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The unequal distribution of professional autonomy in schools

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THE UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY IN SCHOOLS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts

in

The Department of Sociology

by

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This thesis is dedicated to my good friend, Gail Deangelis.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the ways in which educators interpret and respond to government interventions in public schools. I conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven teachers and two principals at two public high schools in a mid-size city in the Deep American South¹. I will call this city, “August City”, and I refer to the state as “Gulf-State”. By comparing the perceptions of educators at a low-performing school (which serves high percentages of minority and low-income students) with perceptions of educators at a high-performing school (which serves fewer numbers of minority and low-income students), this study demonstrates how an educator’s sense of autonomy relates to students’ socioeconomic backgrounds. Findings show that educators, who work in schools with high numbers of poor students and students of color, are deeply frustrated by their own powerlessness. These educators are also angered by what they believe is an unfair system that rewards educators who work in high-performing, high socioeconomic schools, and punishes those who work in far more challenging environments.

Key Words: Autonomy, Public School, Socioeconomic, Inequality, Government.

¹ Fictitious names are used for all participants and schools, as well as for the city and state in which this study took place. When citing sources which include the name of a school, the city, or the state in their title, I replace the revealing word or phrase with, “Anonymous”. This was done to protect the anonymity of this study’s participants. This adheres to APA formatting of Anonymous authors. The following webpage describes this formatting style: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/03/>.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Research Questions

Observations of two high schools in August City suggest that educator autonomy is unevenly distributed to schools based on students' socioeconomic background. Guided by prior research on autonomy as well as the critical theories of Michael Apple, my research contributes a critical understanding of educator autonomy by answering the following questions:

- 1) How do views about professional autonomy compare and contrast between educators at a poor high school and educators at a wealthier high school?
- 2) Does student socioeconomic status relate to an educator's sense of professional autonomy, and if so, how?
- 3) How do educators of each school navigate and respond to perceived encroachments on their professional autonomy?

Autonomy Defined

Broadly conceived, educator autonomy is the degree to which a teacher or principal believes they have sufficient professional control to successfully fulfill their professional responsibilities. In their study of chronic illness and patient autonomy (2008), Mars, et al, define autonomy as, "...[the] correspondence between what people want their lives to be like and what their lives are actually like" (Mars, G., Kempen, G., Widdershoven, G., Janssen, P., and van Eijk, J.). The same can be said of teacher autonomy: Teacher autonomy is the "correspondence" or differences between what a teacher wants his or her classroom to be like, as well as what he or she wishes their school to be like and perceived reality.

Amongst scholars who study educator professional autonomy, a common practice is to conceive and operationalize autonomy in very specific and compartmentalized terms. Chubb and Moe (1988), for example, define principal autonomy as a principal's perceived amount of control over the following areas: "Curriculum, Instruction, Discipline, Hiring, and Firing" (Chubb and Moe 1073). Evans (2001) similarly decomposes teacher autonomy into two broad variables (School-Wide Influence and Classroom Control), each of which is further divided into six variables (Evans 20-21). These researchers seem to have defined educator autonomy in such ways because survey data already existed for these variables (e.g. secondary data²). Chubb and Moe (1988) partially based their findings on data from the High School and Beyond (HSB) Survey. Evans (2001) based her findings on data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), a goliath and highly quantitative survey conducted about every four years by the main research unit within the U.S. Department of Education. This approach, one of methodological convenience, is not limited to only these researchers (see LaCoe 2008).

Convenience, therefore, explains why researchers have defined educator autonomy in highly specific and compartmentalized language. I argue that this approach is flawed because teachers and principals do not think about or experience professional autonomy in such mechanical ways. Teachers and principals respond to the conditions restricting or promoting their own professional autonomy with emotions: stress and frustration for those with limited autonomy; joy and enthusiasm for those who are lucky enough to have a high amount of autonomy. Professional autonomy, therefore, ought not to be conceived of in nice and neat language. I still believe the variables used by some researchers (Chubb and Moe, Evans, and LaCoe) ought to be incorporated into studies of educator autonomy; however, they should only guide or focus research, not pre-determine outcomes (the latter is a likely consequence for the researcher who shoves participants' responses into nice and neat categories). Participants need enough

² However, to their credit, Chubb and Moe also used data from the Administrator and Teacher Survey (ATS), a survey which they helped to create.

space to construct their own definitions and perceptions of professional autonomy (Glass's 1997 study, *Myths and Markets*, is a good example of this).

Interviews with teachers in this study were guided by questions relating to a teacher's autonomy *from*: the Gulf-State Department of Education, the federal department of education, the local department of education, their principal, bureaucratic responsibilities which interfered with core goals (i.e. having to fill out paperwork like "Individualized Education Plans"); as well as control *over*: curriculum, evaluation, standardized testing, and disciplining of students. Actors that may directly restrict teacher autonomy are principals and assistant principals. Agents that are physically located outside of a school building (superintendents, staff members at the federal, state and district departments of education) may also limit teacher autonomy; however, their impact on teacher autonomy is indirect. That is to say that these agents typically interact directly with principals (through co-present communications such as a visit to a school, and distant communications such as email, phone, fax, or traditional mail) who, in turn, interact directly with teachers (and "pass on the message" from the external agents).

Interviews with principals were focused by questions relating to a principal's autonomy *from* the state department of education, federal department of education, local department of education, bureaucratic responsibilities which interfered with core goals (i.e. paperwork cutting into a principal's time to walk around the school and observe teachers teaching), as well as control *over* curriculum, standardized testing, one's time and schedule, and funding decisions. Central to this conception of principal autonomy is the amount of pressure³ exerted on a principal by agents that are physically located outside of the school such as superintendents and staff members at the federal, state and district departments of education. These outside entities compel principals to follow their (the outside entities') prescribed directives in order to achieve the overt goal of improving student achievement as well as the more covert political objectives for local, state, and federal politicians (most importantly, reelection).

In addition to having to follow these mandates, principals must sufficiently document evidence that he or she (the principal) and the school are complying. An example of one such directive is the "School Improvement Plan", a bureaucratic measure intended to improve student achievement in historically low performing (and usually impoverished) schools. Generally speaking, School Improvement Plans, which were a hallmark of the No Child Left Behind Act, are summarized accordingly: The state department of education prescribes an educational action plan which principals and teachers at a particular school must follow; teachers and principals must supply the state department of education with documentation of progress or lack thereof; and ultimately, there will be consequences (penalties or reward) resulting from progress or lack thereof. Penalties range from increased scrutiny of principals and teachers by external agents (and losses in principal and teacher autonomy) to school closure. Rewards generally consist of an easing of external control on a school and a school's educators.

The term "educator autonomy" refers to more generalized situations where both teacher autonomy and principal autonomy are concerned. In cases where principal autonomy is directly affected and teacher autonomy is of only indirect or no concern, the term "principal autonomy" is used. Conversely, in situations where a teacher's autonomy is the primary interest and principal autonomy is of minimal or zero concern, the term "teacher autonomy" is utilized.

Educator autonomy thus far has been conceived of as a resource that is given to teachers and principals by the federal, state and local governments. Autonomy is also "taken" or claimed for by individual teachers and principals. From this perspective, a teacher or principal seizes autonomy from his or her superior who, the educator believes, is encroaching on their professional autonomy. There are at least two ways that a teacher seizes professional autonomy in this circumstance: Either by proving to his or her principal their worthiness as a teacher, and thus earning the principal's support and approval. Or, if the principal refuses to grant autonomy, a teacher seizes his or her own autonomy by adhering to the principal's orders when the principal is "looking" and teaching according to their own style when the principal is "not looking". Glass supports this claim, "...teachers are able to exert autonomy by seeking protection from administrative hierarchies, ...ignoring selected policies, and seeking the sanctuary of their own classroom where their authority is unchecked" (Glass 51). I suspect a similar dynamic exists between

³ As conceived and measured by principals' perceptions.

principals and superintendents. Teacher and principal autonomy is thus conceived as a phenomenon which individuals may impact by taking a professional risk. Ultimately, this study is concerned with the typical teacher and principal; not the exceptional risk-taker who may be more immune to outside pressures. Thus, the previous conception of autonomy as a resource that is given to teachers and principals by the federal, state, and local governments is used.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior Research on Educator Professional Autonomy

Prior research has revealed a relationship between student socioeconomic status (as an Independent Variable) and academic outcomes (as the Dependent Variable) (Sirin, 2005), and between teacher autonomy (as an Independent Variable) and student academic outcomes (as the Dependent Variable) (United States Department of Education 1997: 17). Whether or not a relationship exists between the two independent variables (student socioeconomics and educator autonomy) is less clear; if a relationship existed⁴, it would provide a more comprehensive picture of student achievement. An historic accounting provides clues which may explain the absence of research on a possible relationship between student socioeconomics and educator autonomy.

