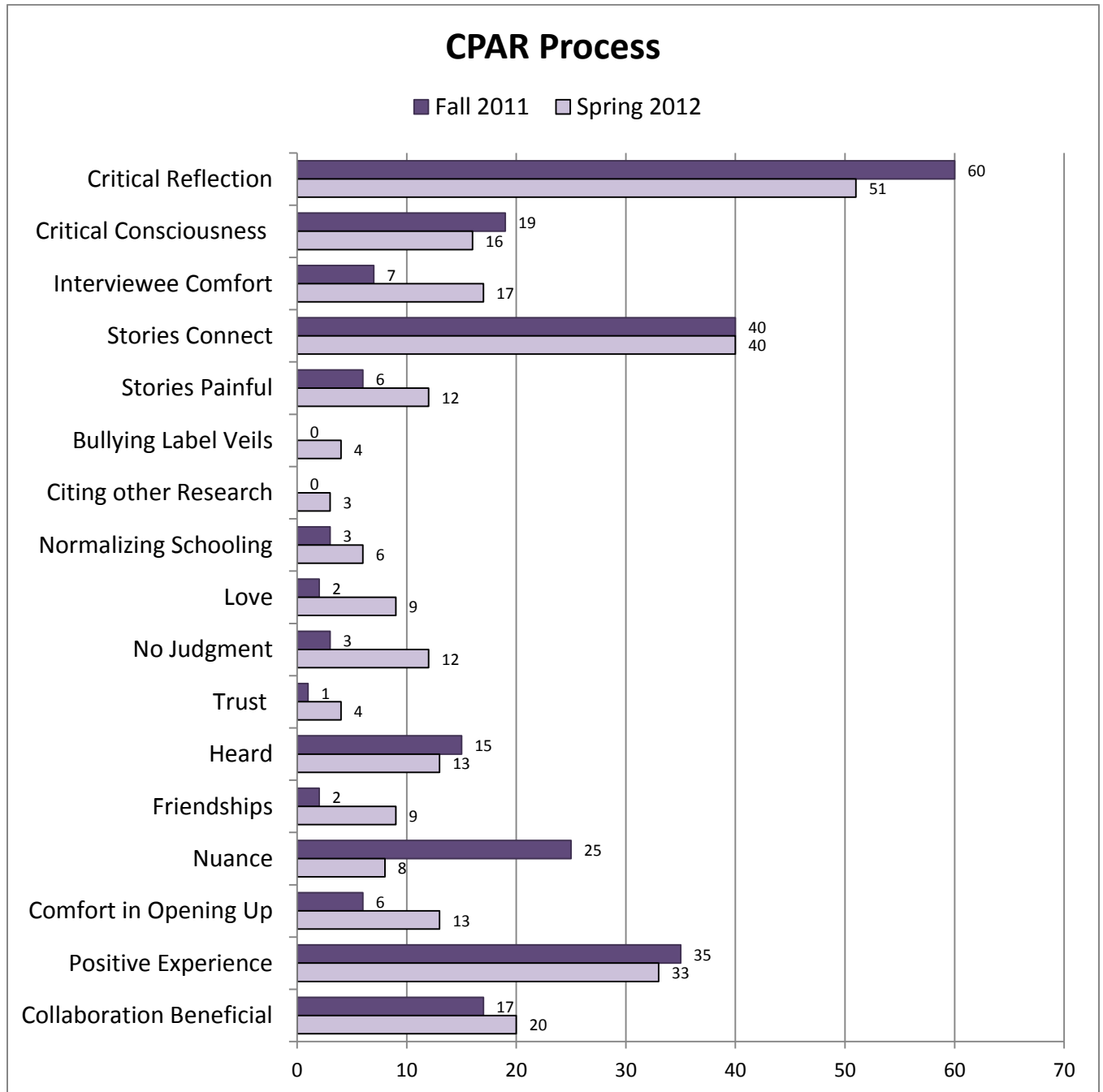
APPENDIX 9: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS FIGURE

Figure A.5: Problems and Solutions



APPENDIX 10: CPAR PROCESS FIGURE

Figure A.6: CPAR Process



APPENDIX 11: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

OFFICE OF HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS

Medical School Building 52
Mason Farm Road
CB #7097
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7097
(919) 966-3113
Web site: ohre.unc.edu
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #4801

To: Kathleen Nichols
School of Education
218 Andover Place Robbinsville, NJ 08691

From: Behavioral IRB

Approval Date: 11/21/2011

Expiration Date of Approval: 5/07/2012

RE: Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)

Submission Type: Modification

Expedited Category: Minor Change to Previously Approved Research

Study #: 11-0775

Study Title: An Investigation of the Schooling Experiences of Urban and Suburban Community College Students

This submission has been approved by the above IRB for the period indicated. It has been determined that the risk involved in this modification is no more than minimal. Unless otherwise noted, regulatory and other findings made previously for this study continue to be applicable.

Submission Description:

The participants in the study have changed. All participants will be adults. The location of the study has changed. The participants are adult community college students who meet for a class in a community college classroom. The assent and parent permission forms are no longer needed, and the consent form has been changed. The method of inviting the participants to participate in the study has changed.

Investigator's Responsibilities:

IF YOU SUBMITTED ONLINE (Behavioral and Public Health-Nursing IRBs Only), your approved consent forms and other documents are available online at http://apps.research.unc.edu/irb/eform_routing.cfm?masterid=102376&Section=attachments.

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

CC:
George Noblit, School of Education

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