

WORDS MATTER: THE ROLE OF DISCOURSE IN CREATING,  
SUSTAINING, AND CHANGING SCHOOL CULTURE

by

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The culture here at Centerville is that most of these kids, a lot of people give up. I've heard a lot of teachers say that, you know, "I just give up. I don't know what else to do." You know, and it's real easy as a teacher to get really negative really fast. Because there is such a low expectation for these kids. Nobody expects these kids to succeed.

—Ellen Garrity

I think we're in a toxic environment here, I really do .... It's like trying to swim in an undertow or something. It's like banging your head against the wall. You're working so hard every day to try and make changes, and it just feels like, I know it's not true, but it feels like you're alone. Because there's no sense of community, no communication between colleagues, and it's really hard. You go home sometimes and it's just so depressing, and no one understands in your family, what you're talking about ... it can make you sick. That's why I said it's toxic. I think it could make you physically sick, but it can make you emotionally sick every day. If you don't figure out some way to shut it off. It's just really sad. I mean, it's heartbreaking because when you get to know these kids, so many of them have so much potential and are so bright, and so few of them go anywhere from here. I mean they don't. They don't even go to college. They don't even go to community college. They go and work at McDonald's or Kroger's. And they're just as smart as the kids who live 20 minutes away. But we seem to not be able to do anything to change it. And it's just, you know, it's wrong. It's a huge injustice to them. So if that can't make you sick, it's hard to imagine what can.

—Tina Olsen

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To the staff and students of Centerville High School,  
with appreciation and gratitude

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## ABSTRACT

### WORDS MATTER: THE ROLE OF DISCOURSE IN CREATING, SUSTAINING, AND CHANGING SCHOOL CULTURE

by

Jennifer Lyn Buehler

Chair: Lesley A. Rex

This three-year ethnographic study analyzes the ways in which “toxic” school culture was produced through interactions among staff members at Centerville High School, an under-resourced high school where I conducted fieldwork from 2004-2007. Using discourse analysis, I examine adults’ competing beliefs about low-income and minority students, and I analyze the ways in which differences in belief immobilized the staff in a larger school reform effort. Against this backdrop, I trace the attempts of one small group of teacher-leaders to change their own discourse interactions as they grappled with difficult questions about race and class in their work toward school change.

Fieldwork consisted of visits to the school three times each week during the first two years of the study followed by daily visits during the third year, resulting in over 1000 hours of participant observation and over 4000 pages of fieldnotes. Intensive fieldwork was coupled with extensive audiotaped ethnographic interviewing of more than 50 staff members during the third year in order to analyze individuals’ sense-making processes within the larger school culture. Through a series of ethnographic vignettes

embedded in a narrative account of the school reform effort, I illustrate the ways in which adults' race- and class-based belief systems gave rise to behaviors that unwittingly sustained toxic culture.

I argue that the widespread helplessness and frustration which plagued Centerville staff members developed in large part because adults were unwilling to talk publicly about the dilemmas that shaped their work with low-income and minority students. Adults who were unable to meet the instructional needs of these students developed “place-specific expectations” which they used to justify lowered academic standards, and they positioned students as destined for low achievement *because* of their race and class status. Students responded by engaging in patterned interactions with staff members that contributed to a self-fulfilling prophecy of academic failure. Racial tension in the school further complicated interactions between adults and students and further precluded talk across ideological differences.

Although discourse clashes created toxicity in Centerville, I argue that close examination of discourse can allow staff members to *see* the sources of their assumptions and beliefs about students, and in turn, develop new understandings about the complexities of teaching and collaborating across race and class differences. Furthermore, individual stories of growth and change reveal that when staff members admitted what they did not know about teaching low-income and minority students, they opened up a productive and necessary space for grappling with the challenges of work in urban and under-resourced settings.

INTRODUCTION:  
A CULTURE OF FAILURE

Centerville High School<sup>1</sup>  
Fieldnotes, February 13, 2007  
12:45 p.m.

“It’s gotten to the point I want to poke my eyes out,” teacher Harry Greiner says. He’s been preparing all the school’s juniors for the upcoming state achievement test every day for the past three weeks, and he still has three weeks to go. “I tell them, ‘You’re just in here one hour a day. I’m in here four hours a day!’”<sup>2</sup>

Harry lingers in the hallway for a few minutes to chat with me and my security guard friend, Al Ligget, while the juniors continue their test-prep work in the Forum Room. Spending time in the halls with Al has become a ritual element of my fieldwork over the past three years, exposing me to jokes and small talk, occasional spontaneous outbursts, and at times, heartfelt disclosures from staff members struggling to cope in a challenging environment.

Down the hall we hear a door slam. A heavysset girl named Akira storms out of class, followed moments later by Mr. McMillan, an elderly substitute teacher with wispy white hair.