Historically speaking, sociological research on educator autonomy is in its infancy. The first significant work was Chubb and Moe's 1988 study which conceived of educator autonomy as a necessary "input" in student achievement. Though Chubb and Moe are considered to be strong advocates of conservative educational policy (Glass 1997), the conservative reform movement (politicians, researchers, and educators) in the 1980s was singly focused on objective measures of school and student achievement ("outputs") (Guthrie and Springer 2004). This was a logical reaction to the damning conclusions about the state of American public education found in the 1983 government report, *A Nation at Risk*. The focus on outputs gained momentum in 2001 with the signing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which dramatically intensified the nation-wide effort to quantify nearly every type of school activity. Furthermore, NCLB proponents aggressively asserted that any student, regardless of socioeconomic background, could succeed in school. This well-intended disregard for the influences of a student's background may be one explanation for the lack of research investigating a potential relationship between student background and educator autonomy. And while an ample supply of non-critical works on educator autonomy exists (Rosenholtz and Simpson 1990; Ingersoll 1996; Pearson and Moomaw 2006), there is an absence of critical sociological research on this subject. Furthermore, it is believed that the federal government preferred quantitative studies to qualitative studies because it is easier to make decisions from afar based on quantitative statistics than it is based on qualitative data. The lack of research on the potential relationship between student socioeconomic status and educator autonomy, the absence of critical works on educator autonomy, and the limited amount of qualitative educational scholarship since the early 1980s all suggest that a qualitative critical study, which explains how and why student socioeconomic status relates (if it does) to educator autonomy, is sufficiently justified.

Unintended Consequences of Federal Funding

Since the 1960s, the United States has attempted to close the "achievement gap" between poor and non-poor students by providing at-risk schools with additional public funds. One such type of funds are Title I funds, federal funds given to schools in which 70% or more of students are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch. Johnson's (2011) study shows that federal funds can lead to unintended consequences for schools. Although Johnson's study focuses on the effectiveness (and lack thereof) of Title I and Title III funds for poor students and English Language Learner (ELL) students in Californian public schools, it provides some insights about how and why federal funds restrict a principal's autonomy. In particular, it explains why the administration of Title I funds requires a high degree of time and energy. This is relevant because one of the schools in this study receives Title I funds.

Title I funds are very restrictive because fund administrators are strictly instructed by the federal government on how to spend funds, and they must document and account for how funds are spent. In light of all the demands of Title I funds, Johnson claims that a great deal of experience and knowledge is

⁴ If, for example, it was discovered that student socioeconomic status causes teacher autonomy, which causes academic outcomes.

necessary for those whose job it is to administer them. She concluded that many of the Title I administrators in her study were not fully aware of regulations surrounding Title I funds, nor did they fully understand how funds were supposed to be spent (Johnson 2011). She referred to this as “knowledge gaps” (Johnson 56, 60). Johnson recommends that district offices provide more training and mentoring for Title I administrators. Ultimately, Johnson’s study illustrates the complexity and myriad of challenges facing Title I administrators.

This tremendous bureaucratic burden imposed on principals is the result of political demands for “accountability”: Taxpayers insist (understandably so) that they be informed whether or not they are getting their money’s worth (i.e. if their “investment”, in the form of taxes, is yielding an acceptable amount of “return”). The concept of “Return on Investment (ROI)” is a popular and effective measurement of value in corporate America. In the private sector, ROI is easily measured because both sides of the mathematical equation which measures ROI are numeric: investments refer to U.S. dollar (or another country’s currency) amounts, and the “return” refers (with some variants) to profits which are measured in currency. Thus, there is widespread consensus regarding the legitimacy of measures of ROI in the private sector. This is not the case in public education.

The “return” component of the ROI equation is significantly more difficult to measure in the public sector (the measure of “investment” in the public sector refers to tax dollars which are easier to calculate). Standardized tests enable educators, researchers, and politicians to numerically measure returns on tax dollars. Current efforts to increase the measurability of public education have, however, been met by tremendous resistance from teachers’ unions and some politicians. In some cases, this has led to massive strikes- as it did in Chicago in 2012 and in Seattle in 2013. Opponents of standardized testing often claim that they are not valid measures of student or educator achievement because, they argue, a quality education cannot be numerically measured⁵. Moreover, as standardized testing intensifies, teachers and principals are more vulnerable to job loss. Generally speaking, schools that receive more tax dollars are subjected to greater scrutiny (i.e. heavier pressure to measure and show the “Return on Investment”) than schools that do not receive as many public funds.

Nevertheless, the federal and state governments have created education reforms over the last several decades which rely heavily (if not entirely) on the quantified measurements of educator and student performances. Darling-Hammond’s (2007) “historical design” (*LibGuides at University of Southern California*) found that the *No Child Left Behind Act* has, like Title I funds, had unintended consequences. Darling-Hammond found that NCLB has unintentionally widened the achievement gap between poor students and wealthier students because it penalizes schools in which a significant amount of students underperform on standardized tests by cutting their federal funds. Furthermore, the author found that schools which are deemed “low performing” are subjected to greater paperwork and greater scrutiny from “outside⁶” entities. Both Johnson and Darling-Hammond’s works show how federal reforms since the 1960s have resulted in a decline in autonomy for principals (and, indirectly, for teachers) who work in America’s poor public schools, and an increase in federal intervention. The notion that student’s socioeconomic status is connected to educator teacher autonomy is not a new one. In one of the few works conducted on this topic, a study of British schools (Lauder, H., et. al. 2006) found that British teachers who serve wealthy students were more likely to participate in school-wide decisions than teachers who serve poor students. They explain, “Perhaps the most striking pattern shows a connection between the number of agents exerting influence on decision making processes and the socio- economic status of a school” (Lauder, H., et. al., 15). The Lauder study provides empirical support for the existence of an “autonomy gap”: the difference in the amount of autonomy the federal, state, and local governments allow educators in poor and non-poor public schools.

⁵ I am basing this statement on conversations with colleagues which took place during the three years that I was a public school teacher in New York City (2007-2010).

⁶ I refer to school district central offices and state departments of education as “outside” entities. I place “outside” in quotations because although they are perceived by participants to come from the “outside”, these entities belong to the same public education system as the schools and local educators.

Scholarly Consensus about the Importance of Educator Autonomy

Previous literature shows that some researchers, who otherwise disagree vehemently with each other over their political differences, concur over the importance of educator autonomy. Those on the Right, particularly Chubb and Moe, have argued (1988) that autonomy is a necessary prerequisite for academic success for students, educators, and schools. They claim federal intervention in public education dilutes an educator's autonomy, and thus, they argue for a weaker role by the federal government in public education. Chubb and Moe support their claims with extensive quantitative data and findings on autonomy from a comparative analysis between private school educators and public school educators. They claim their study demonstrates that private school educators are more effective than public school educators because they are more autonomous and less vulnerable to federal interference. Apple (2004), however, questions these findings, and claims that:

[i]ndeed, when research has been used, it has often either served as a rhetoric of justification for preconceived beliefs about the supposed efficacy of markets or regimes of tight accountability or they have been based—as in the case of Chubb and Moe's (1990) much publicized work on marketization—on quite flawed research (Apple 2004:17).

Despite Apple's wariness toward Chubb and Moe's political loyalties, their claims about the importance of educator autonomy have support. In her qualitative case study of six affluent high schools, Sandra Glass (1997) seems to agree with their basic premise that educator autonomy is an important factor in student success. To be sure, Glass is an open critic of Chubb and Moe and the purpose of her paper is to demonstrate that public school educators do not necessarily have less autonomy than private school educators (thus directly challenging Chubb and Moe's conclusions). Moreover, Glass does not directly assert that educator autonomy is an important factor in student achievement. However, by attempting to discredit Chubb and Moe's claim that private school educators are more autonomous than public school educators, she implies that she accepts the claim that educator autonomy is an educationally important variable. If she did not, it seems unlikely that she would write a paper refuting the existence of an unimportant advantage between private and public schools. Glass even suggests a potential relationship between student socioeconomic status and educator autonomy:

The schools examined here enjoy success in all conventional senses of the term. This favorable environment may shape the way the political system treats educators and how educators respond in return. One might have reason not to expect the same organizational effect obtaining in schools under the duress of poverty and social dislocation. The following themes that emerged from this research should be viewed with these cautions in mind (Glass 1997: 44).

Glass also recommends that future research on autonomy examine the interplay between student socioeconomic status and educator autonomy. She asks, "In what ways do the social and economic circumstances of the students affect teachers' and administrators' autonomy" (Glass 51).⁷

Generally speaking, most education scholars are primarily concerned with student achievement (Chubb and Moe 1988; Glass 1997; Darling-Hammond 2007). Some focus on the unintended effects of federal programs (Darling-Hammond 2007); others have compared perceptions of professional autonomy between public and private school teachers and administrators (Chubb and Moe 1988; Glass 1997). Nearly all, however, tend to have one element of their studies in common: a concern for the effects of some variable on student achievement. This study breaks from this tradition. The main concern in this paper is the professional experiences of teachers and principals. (Nevertheless, this study still has indirect

⁷ The current study picks up where Glass left off by comparing perceptions about professional autonomy between educators at a poor public high school and educators at a wealthier public high school. The potential relationship between student socioeconomic status and educator autonomy has never been the primary focus of any sociological study to date. Evans (2001) explores this potential relationship; however, it is not the focus of her study.

implications for student achievement). This decision was made largely as a response to the near compulsive habit of education scholars (sociologists included) to justify their research through explanations of how students are affected and how student achievement may be maximized. This study assumes that the need for a more complete understanding of the professional realities of adult educators is, by itself, a legitimate justification for scholarly examination because it will potentially discover fundamental truths about one realm of professional work environments in western capitalist societies: the relationship between the socioeconomic identity of a “customer” (i.e. student) and the professional autonomy and capabilities of the professionals serving customers.

CHAPTER 3 SOME HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Desegregation, Magnet Schools And the Autonomy Gap

From 1954⁸ until 2007, the August City school district grappled with one of the nation's longest and most grueling legal battles over the desegregation of its public schools. The predominantly black plaintiffs demanded federal and state governments to intervene and force the local district to desegregate. The white defendants opposed integration and framed their arguments around the idea of "freedom of choice"⁹. From 1963 until 1969, the official desegregation policy in August City was based on the freedom of choice plan. However, in 1969, a federal appeals court ruled that the freedom of choice plan had failed to achieve integration, and ordered both sides to submit new desegregation plans (Anonymous Desegregation Case Studies 2010). Between 1969 and 1975, a group comprised of white and black school board members implemented a desegregation plan which included the relocation of black teachers to schools with majority white student enrollments, and the relocation of white teachers to schools with majority black populations (Anonymous Desegregation Case Studies 2010). This plan failed to achieve integration, however, and in 1975, a federal court overturned a lower court's ruling which had declared August City's school district to be successfully desegregated (Anonymous Desegregation Case Studies 2010).

Around this time, school districts throughout the United States (especially large urban districts which faced similar resistance to desegregation) began to use forced busing as a means of integrating schools. These efforts were resisted by many whites (and some blacks). By the mid 1970s, opposition to forced integration became increasingly louder and more violent (i.e. Boston). Politicians from Boston to Birmingham feared for their political livelihoods. August City's decision to use forced busing in 1981 unleashed one of the school system's most divisive and darkest eras¹⁰. In response to political upheaval and unrest, the first "magnet" school in the United States was opened in Tacoma, Washington, in 1968 (Rossell 2005). In 1976, Bridgton High School became one of the first magnet schools in August City. Since magnet schools were voluntary (students could choose to attend or not attend magnets), they offered a more peaceful and politically feasible way of achieving desegregation.

According to Evans (2001), magnet school students outperform traditional school students (Evans 2001). Evans provides two possible explanations for this. One school of thought is that, at least in some public school districts, magnets have pulled the best teachers and students away from traditional schools (Evans 2001). This phenomenon is more likely to exist in districts where union representation and power are relatively weak (as they are in August City) (Evans 2001). Another view claims that magnets are more successful than traditional schools because magnet school teachers (and, I claim, principals) possess greater autonomy than traditional school educators (Evans 2001)¹¹. I submit that these two explanations are both valid; that teachers and principals at the most exclusive magnet schools¹² possess greater autonomy than traditional school educators and their schools pull the highest performing students, teachers, and principals away from traditional schools.

Since the 1960s, magnet schools have been a political device (Gelber 2008) with which politicians could achieve (or appear to be trying to achieve) two goals that had previously contradicted each other: racial desegregation and the curtailing of white flight. Politicians jumped on the magnet school bandwagon because it was a voluntary desegregation plan which enabled them to evade white riots (such as those in South Boston during the 1974-75 school year, Gelber 2008) and appease the increasingly powerful

⁸ The legal battle over desegregation in August City began after the historic Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, in 1954.

⁹ In this plan, any student could attend the school of his or her choice. Advocates claimed it promoted fairness and freedom. Critics argued that it was simply a racist tactic by which white August City citizens were able to maintain segregation.

¹⁰ From 1983 until 1996, the August City school district experienced its strictest and most aggressive desegregation plan to date (Anonymous Desegregation Case Studies 2010). During this tumultuous period, magnet schools were gaining popularity throughout the United States and in Gulf State.

¹¹ According to Evans (2001), magnet school teachers, in general, enjoy more autonomy than traditional school teachers; both in terms of their classroom control and their level of participation in school-wide decisions (Evans 2001).

¹² I am referring to the 1/3 of all magnet schools that have admissions criteria. Rossell calls these schools "perfect" magnets (Rossell 2005).

(predominantly, though not entirely, black) pro-desegregation lobby. I contend that politicians granted principals and teachers at magnet schools greater autonomy (than educators at traditional schools) because they were relying on magnet schools to achieve their politically sensitive desegregation goals. I claim that politicians tried to appease magnet school teachers and principals because their political ambitions were tied to the success of magnet schools. According to Rossell (2005), a “perfect magnet” is a school in which all of the students have chosen to attend¹³ (Rossell 2005). These types of magnets are more successful than any other type of magnet schools in attracting white students and tend to have lower percentages of non-white students (Rossell 2005). Gelber’s (2008) historical analysis of magnet schools in Boston corroborates these claims, “I contend that to the extent that Boston magnet schools were perceived as elite enclaves, they became potent symbols of the very inequality targeted by the federal court order” (Gelber 2008, pg. 454).

By the 1990s, desegregation became less important to the American public and by extension, to American politicians (Rossell 2005). Magnet schools recognized this shift in public opinion. Rossell (2005) claims, “With desegregation waning as a public goal...magnet schools have maintained support by attaching themselves to the school-choice movement” (Rossell 2005). Similarly, in August City, the courts ended forced busing in 1996, and more recently, school choice has become an increasingly popular slogan in the educational reform rhetoric coming from the governor’s office in Gulf-State (“Governor Anonymous Unveils Education Reform Plan” 2012). All of these factors contributed to gaps in principal and teacher autonomy between magnet schools¹⁴ and traditional schools throughout the United States and in Gulf-State. The diagram below summarizes these historical events which contributed to an autonomy gap.

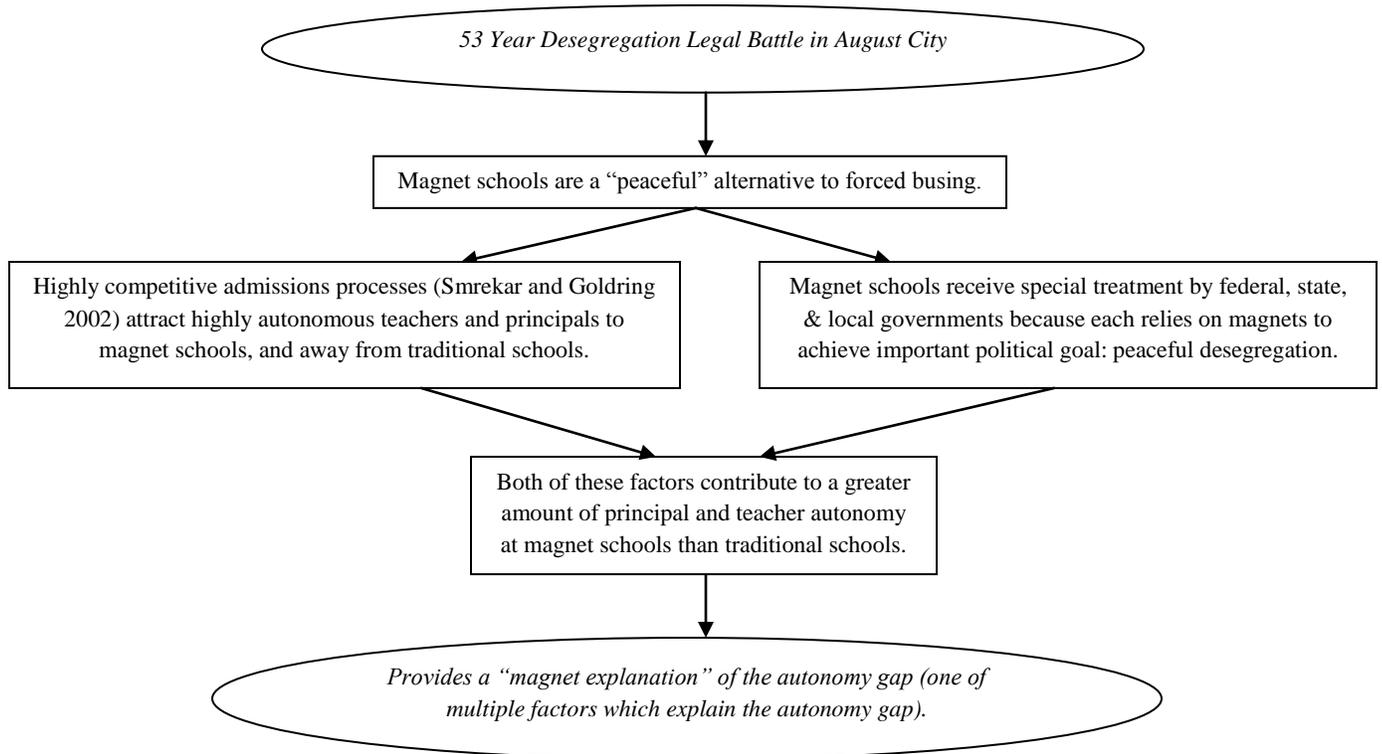


Figure 1. Summary of Events Which Contributed to the Autonomy Gap between “Perfect” Magnet Schools and Traditional Schools.

¹³ The non-poor (magnet) school in this study fits this description (Rossell 2005).