“This girl is out of order!” he shouts, waving a disciplinary referral form at us.

“I haven’t been here for two weeks, and he wants me to take a test!” Akira fires back.

Mr. McMillan thrusts the referral form at Al. He takes a quick glance at it, but Akira is already storming down the hall toward the office. “See ya, Jen,” Al says, turning to follow her.

Ellen Garrity, one of the new teachers, stands at her door watching the scene unfold. Her face is impassive. I walk over to talk to her.

“So how are you doing?” I ask.

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<sup>1</sup> Except for Ann Arbor (the town where I lived and worked while conducting the fieldwork upon which this study is based) and Detroit (a city people sometimes referred to when talking about Centerville), all names of people, school districts, and communities in Michigan are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Since the start of second semester this year, test prep work has taken the place of regular eleventh grade language arts classes. Centerville administrators justify this loss of instructional time by explaining that their school has entered a crisis phase under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. They have to raise test scores in order to make Adequate Yearly Progress, or they risk losing all federal funding. In addition, one administrator told me that students will probably learn more in test prep classes than in regular language arts class anyway, since half of all eleventh graders are being taught by an inexperienced long-term sub hired in January.



“I’m frustrated,” she says.

“What is it this time?” I’m thinking of the many stories she has told me at lunch about disruptive students and her inability to get the supplies she needs for her classroom. She started teaching in Centerville in October when the previous teacher in her position was fired.

“It’s culture,” she says. “It’s just culture. The culture of this building.”

I remind her that this is the very subject I’ve been studying.

“You got a minute?” she asks. “Come on in.”

I follow her into the empty classroom. She closes the door before taking a seat behind her desk. She looks tired.

“I thought of you when I heard this one,” she begins, and mimics the voice of a student: “Would you shut up and stop being white?”

“Was that said to you or to another student?” I ask.

“To another student. It was one of those under-the-breath comments. I tried really hard not to hear it. Lord help me if I say anything, because then I would be called a racist.”

She glances at the door when we hear another disturbance in the hall. Someone out there is shouting again, but we can’t make out what they’re saying.

“I heard some teachers arguing the other day. They were arguing over rules. Some of the rules we have are petty, but some are important. I realized they were arguing over the culture of the building.”

I nod, remembering how often I’ve heard this same argument. Bickering about rules occurs daily here—at lunch, in the halls, even in staff meetings.

“These kids won’t connect to the curriculum. In my WASP tradition, the curriculum is basically a bunch of dead white guys. I hear teachers throughout the building saying the kids won’t connect. They won’t learn.

“Kids walk around saying they hate this school. ‘This school is wack,’” she mimics. “I hear that again and again. I don’t know exactly what it means, but it means something. Just look around at the place. I have yet to have anybody ask what happened to my missing ceiling tile. My heating unit is falling apart.”

I look up at the ceiling and see a strip of metal hanging down from the heat exchanger.

“They look at this place and they don’t care about it. They have no pride in it. They have no pride in themselves. They see themselves as failures. This is a culture of failure here!

“They don’t take responsibility because we don’t hold them responsible for anything. And the only option they see for themselves is the military recruiter. Joining the military is the only way they can get out of Centerville.

“They are expert manipulators. And then there are the kids I call the ghosts. They never say anything. They think they have nothing to contribute to society. And I find those kids to be really scary.

“These kids yell at each other all the time, like the one walking down the hall just now. F- this and b-i-t-c-h that.” She spells the words so she won’t have to say them. “They treat each other like they’ve been treated. But if I say anything, that’s my middle-class values coming through.”

She pauses for a moment. “I don’t know if any of this is helpful to you,” she says.

“Oh, it’s incredibly helpful,” I say. I’m itching to write down all the things she’s telling me, but instead I try to hold her words in my head until we finish our conversation.

“I don’t know what really goes on. All I have to go on is what the kids say, but there are teachers in this building who swear at these kids. Swear at them. In class. And then they turn around and expect the *kids* not to swear? I’ve been called every name in the book. Some nights I go home and say, I don’t know how much longer I can take this. It’s hard. It’s really hard. And I have *never* been one to count down the days. We have a culture of failure here. It’s a culture of failure.”

We hear a knock at the door.

“Just a minute, I’m coming,” she calls. “It’s the recycling people.”

“Well, thank you so much,” I say, as a paraprofessional and her crew of special needs students step into the room.

“It’s important work you’re doing,” Ellen adds. “I know it’s not easy to get people to talk to you.”

“People have actually been amazingly generous,” I say.

“You’re doing important work,” she repeats. “I hope it leads to some findings we can use.”