¹⁴ This applies to magnet schools which are able to filter incoming students through admissions criteria (approximately a third of all magnet schools in the U.S. as of 2005) (Rossell 2005). The remaining 2/3 of magnets are believed to be comparable to traditional schools in terms of educator autonomy.

CHAPTER 4 THEORY

The Conservative Restoration

Michael Apple borrows the term, “conservative restoration”, from City University of New York critical theorist, Ira Shor (Apple 206). In *What is Critical Literacy?*, Shor (1999) explains that the conservative restoration is retaliation against the liberals’ “culture wars”, which Shor defines as, “. . . a long-term questioning of the unequal status quo” (Shor 6). The culture wars emerged in the United States during the 1960s (Shor 6) and continue to influence the liberal agenda; likewise, the conservative restoration, which began in the late 1960s and early 70s, is still a driving force for conservatives (and, I claim, is currently gaining momentum with surprising speed within August City’s and Gulf-State’s educational political arena). I focus on Michael Apple’s works which analyze developments in the conservative restoration during the early and mid 1980s, the 1990s, and the early 2000s¹⁵. Except for *Ideology and Practice in Schooling* (Apple and Weis 1983), all of these works were written years after the release of the 1983 government report, *A Nation at Risk*, and are critiques of conservative reform efforts that were in part motivated by this report. The opening section (first section after the Introduction) of *A Nation at Risk* declares:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. . . the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war (The National Commission on Excellence in Education 9).

Conservatives responded to this “act of war” by intensifying the conservative restoration, and blamed liberals for America’s alleged global fall from grace. Over the next three decades, the United States federal government would drastically increase its control over America’s public education system and impose reforms that advanced the conservative restoration. This was an ironic development as conservatives are generally in favor of less government, not more. The reality of the conservative restoration is, however, more complicated than popular wisdom would suggest.

A major goal of the conservative restoration is to privatize America’s public education system (i.e. make the public education system more like a free market). This means treating students and parents as customers, teachers as workers, principals as managers, and schools as products to be bought and sold. Leaders of the conservative restoration believed that America’s public education system would ascend to global preeminence in the same manner which the U.S. economy did during the post-World War II years: through the magic of the free market. However, this ideal has been applied discriminately: the federal government’s influence has waned in wealthier, higher performing schools; its presence in poor, low-performing schools¹⁶ has remained. A common sense ethos has justified the discriminate influence of the federal government (as well as the state and local governments): Since the federal government is giving more public funds to poor schools, it should be allowed to play a greater role in those schools. Furthermore, for the schools that are low-performing (i.e. poor schools, in general), the federal, state, and local governments are expected to step in and help. These two justifications offer an explanation for the gap in the level of federal and state government intervention in poor and wealthy schools which may satisfy the layperson; not the critical observer.

¹⁵ Although Apple’s analysis is on the national level, I argue that his theory of a conservative restoration provides a conceptual means to shape understanding of events that are presently transforming August City’s (and the state’s) public education system. Evidence of a conservative restoration taking place in August City and the state is seen in recent speeches made by the governor of Gulf-State.

¹⁶ It is true that there are non-poor, low-performing schools as well as poor, high-performing schools. However, these tend to be exceptions in American and foreign public education systems. This paper does not focus on exceptional cases. It focuses on comparisons between poor, low-performing schools and non-poor, high performing schools.

Apple (1986) claims that female teachers experienced greater “deskilling” than male teachers, during the 19th and 20th centuries, simply for being a woman (Apple, 1986, pgs. 41, 50). Apple’s theory does not account for or suggest a gap in educator autonomy based on student socioeconomic status- then or now. The present study advances conceptual and historical understandings and explanations of the culture wars and the conservative restoration by attempting to discover whether or not some teachers and principals are more likely to experience deskilling than others (like the female teachers in Apple’s study) and, if this is so, how and why this is so.

CHAPTER 5 RESEARCH DESIGN

Overview

Field work was guided by the three primary research questions:

- 1) How do views about professional autonomy compare and contrast between educators at a poor high school and educators at a wealthier high school?
- 2) Does student socioeconomic status relate to an educator's sense of professional autonomy, and if so, how?
- 3) How do educators of each school navigate and respond to encroachment on their professional autonomy?

Snow-ball Sampling

I attempted to recruit participants by emailing high school principals in the August City school district with a summary of my research study and a request to conduct interviews with teachers and the principal. Only one of these principals, Principal Smith of Fryburg High School, agreed to participate. Principal Smith responded rather quickly to my request and explained that he thought my notion of educator autonomy and the forces acting upon it was well conceived, and additionally, he thought my study was important. After meeting with Smith for the first time, I asked him if he could contact the principal of Bridgton High School, a school in which I was trying to gain entry. I believed such a snow-ball approach would increase my chances of success. I employed an approach that mirrors Esterberg's (2002) model of snow-ball sampling. Esterberg explains, "In this technique, you begin with an initial interviewee- often, a key informant. Then you ask that person to refer you to friends or acquaintances or others who might be appropriate to interview" (Esterberg 2002: 93). Principal Smith was my key informant, and he referred me to Principal Nichols, the principal of Bridgton High. Principal Nichols contacted me shortly after Principal Smith spoke with her on my behalf, and informed me that she would be willing to participate in my study.

By gaining entry into Bridgton High, I was able to interview teachers and principals from two very different schools: one which consists predominantly of minority and poor students; the other having significantly less poor students and students of color. This enabled me to compare and contrast views about professional autonomy between educators at a poor high school and educators at a wealthier high school. It also allowed me to understand how student socioeconomic status affects an educator's sense of professional autonomy. Prior research has found a positive relationship between the length of time a teacher has been teaching and a teacher's need for autonomy (Rosenholtz and Simpson 1990). Thus, in order to understand educator autonomy from multiple perspectives, I asked that each principal select two teachers who were in their first few years of their teaching careers, two veteran teachers, and two random teachers. Fryburg's principal seemed to have followed these guidelines more strictly than Bridgton High's principal (every teacher selected at Bridgton High had five or more years of teaching experience).

Support for Chosen Methodology

Although a reliable quantitative measure of teacher autonomy exists (Pearson and Moomaw 2006), a qualitative methodology more effectively captures participant's perceptions about their professional autonomy. Mars et al. explain that an individual becomes aware of their autonomy (or lack thereof) through reflection and conversation, "...the relational scholars attribute a central place to conscious reflection in the realization of autonomy... According to the relational scholars, reflection is not primarily an individual matter, but a process that takes place through interaction and communication. Autonomy thus is based upon dialogical hermeneutic procedures" (Widdershoven 1999 cited in Mars, G., Kempen, G., Widdershoven, G., Janssen, P., and van Eijk, J.). Autonomy is conceived as an individual's awareness and perception of his or her professional control in the workplace. Moreover, this self-realization

is facilitated by conversation between the researcher and participants, as well as amongst participants in a focus group. Therefore, qualitative interviews were chosen as the ideal method of inquiry. This choice is consistent with findings which presented “a view of autonomy as self-development through dialogue” (Widdershoven 1999 cited in Mars, G., Kempen, G., Widdershoven, G., Janssen, P., and van Eijk, J.). Through semi-formal conversations, I was able to identify how the principal and teachers of each school navigate and respond to perceived intrusions on their professional autonomy.

A “Multi-Site Qualitative Case Study”

Methodologically, my study is comparable to Glass’s (1997) “multi-site qualitative case study” in which (as previously noted) Glass investigates teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of professional autonomy at six high schools (Glass 1997:9). Explaining her study’s methods, Glass writes, “The methods employed in this investigation were those of the multi-site qualitative case study: interviews from multiple data sources, observations and field notes from a variety of on-site meetings and visits, and analysis of documents (brochures, teacher handbooks, policy manuals, meeting agendas)” (Glass 1997:9). All three of these methods were utilized in the present study: I conducted video-taped, semi-structured interviews with six teachers and the principal of Fryburg High School, as well as with five teachers and the principal of Bridgton High School; on my visits to each school, I recorded my thoughts, feelings, and observations which I considered relevant (I, for example, recorded how one teacher’s classroom seemed cluttered with books, computers, posters with classroom rules, and other physical and visual distractions- a signal to me that she might have been instructed, perhaps by a superior, to have all of these things in her classroom); online documents were also analyzed (such as the profiles of each school provided by the Gulf-State Department of Education’s website and the National Center for Education Statistics, each school’s own website, and several speeches on education made by the governor of Gulf-State). According to Clarke (2005: 165), multi-site ethnographic studies “... contribute to both a broad and deeply empirically grounded understanding of the phenomenon of interest.”

At Fryburg, I interviewed the principal and teachers one and two at a time. However, at Bridgton High, the principal instructed all five teachers to meet me in one room, where I conducted a two hour focus group interview with all five teachers at once (one teacher had to leave about half way through). On a separate occasion, I returned to Bridgton High and interviewed the principal. I also conducted two separate follow-up interviews, one with Bridgton High’s principal, and the other with a Bridgton High teacher (These interviews were not video-taped; they were audio-recorded). I selected these two participants based on their performances in the first set of interviews. The Bridgton High teacher, for example, was surprisingly honest and willing to disclose his perceptions and opinions about sensitive issues related to autonomy, his school’s academic reputation, and some other matters. The principal was selected because, as the principal of the only high school in August City to have received a passing grade on the state’s recent evaluations, she provided unique insights into her school’s relationships with the state department of education and the August City central district office. The follow-up interviews ultimately provided me with opportunities to explore and investigate areas, which based on participants’ responses from earlier interviews, I had identified as being especially important to my study.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics’ (NCES) online database, there are approximately 1,040 students in grades 8-12 at Fryburg High School (“Search for Public Schools”). Approximately 73% are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Black students comprise 79% of all students, and white students comprise 12% of the student body. It is located in a residential neighborhood in south August City. Bridgton High serves approximately 1,224 students in grades 9-12; approximately 41% are black and 44% are white. Additionally, 31% are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. It is currently located in the former Rice High School¹⁷ building, a run-down relic of an earlier time. This is only a temporary location as their actual school building is in the final stages of a \$58 million renovation process (Portier). The newly renovated site looks like it could be a school for the children of the power elite. It includes two theaters, brand new science laboratories, a new “TV production area”, beautifully manicured grounds, and a main building which looks more like a college than a public high school (Portier). Bridgton High’s principal, Barbara Nichols, is well known as a top school leader, and she has

¹⁷ Fictitious name.

received numerous distinctions at the state and national levels. The esteemed magnet high school is one of the top public schools in the state and is regarded by many in August City to be a vital institution for the city.

CHAPTER 6 DATA ANALYSIS: GROUNDED THEORY

Initial Coding

I employed Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory to analyze my data. There was a considerable amount of data to analyze and code, and Charmaz's grounded theory provided an appropriate qualitative methodology to organize and negotiate all of it. Before coding data obtained in interviews, I transcribed the data (i.e. the participants' interview responses). A total of 220 transcribed pages were analyzed. According to Charmaz, the first step of coding (when constructing grounded theory) is initial coding. A specific kind of initial coding called line by line coding, was used. In this step, I went through each transcribed interview, one at a time, and carefully read and made meaning out of every line. In the margin beside each line, I typed a short sentence which captured the meaning I derived from the line. The interview with Fryburg's principal, for example, produced 100 initial codes (lines) in the margins; the interview with Bridgton's principal produced 166 initial codes. After I coded every line of every interview (and copied and pasted all of them onto a new document), I proceeded to focused coding.

Focused Coding

The objective of focused coding is to condense and organize the codes that emerged from initial coding. This is done by discarding repetitive codes and by assigning each remaining code into focused categories. In the case of the interview with Fryburg's principal, the initial 100 codes were condensed into 36 codes (64 codes/lines were discarded because they repeated an existing meaning). These codes were then organized into seven categories (two such categories in from the coding of the interview with Fryburg's principal are: "Control (or lack thereof) over time" and "Sources of funding (Title I)"). The 166 initial codes from the interview with Bridgton's principal were condensed into 94 focused codes which were assigned into 10 categories. Next, the focused codes from both of the principal interviews were combined into one document (this was done for the teacher interviews, too). In total, there were 130 focused codes from both of the principal interviews. One objective of focused coding in this study was to compare and contrast codes from each interview (i.e. Codes of Fryburg teachers were compared to codes of Bridgton teachers; and codes of Fryburg's principal were compared to codes of Bridgton's principal). Out of the 130 focused codes from the combination of both principal interviews, 13 focused codes from the Fryburg principal's interview corresponded to 16 focused codes from the Bridgton principal's interview. Thus, 130 focused codes were condensed into 27 (the remaining 103 codes were omitted because they did not yield a comparison). This entire process, known as focused coding, was repeated with focused codes from all of the teacher interviews. Following this step is the third and final stage of coding: axial coding.

Axial Coding

The purpose of axial coding is to "sort, synthesize, and organize large amounts of data" (Charmaz 2006: 60). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) (cited in Charmaz 2006), axial coding reveals relationships between categories (each category contains focused codes from the previous step) (Charmaz 61). One way to do this is to create the following three different categories: conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences (Charmaz 61); the focused codes (from the previous step) are assigned to each of these three categories. Axial coding enabled me to present a coherent story which "sort[s], synthesize[s], and organize[s] large amounts of data" (Charmaz 2006: 60). The following is a summary of the entire, four-step coding process for the principal interviews (teacher interviews were subjected to same procedure):

- Fryburg principal: 100 initial codes; 36 focused codes and 7 categories, 27 combined focused codes, 29 combined axial codes.
- Bridgton principal: 166 initial codes, 94 focused codes and 10 categories, 27 combined focused codes, and 29 combined axial codes.

CHAPTER 7 FINDINGS

Initial Interpretations

Of the six teachers at Fryburg, I found a mixture of obedience, frustration and cynicism, and idealism. Two teachers obediently follow the government's mandates unquestionably. One, for example, follows the state's curriculum almost to the letter; the other spends a great deal of her time figuring out how to help students prepare for the end of year standardized tests. The latter believes that when students fail, it is the teacher's fault. She perceives herself and her colleagues to be entirely responsible for their student's academic outcomes. The other obedient teacher informed me that she is perturbed by teachers that don't follow curriculum because it leads to confusion (i.e. for students who switch teachers). The two oldest teachers were deeply frustrated by what they perceive to be unjust behaviors by the government. They blame the government (August City school district and the state government) for caring only for Bridgton High, and ignoring the rest of the schools in the district. They also believe that their school's failures are related to Bridgton High, who they assert, has taken the city's most intelligent students away from their school (and, they believe, the government has assisted them in this effort). I also met with two young teachers who were hopeful about their chances of making a difference in their students' lives. Like Fryburg's other teachers, they had to follow government curriculum and test preparation mandates; however, unlike the two obedient teachers (and more so than the two older teachers), their responses led me to believe that they have their own, independent motivations and agendas which are grounded in their hope that *they* will be *the* positive difference in their students' lives. Lastly, there is Principal Smith, a public school veteran of nearly thirty years. He appeared to be very fatigued and frustrated by what he perceives as unreasonable demands of his job. I would not be surprised if he retires very soon. Nonetheless, he is perseverant, highly professional, and has an enormously strong will. This is evidenced in the fact that although he perceives some aspects of his job to be unnecessary, he fulfills them without question and in some cases explains that he understands why such unreasonable demands exist.

All of Bridgton's teachers struck me as being highly autonomous practitioners of their craft (except for one teacher whose obedience reminded me of one of Fryburg's teachers). They expressed none of the frustrations that Fryburg's teachers complained of and all seemed to be calm and collected. They were surprisingly honest in acknowledging their school's potentially unfair advantages (such as being able to filter incoming students and get rid of low performing students), and they understood that such things influenced their school's prestige. Each, however, also believed that a key to their success was Principal Nichol's ability to buffer them from the state government. Another key to their success, they told me, is that they go above and beyond what the state government expects them to do (in terms of what and how they teach their students). Unlike Fryburg's teachers, they were much less affected by standardized test scores, school performance scores, and the daily realities that confront struggling, poverty-stricken schools. Their principal, Principal Nichols, appeared to be totally in control and very confident in her role as the school's leader. Unlike Principal Smith, she told me numerous examples of how she has successfully buffered herself and her teachers from the government's reach (This was in stark contrast to Principal Smith. Although he seems to have buffered his teachers from the state to some degree, he has not been able to do the same for himself).

Most of the participants from both schools in this study possessed "principles" (such as a view about what "good teaching" means, or opinions about educational equity in August City). Participants at both schools also believe the "correspondence" (between the professional lives they wish for and their professional realities) had been "disrupted" by the Gulf-State Department of Education (who, they say, micro-managed them). However, only the educators at one school were able to "restore" correspondence by "increasing the opportunities to arrange life". In contrast, educators at the other school had to restore correspondence "by adjusting how one wants life to be arranged" (Mars, G., Kempen, G., Widdershoven, G., Janssen, P., and van Eijk, J.). According to Olivier, autonomy is realized through:

...the difficult, painstaking development of the ability to distance oneself from those agencies that constantly tend to 'infantilize' people, by treating them as if they are children, incapable of thinking

and acting as (relatively) autonomous beings. Such agencies are all around one today, given the ‘bio-power’ that governments, schools, the media, economic institutions like corporations and churches wield over people’s lives (Olivier, B).

State and Local Departments of Education: Different School, Different Treatment

Before I investigate the teachers’ and principals’ different experiences with professional autonomy, I believe I must highlight the structures which lead to differences in autonomy for the educators at both schools. Interview responses reveal that government entities, especially the Gulf-State Department of Education, treat some educators as professionals; and others, they do not. Bridgton High teachers, for example, do not have to administer the incredibly time and energy consuming “Benchmark Tests” which prepare students for the end of year state tests. Nor does Bridgton’s principal have to deal with auditors, mentors, or coaches, sent by the August City district office and the state, who come to “help” Fryburg’s principal do his job. A typical day for Bridgton’s principal is, in fact, very different from a routine day for Fryburg’s principal – primarily because Principal Nichols and her school are largely insulated from state intervention, whereas Principal Smith and Fryburg High are not.