\*

Though Ellen Garrity was relatively new to Centerville,<sup>3</sup> it had not taken her long to conclude that regardless of her efforts, failure was inevitable. Faced with disaffected students, a fractious staff, and persistent undercurrents of race- and class-based tension, Ellen invoked culture as a way to explain the habitual and patterned quality of negative behaviors, interactions, and mindsets she encountered. From Ellen’s perspective, Centerville’s culture of failure originated with the low-income and minority students that the school served: they behaved badly and refused to learn. By failing to engage with the curriculum, take responsibility, or believe in themselves, these students created an

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<sup>3</sup> Centerville High School is a small school with steadily declining enrollment located in a blue-collar community in southeast Michigan. Approximately 60% of Centerville students are black and 40% are white, while around 70% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch. The teaching staff was approximately 78% white and 22% black at the time of this study. To date, Centerville has yet to make Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind, and the school received an evaluation rating of D-Alert from the Michigan Department of Education in 2004-05, 2005-06, and 2006-07, the years in which I conducted fieldwork. The graduation rate, as listed in the district’s Annual Report, was 59% in 2004-05 and 68% in 2005-06. According to the Michigan State Department of Education, the graduation rate was 52% in 2006-07, the year Ellen Garrity taught at the school.

antagonistic dynamic that Ellen felt helpless to disrupt. Her reading of race and class into that dynamic is apparent in her self-conscious and defensive stance toward student behavior (“Lord help me if I say anything, because then I would be called a racist . . . . If I say anything, that’s my middle-class values coming through”). Beneath her defensiveness, however, Ellen was worn out and vulnerable, unsure how much longer she could last in conditions she found to be hostile.

As an ethnographer who spent three years seeking to understand the dynamics that gave rise to school culture in Centerville, I participated in hundreds of exchanges with staff members like Harry, Al, and Ellen. Their ongoing attempts to define and describe the unique challenges they faced working in Centerville form the basis of this dissertation study. Through frequent and recurring references to “culture,” Centerville staff members revealed widely-varying, often-conflicting assumptions and beliefs about their students, the community, and the nature of work at an under-resourced high school. Staff members referred to culture when they talked about Centerville students and their families, when they explained the reasons for their school’s chronically poor performance, and when they discussed changes that were needed in people’s daily routines and interactions. Culture was a loaded term in Centerville, freighted with contextual and situational meaning.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Establishing a definitive theoretical stance on the concept of culture was ultimately less important to me in this study than exploring and interrogating the meanings that were ascribed to the word by study participants. While I understand culture most generally to be “the patterned ways in which people perceive, believe, evaluate, and act” (Goodenough, 1981), Centerville people used the term in a variety of ways. Most commonly culture was invoked reductively: staff members used “culture” as a form of shorthand to refer to characteristics they believed to be common among low-income people and within specific racial minority groups (cf. Ladson-Billings, 2006). Almost no one referred to culture when referring to white or middle-class people (cf. Frankenberg, 1993). Staff members also referred to culture when they tried to explain dysfunctional patterns and dynamics in the school and community. I will say more about the ways in which I conceptualized culture as a researcher and engaged in conversations about culture with study participants in Chapter One.

I will argue that the concept of school culture, which was introduced to me when staff members embarked on a long-term school improvement initiative, provides a window through which teacher educators, educational researchers, and staff members in under-resourced schools can gain insight into the complex negotiations that regularly occurred as a largely white, middle-class teaching staff interacted with a majority-black, low-income student population in a school with an established pattern of academic failure. My research demonstrates that school culture in Centerville had its roots in interpersonal interactions, patterned practices, and institutional history, but most importantly, in beliefs and assumptions that were revealed through the forms of everyday talk that staff members engaged in. Through talk, staff members disclosed the degree to which deep-seated ideas—as well as tensions and dilemmas—about race and class informed their work, shaped their relationships, and contributed to enduring personal and professional conflicts. In this dissertation, an examination of school culture will provide a starting point for extended analysis of the beliefs that circulated in Centerville, beliefs that teachers like Ellen Garrity relied on in order to make sense of chronically challenging conditions.

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Ellen was not alone in her frustration or in her characterization of Centerville's problems as a matter of culture. When administrators launched a school-wide reform initiative in the summer of 2004, consultants from a company called High Schools That Work told them that the way to improve student achievement was to create "a culture of high expectations." By toughening graduation requirements and making the curriculum more rigorous, consultants argued, staff members could change the culture of their

school. At the end of a series of introductory workshops led by consultants from HSTW before the start of the 2004-05 school year, many staff members seemed receptive to HSTW's message about changing school culture, even if they used varying terms to talk about the concept. During a wrap-up session at the end of one workshop, staff members repeatedly identified improving school climate and creating a more supportive learning environment as goals for school improvement (fieldnotes, 8-30-04).