Two Fryburg teachers were also frustrated by Bridgton High, which they believe, has taken all of the smartest and most committed students away from other schools (including their school). One teacher at Bridgton High confirmed their accusation, “...basically we skim the cream off the crop and they’re all concentrated here.” This sentiment echoes findings from previous research on magnet schools:

...[T]he major issue discussed in magnet schools success is been one of stratification; the reason magnet schools do better is due to the self-selected, often affluent, student body. The issue of who chooses is an area of particular interest to sociology scholars in the field of stratification. According to some, magnet schools attract the best and the brightest students in the school district, “skimming” these students from the other public schools (Gamoran 1996; Lee 1995; Martinez et al. 1998 cited in Evans 2001, pg. 12).

Several other Bridgton High teachers seemed to agree that they have an unfair advantage. One told me, “Well one of the reasons [why Bridgton High is successful] is that it is a magnet school and the kids have to maintain a certain GPA to stay here so the ones that don’t do well don’t stay so they don’t become a part of the stats.” (Keep in mind that a Bridgton High teacher said this about her own school). Thus, Bridgton High is more likely than other schools in the district to receive a high School Performance Score (SPS) because it is able to filter its students. Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of Bridgton High students’ academic competence is that some of them, according to several teachers, tutor their college friends.

Different “Types” of Students Lead to Different School Performance Scores

The existence of a “student filtering mechanism” at Bridgton High may explain why they have far fewer numbers of low-income students and special education students. Darling-Hammond’s work (2007) reveals that these two groups of students historically perform poorly on standardized tests. That Bridgton High is consistently ranked amongst the highest performing public schools in the state should, therefore, not come as a surprise (To be clear, I am not arguing that all of Bridgton’s success is a result of its advantageous filtering processes; some of it is). Fryburg and the other low performing schools in the district and the state are forced to step up to the plate, as it were, and take responsibility for educating the state’s least successful students. Fryburg’s principal expressed frustration with the seemingly unreasonable demands asked of him and his teachers:

You know, when we get students that are reading on a third grade level and can’t do basic arithmetic, it is very difficult for us to teach them algebra and for them to read, you know, to do the things that they have to do in our English classes and in any other classes. And nobody takes that into consideration. All they look at is how your score, how did your kids do on those scores? And it’s just, so I don’t want to stand up and scream, ‘Not fair, not fair, not fair.’ But it’s not a fair system. It’s not fair.

Educators at Bridgton and Fryburg believe there are significant differences in levels of parental involvement at both schools. Bridgton High parents, according to respondents, take their children’s educations and careers much more seriously and are much more involved in them than the parents at

Fryburg High. Many of the Fryburg teachers are frustrated by what they perceive to be an apathetic approach toward education by Fryburg parents.

These three differences between Bridgton High and Fryburg High (differences in students' standardized test-taking abilities, parental involvement, and a filtering mechanism of incoming students) have led to what appears to be a rigged academic competition in which Bridgton is almost guaranteed to outperform schools like Fryburg. A significant and equally misunderstood outcome of this system is the resulting relationships which the state and local governments have with the "victors" (i.e. Bridgton High) and the "losers" (i.e. Fryburg High): a hands-off and highly desirable relationship with the victor and a hands-on, highly intrusive and micromanaging relationship with the loser. This entire process is defined by a *circular relationship among student socioeconomic status, school performance score, and governmental intervention (on educator autonomy)*, as illustrated in Figure 2:

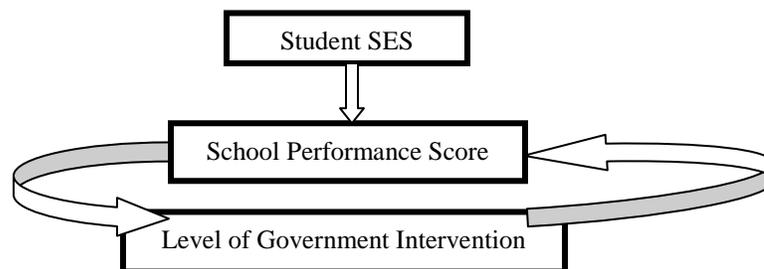


Figure 2. The Circular Relationship among Student Socioeconomic Status, School Performance Score, and Government Intervention.

My purpose in revealing the differences between the two schools is not to protest the current system and detest its unfairness. Rather, my goal is to explain how schools like Fryburg consistently struggle, and thus, to demonstrate how schools like Fryburg are fundamentally vulnerable to government intrusion and losses in educator autonomy.

Different Sources of Funding

Sources of funding are another difference between Fryburg and Bridgton High. Approximately 70% of Fryburg's student are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, compared with only 35% (approximately) of Bridgton High's student body. Consequently, Fryburg receives Title I federal funds; Bridgton High does not. Consistent with Johnson's (2011) findings, Title I funding requires a considerable amount of time and energy to administer. Although a staff of workers at the August City central district office helps him with paper work and accounting requirements, a great deal of bureaucratic work falls on Principal Smith's desk. Smith explains:

We're dependent on a lot of funds that we get, that are federal funds, such as Title I funds. Well with Title I funds come restrictions. Ok. You have to do this. Ok, if you're getting Title I funds, well then you have to do this, you have to show us that those funds are being used for this and show them how they're successfully educating kids. So we have a lot of accountability there and there's a lot of documentation there, so it's kind of a tough deal and [sighs] I mean I understand, well if they're giving us the money, then they ought to be able to tell us...But it adds to the restrictions and to the hands being tied and the things we have to do.

For Smith, Title I funds are a necessary evil: although they create tedious administrative work, they provide Fryburg with necessary financial resources. Smith explains, "That just kinda adds to the bureaucracy, but I mean, if you want the funds, you have to do that."

According to Fryburg's principal, some schools in the August City school district have hired full-time Title I administrators, like the schools in Johnson's study. However, Fryburg High School does not have enough money to do this. Their principal informed me, "We really can't afford to do that so we have

to do all of the administration ourselves.” There is someone in the district office who assists them and, according to Fryburg’s principal, he is very helpful. However, a lot of (if not most of) the work is done by the principal and his staff. Considering how challenging these responsibilities are for participants in Johnson’s study (whose primary job responsibility is to administer federal funds), one must wonder how difficult they are for Fryburg’s principal and his staff (who have additional responsibilities beyond fund administration).

In contrast, Principal Nichols relies on an alumni “foundation” that provides Bridgton High with “endowments”. As indicated, her school is currently located in a temporary site while their actual school building undergoes extensive renovation. Nichols revealed that the alumni foundation has raised several hundreds of thousands of dollars for this project. The foundation also helps provide Bridgton High with financial support for urgent academic needs, as they did when they recently gave \$20,000 for expenses related to the implementation of an English curriculum which she and her teachers used in place of the state mandated curriculum. Different funding sources provide insight into why Principal Nichols has more freedom and autonomy than Principal Smith, as Nichols revealed:

...now there are a lot of things that we don’t have to tolerate, that we don’t have to do because we are not Title I. There is a lot of paperwork that we are not involved in because we are not Title I. A lot of people think, well gee, you could be Title I if you if you just did such and such but I don’t want to be, that is one of the ways we are able to keep our autonomy.

Additionally, unlike Smith, Nichols does not have as many people calling, emailing, and interrupting her (regarding financial decisions) because the executive director of her school’s alumni foundation is the only person within the foundation who is allowed to contact Nichols (except for, occasionally, one other person). Smith on the other hand, has no choice but to respond to an almost unbearable number of calls, emails, and visits by government bureaucrats (who conduct audits at his school), all of whom want to make sure that he is spending government funds appropriately.

Effects of “Outside Help”

As the principal of a school that received a “D” on the state report card evaluations, Smith is also forced to participate in a vast array of plans and programs designed to improve Fryburg’s School Performance Score. Smith elaborated on his aggravation with government intervention and control:

Well, unfortunately, many, most of the time I spend in my day has to do with some requirement that we’ve gotten from above. Whether it’s, you know, we have all kinds of plans, we have school improvement plans, we have recovery plans, we have this plan and that plan that we have to do... Now you need to have a certain amount of oversight somewhere, but it would be nice to have one person or one entity and you would have, you know, a simple measure of how your school’s doing or how your students are doing. As it is now, since everyone is involved, we have all kinds of measures about what we’re supposed to do and what we need to do, and how we’re doing. And we spend all of our time making sure we’re taking care of those things... I don’t mind having someone overseeing or looking at us. But it’s gotten to the point where it’s too much. There’s too much. Too many people are looking at us, too many people are throwing things at us and saying, ‘Hey, you need to do this, you need to do that.’ It’s just gotten too much.

Unfortunately for Smith, he does not have the freedom to opt out of these plans. As he told me, “And all of that... adds to a whole bunch of things that we’re having to do that we might not necessarily agree with, but we’re under their, we’re under them, so we have to do it.” That Fryburg has to “take whoever walks through the door”¹⁸ and is unable to filter its students like Bridgton High, clearly plays a significant role in Fryburg’s inferior School Performance Score, and consequently, the greater level of intervention imposed on the school by the state department of education and the August City central district office.

Although Principal Nichols said her school is treated just like any other high school in the August City school district, she acknowledged that an “unspoken relationship” has developed between her school

¹⁸ One of the teachers I interviewed at Fryburg High told me that Bridgton High does not have to “take whoever walks through the door”, and implied that she and her colleagues at Fryburg do.

and the local district central office. That is, the August City central office grants her more autonomy than the principals of other schools because of her students' high test scores. She does not have to endure all of the plans and meetings that dominate Principal Smith's schedule. Nichols explained:

...there's some harsh monitoring that goes on that actually forces you to a daily routine in daily meetings. Where sometimes principals, not me, but other principals are in meetings and never at their school because they're being pulled out and being coached, or mentored, or going through training or where they're coming to monitor you, audit you, what you're doing. I mean, it is hard. And I've seen my colleagues go through that. So this is something that's developed over the last six years.¹⁹

Though Principal Nichols believes she is responsible for her favorable amount of professional autonomy (according to Nichols, "...one earns autonomy"²⁰), it is unlikely that she would enjoy as much autonomy if she were the principal of Fryburg High.

Effects of Professionalization and De-Professionalization

Apple claims that the State (State in this context is the encompassing term referring to nation-states) has historically minimized the decision-making power of female teachers by "separating conception from execution" (Apple, 1986, p. 40). In other words, the State makes decisions about what students learn (curricula) and to some extent, how they learn it (through standardized testing), and teachers are responsible for teaching the curricula and preparing students for these tests. Findings show that Fryburg's teachers and principal are more susceptible to this kind of deskilling than Bridgton's educators. One example of this is found in a comparison of curricula. Since their students have superior academic abilities (and as one respondent indicated, their students have little trouble in passing standardized tests), Bridgton's teachers are under less pressure to "teach to the test"; and Bridgton's principal is under less pressure to make sure her teachers are teaching to the test than Fryburg's principal. This enables Bridgton's teachers to "go above and beyond" the state's curriculum. Conversely, Fryburg's teachers feel pressures to stick more to the state's curriculum because their most of their students struggle with the state's basic curriculum (which they must master in order to pass the state's End of Course examination). Thus, Bridgton's teachers play a greater role in determining the "what" students learn than Fryburg's teachers. Consequently, they spend less time doing what they have to do and more time doing what they want to do.

Fryburg Educators' Frustrations with "Outside Help"

About half of the educators at Fryburg believe that the August City school district office treats Bridgton High School differently than other schools in the district. That is, they perceive the district to have a "hands-off relationship" with Bridgton High and a "hands-on relationship" with the rest of the high schools (including Fryburg). One teacher exclaimed, "And we just decided that we're going to put all of our good eggs in one basket and the heck with the others." Another teacher voiced a similar sense of frustration with the August City district office, "Because right now the way the schools are set up, I mean, we're just pretty much setup to fail." It should be pointed out that each of the three educators who acknowledged the existence of different relationships appeared to be the three oldest participants at Fryburg. One of these teachers explained his frustration with the district office's favoritism for Bridgton High (whom he refers to as "the flagship"), when he asserts, "...the lack of leadership at the district level has created an environment that is just, you know, it's sink or swim. And they're putting everything behind the flagship and we are left off with..."

¹⁹ Perhaps not ironically, the unspoken, hands-off relationship between the district and Bridgton High emerged shortly after a natural disaster severely disrupted this southern state.

²⁰ Nichol's conception of autonomy appears to be similar and different from the one utilized by this author. On the one hand, she defines autonomy as freedom from government intervention (which is the definition used in this paper). However, she also seems to define autonomy as self-initiative or entrepreneurial behavior. She explained, "The only thing that is ever called autonomy in August City for me is that because of my School Performance Score, I don't have to do benchmark testing which takes up 3 days of your time for every benchmark test. That is one thing I have been given, I can do it or not so I don't. As far as autonomy goes, that is the only thing that I am actually given a choice of. The rest of the autonomy, I take for myself. It's not something anybody gives me. It's my own drum that I, you know, walk to. It's my own sense of urgency of instruction that I try to do what I think is the right thing and it is not something anybody gives me, it is something that we do."

The “Revolt” at Bridgton High

Like Fryburg’s teachers and principal, the educators at Bridgton High do not like the state telling them what to do. However, unlike at Fryburg, Bridgton High educators successfully thwarted the state department of education’s efforts to implement a state-wide curriculum at their school. Bridgton High teachers offered two main reasons for the success of their “revolt” (as one teacher called it). One reason for their successful revolt seems to be that the state department of education would not, as one teacher suggested in the form of a question, want to jeopardize its own reputation. She said, “And don’t you think the state [department of education] wouldn’t want to lose us as a stat?” A few other teachers agreed, “I think just because of our school performance score....Yes, we had stuff that we could say, ‘Look, look at what we’re doing here’”. Bridgton High teachers believe they are insulated from the state’s coerciveness, and perceive this to be an important factor in their school’s academic excellence.

One of the teachers explained how their revolt developed, and how they were ultimately able to thwart the state’s intervention. He told me how a group of teachers, who were frustrated by the loss of autonomy, approached Principal Nichols and voiced their opposition. She responded by telling the teachers to ignore the state while she “runs interference”. One teacher paraphrased Nichols’s response, “‘Look my job is to run interference for you. You do what you do that you know works.’”

During the first year of the state’s effort to impose a state-wide curriculum, Bridgton High teachers and administration begrudgingly obeyed. In the beginning of the following school year, however, Principal Nichols informed Bridgton High’s teachers they were not going to follow the state’s mandate anymore. One teacher paraphrased Nichols’s well-received instructions, “We’re not doing it anymore...Just do what you want. We’re not going to play that game.” This teacher believes the state “gave up” following strong opposition from their principal. Bridgton High teachers told me that they follow the state curriculum, but they led me to believe that they have to exert only a minimal amount of time and energy in order to meet the state’s curriculum requirements (since their students are already highly capable), and thus, they are able to dedicate most of their time and energies to their own agenda. In some instances, Bridgton teachers are exempt from policies that other schools are forced to comply with (such as the Benchmark tests, a testing program that prepares students for the state’s End of Course examination). Bridgton High teachers told me that, like them, other teachers in the state were probably frustrated by the state’s invasion of their craft. However, they told me, most schools cannot successfully rebel against state intervention because most schools in the state have lower School Performance Scores than Bridgton High. One teacher simply said, “That wouldn’t work at a normal school.” That is, even if a typical school tried to revolt against the government’s mandates, it would not succeed.

The teacher’s revolt at Bridgton High sharply contrasts with the ways in which Fryburg teachers have responded to the state’s mandates. Since their students are not as academically capable as Bridgton’s students, they have to devote much more time and energy preparing for the standardized tests. They simply do not have the time to “go above and beyond” the state’s mandates, as Bridgton’s teachers do. Another teacher is happy that she has to follow the state’s “pacing guide” (a document which instructs teachers as to what content they have to teach and at what point during the school year they have to teach it). She explained:

Well, we do have a curriculum that we have to teach by but the thing I like about it is that you can’t as a teacher, as a Math teacher just pick whatever you want to teach which I don’t think we should be allowed to do anyway. You can’t pick whatever you want to teach and teach it...I don’t understand why you wouldn’t want it to be uniform and knowing that when a child comes to you from another school, well he has already been taught what you taught your students.

Differences in Teachers’ Praises for Their Principal and Differences in Job Responsibilities

Teachers at both schools were overwhelmingly positive about their principals. This was not too surprising since I informed them that their principals would be viewing their video-taped interviews. Differences in the kinds of praise, however, were insightful. Bridgton High teachers praised Principal Nichols for providing them with a high level of autonomy and for treating them like professionals. Regarding the entire administration, one teacher said, “Instead of policing us, they really leave us alone. I

was shocked when I first got a job here...at how much I was left alone. I mean, I was just left alone...And it was awesome.” Another teacher, who had taught at other non-magnet schools, informed me that teachers in other schools do not have as much autonomy as the teachers Bridgton High. He explained, “In other schools, and I taught at others, I felt like the migrant farm worker and I was just picking so many heads of cabbage every day and here I’m back at being a professional.” Another teacher expressed a similar perspective:

And she also doesn’t police us. You know, she never says, ‘Why aren’t you doing what you’re supposed to be doing?’ Because the assumption is that we are unless there’s some red flag that comes up...And I think that’s my favorite part about working here.

Another teacher reinforced the notion that the working conditions at Bridgton High are more favorable than other schools, “...it’s really hard to lure us away from here where we have the ability to massage our curriculum, massage what we do in a classroom.” All of the teachers at Bridgton High shared a similar sense of excitement about teaching and working at their school.

Like the Bridgton High teachers, Fryburg’s teachers were very positive about their principal. The most common praise concerned the principal’s and the administration’s consistency with enforcing disciplinary rules. This makes the teacher’s jobs significantly more manageable and adds to their sense of self-efficacy. As one teacher informed me, “You have to have good discipline before you can begin teaching in the classroom.” One teacher explained that when she has discipline-related disputes with students, the administration always takes her side:

I’ll go in and they’ll believe the adult 100%. This is not a kid’s world here. It’s the adults win. And so with our issue that we’ve had this week I told one of the assistant principals, and so she got the other one in and we called the girls in yesterday, we sat them down, and it was, ‘These are the rules, here’s your punishment.’ They didn’t even ask me. You know, they didn’t ask for their side of the story.

This teacher also happily reflected on her close friendship with Principal Smith, while another praised him for being a competent principal. By in large, though, Fryburg teachers’ praises had little or nothing to do with their sense of autonomy. I did not perceive there to be an unreasonable lack of autonomy, but the absence of praises and significant discussion on this subject suggests that Fryburg teachers probably do not enjoy the same high level of professional freedom as their peers at Bridgton High.

Another significant difference between Fryburg teachers and Bridgton High’s teachers was reflected in their job responsibilities and job expectations. At Bridgton High, teachers are expected to just teach. Fryburg teachers, in contrast, have additional duties beyond classroom teaching. As one Fryburg teacher explained:

And then outside the classroom as teachers, I mean, there’s tons of paperwork. So I always know what is IEPs and things like that, we’re always signing off on this, that and the other and there’s just a lot of stuff going on and the world of the teacher is really broad. There are all these different things that you always have to constantly keep track of. And again that’s on top of just what goes on in the daily teaching of a class. That in itself is pretty intense.

Additionally, Fryburg teachers are expected to participate in extra-curricular activities (one is a cheerleading coach; another is a football coach), and, as one teacher informed me, they must participate part in “subject area meetings” during which they discuss ways to better prepare students for the state’s standardized tests (they “document everything” during or after such meetings). More so than the educators at Bridgton High, Fryburg teachers’ and principal’s experiences are consistent with Apple’s observation of educators who “...experience considerably heavier workloads and ever escalating demands for accountability, [and] a never-ending schedule of meetings...” (Apple 2004:25).

CHAPTER 8 DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that a current wave of the conservative restoration is hardening the boundaries between poor and non-poor schools. It specifically focused on differences in professional autonomy at poor and non-poor schools, and revealed a circular relationship between student poverty, a school's School Performance Score, and resulting levels of government intervention (this relationship existed long before this study but nevertheless was largely absent in national and state reforms and policy-related discourse). Nation-wide reforms in the wake of *A Nation at Risk*, which attempted to soften these boundaries, have in fact made it more likely that the federal, state and local governments will possess a "hands-on" relationship with poor schools and a "hands-off" relationship with non-poor schools.

This system is justified through common sense: If a school does poorly, it is reasonable that a regulatory entity comes in and helps the school get back on track. It also makes sense that schools are rewarded for their success vis-à-vis increased autonomy (like Bridgton High has been). The current system does not, however, possess common sense policies which address the effects of poverty and socioeconomics on student and educator achievement. Poor schools are treated just like non-poor schools (an "apples to apples" comparison); and each is subjected to the same reward/punishment system which largely determines the amount of professional autonomy in a school.

I recommend a different lens through which to view the relationship between student achievement and educator autonomy. Instead of treating student achievement as a determinant of how much autonomy to give a school, I argue that politicians would be much more likely to reform public education (if that is their goal) if they asked, "How much autonomy will it take for principals and teachers to improve student achievement?" Autonomy is a factor in student academic success, yet it is treated as an outcome of it. The significance of a public school educator's professional autonomy is evident in this study's interviews: Teachers and the principal at Bridgton Magnet High School deeply believe that it is critical to their school's nationally acclaimed success (they were willing to "revolt" to protect their autonomy); and, similarly, Fryburg's teachers and principal expressed intense frustration over their minimal professional autonomy. I do not support a withdrawal of the federal and state governments from poor schools, but I do advocate for a more common sense approach to intervention.

This study's contributions should be judged in light of its limitations. Since I was not in contact with teachers before the interviews, I did not inform teachers of the nature of my study; this was left up to principals. It appears Principal Nichols provided a more thorough explanation of my study to her teachers than Principal Smith (which is not surprising since Principal Nichols has significantly more control over her schedule than Principal Smith). On the day of the interview, several Fryburg teachers informed me that they had no idea I was coming in to interview them, and I believe my presence caught them off guard. The teachers at Bridgton High, in contrast, were well aware of my research topic, illustrated by the ways in which they repeatedly returned the discussion back to the topic of my study. Conversations with Fryburg teachers were not as focused on autonomy. In spite and perhaps because of this "error", important discoveries were made. For example, because our conversations were not strictly focused on autonomy, I learned from Fryburg teachers that discipline-related matters are a daily reality for them and their administration. This led to my own emerging perception of the school climate at Fryburg High School, one characterized by conflicts and struggles between teenage students and adults. This is consistent with Ingersoll's work (1996) which found a relationship between teacher autonomy and the level of conflict among students, teachers, and administrators (Although, it should be noted, Ingersoll's notion of autonomy specifically focused on a teacher's degree of control over the disciplining of students, whereas my conception of autonomy is more comprehensive. Mine is not better; it is just more encompassing). A second limitation is the absence of minority participants. There were only two minority participants (both are African American teachers at Fryburg); all other participants were white males and females.

I will conclude this study with an appeal to logic and reason. Would a reasonable person conclude that the challenges facing teachers and principals in affluent schools are the same as those confronting teachers and principals who work in the poorest public schools? (Answer on your own). Then why are they treated as so? The unique challenges facing teachers and principals in poor schools (i.e. student apathy, lack of parental involvement, violence, lack of funds, and lack of professional autonomy- to name only some) hinder or “handicap” educators’ abilities to meet external expectations. I am not advocating for a different evaluation system for poor and non-poor schools (among other effects, this might lead to greater tracking of students and eventually, greater career pre-determinism). Rather, I claim that the current evaluation system (including but not limited to School Performance Scores) ought to be modified in such a way so that it accounts for the handicapping effects of poverty in poor schools.

Take, for example, a school in which 80% of its student body is comprised of students who are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Suppose this school received a “D” under the current evaluation system. A modified approach, which recognizes the existence of poverty, would measure the level of poverty (a “weighted value”) in this school. It is determined that the weighted score is equivalent to one whole letter grade. That is, if a non-poor school were to “produce” the same academic outcomes (i.e. same School Performance Score) as this school, it would receive a D; the poor school in this example would, however, receive a C because of the weight or emphasis given to poverty.

For the principals and teachers who serve America’s poor students, it would be a formidable challenge if the question facing them was simply, “How can we overcome the effects of poverty and help poor students excel academically?” But that is not the question at the moment. Presently, August City’s (and the country’s) teachers and principals are confronted with the following question: “How can we help our poor students succeed *in spite of very low levels of professional autonomy?*”

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²¹ Words or phrases in citations which compromised the anonymity of participants were replaced by the single word, "Anonymous". This adheres to APA formatting style for Anonymous authors. See: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/03/>.

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Consent Form

Study Title:

Academic Freedom in : An Ethnographic Study of Teacher and Principal Autonomy

Performance Site:

The actual sites of 2-4 high schools.

Investigators:

Joseph Cleary (Principal Investigator), Phone Number:

Dr. Susan Dumais (Supervising Professor), Phone Number:

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to better understand how important teachers and principals view autonomy as it relates to their ability to do their jobs. I am also seeking to compare the relationship between school sector (private vs. public) and autonomy with the relationship between student's socioeconomic status and autonomy.

Subject Inclusion:

5-10 Teachers at each school, as well as the principal of each school. Teachers are selected by the principal. I will ask principals to select two master teachers, two beginner teachers, and two random teachers.

Number of Subjects:

15-40 subjects

Study Procedures:

This study has two phases. One phase will consist of teachers and principals completing a survey. This will take approximately 10-15 minutes. The second phase consists of a video-taped interview which will last approximately 15-25 minutes.

Benefits:

Teachers and principals will receive credit in the video ethnographic documentary that will be created with the taped interviews (credit will be given anonymously; i.e. "I want to especially



thank the teachers and principal of [] High School for the time and effort which they graciously gave for the making of this film”).

Risks:

Since teachers and principals are going to discuss their opinions about their schools and working environments on film, they risk saying something that may upset a boss or colleague. (Suppose, for example, if a teacher exclaims, “I have no autonomy at this school! I can’t stand it here!”). If I believe a subject has said something that may get him or her into trouble, I will do one of the following: 1) Discard the footage; or 2) Keep the actual remark(s) and hide the identity of the subject. I will further minimize risks by not disclosing the name of the school where each teacher and principal works (I will only mention school name in credits).

Right to Refuse:

Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

Privacy:

Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information of individuals will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosures are required by law.

Signatures:

The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Matthews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator’s obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject Signature: _____ Date: _____

Institutional Review Board
Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair
203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
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Study Exempted By:

Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
Institutional Review Board
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Exemption Expires: 9-11-2014

VITA

Joe Cleary was born and raised in Ridgefield, Connecticut (USA). He was lucky to be able to attend schools in one of the state's best public school districts, and to grow up in a privileged and caring community. He had great teachers, especially in high school (a realization which became even more evident to him after teaching for three years in New York City Public Schools). Fortunately for Joe, he has never had to worry about going hungry; he has never had to worry about not having enough money for the new "in" toys, shoes, video games, or clothes; nor did he ever have to worry about not having parents who always provided him with unconditional love and support. To be sure, Joe has experienced some darker moments. But, all in all, Joe's upbringing was very privileged.

Joe's professional approach rests on the following core belief: It is always worthwhile to challenge conventional wisdom and conventional approaches to scholarly endeavors.