And yet just a week earlier at the first staff meeting of the school year, staff members spent the entire time debating school rules, never touching on issues of curriculum or climate. Under a new interim principal, Dr. Herb Warner (a retired administrator from Detroit brought in after the previous principal had a heart attack), and on the heels of a retirement buyout that spurred the departure of approximately one-third of the school's veteran teaching staff, toughening up attendance and discipline policies was the meeting's main focus. Veteran staff members told me privately that with so many new young teachers, they worried that the halls would become more chaotic and teachers would have more trouble maintaining control in their classrooms (fieldnotes, 8-24-04).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tougher policies were not solely a matter of compensating for the perceived weaknesses of new teachers. Other staff members told me that Dr. Warner's reforms were needed because of the Centerville's negative reputation. "He was brought in here to clean up the district because the community perception of what goes on here is so bad," one teacher told me shortly after school started. "We do have problems, and we need him to clean things up so we can attract new students to enroll" (fieldnotes, 9-2-04). Three months earlier, teacher Neal Morton had used the same language about "cleaning up" as he described Dr. Warner's driving purpose. "The new principal sees this place like Dodge City," teacher Neal Morton said. "He's here to clean things up" (fieldnotes, 6-10-04). With Dodge City, Neal was referring to a 1939 western that chronicled a sheriff's attempts to transform a small Kansas frontier post into a civilized and respectable town by introducing law and order and by ridding the place of bad guys who had terrorized its citizens. In Centerville, however, students could be designated "bad guys" simply on the basis of their clothing. On the same day Neal Morton praised Dr. Warner, a volunteer security guard who went by the nickname "Roughhouse" told Al Liggett in my presence that Dr. Warner had suspended a couple of male students that morning for refusing to pull up their pants, even though it meant that they missed their final exams. "This is how I dress," one of the students had protested. "I'm here to take my finals!" But Dr. Warner sent him home anyway (fieldnotes, 6-10-04).

Dr. Warner took up these concerns at the staff meeting with a series of policy pronouncements. In a booming voice, he enumerated the school's new rules, throwing in a series of sarcastic quips that elicited occasional bursts of laughter and applause from the teachers. Unlike in previous years, students would not be able to appeal to pass a class despite having 20-30 absences in that class ("That policy doesn't exist any more! I never heard of it!"). Students who fought or cursed would be automatically suspended ("Stay home and curse to your mother and father!"). Male students would no longer be allowed to sag their pants ("They *will* wear belts! I'll be standing at the door to make sure of it!"). Backpacks would not be allowed in classrooms, but would be stored in lockers ("Why do they need book bags? What vouchers do we have that there's nothing illegal in there?"). Students were also forbidden to wear coats inside the building ("If you're wearing your coat, I assume you're an outsider, and outsiders go to jail").<sup>6</sup>

Though teachers were not all in agreement about these policies—some argued that students had a right to carry backpacks, and that bulky winter coats would not fit in

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<sup>6</sup> Under Dr. Warner's new rules, Centerville students and staff members were also required to wear photo IDs each day. Everyone, including me, wore IDs on black and white Centerville lanyards that hung around our necks. Dr. Warner argued that the ID policy would make the building more secure, but more often, failure to have an ID resulted in large numbers of students being turned away from class and, in some cases, sent home from school for repeated violations of the policy. "This ID thing is killing us," Al Liggett told me one morning in November, three months into Dr. Warner's first year, as we encountered yet another student wandering the halls during first hour without one. I watched as Al approached the student. "Where's your ID?" The student shrugged. "No one at home to bring it up here?" He shook his head. "Got \$5 to get a temporary one from Ms. Henney?" The student grew hostile. "I ain't paying \$5 for a piece of paper! My daddy gets home at 8. She can call him to bring it." Al sighed. "Well, you can't stay out in the hall. There's nothing good for you out here, no learning going on, nothing that's going to help you with your future." The student turned away, sulking, and started walking toward the office. A few minutes later, we met another student in the same predicament. "No ID?" Al asked. "No one home?" The student shook his head. "But my brother may be sleeping," he offered. "Does he drive?" Al asked. "No," the student replied. "Do you have \$5?" He looked at Al skeptically. "Then you'll have to start walking. If you hurry, you can make it back before school lets out. You know every time you do this, it's an absence," Al reminded him. The boy sighed dejectedly, but he headed for the door, where I could hear heavy rain coming down. I asked Al where he lived, imagining how long it would take for him to get home. The situation seemed crazy to me. "Countryside," Al said, naming a subdivision I hadn't heard of. I asked where it was located. "Way out Forest Road, up towards Eastham. And he's got to walk through the 'hood to get there" (fieldnotes, 11-6-04). For a discussion of security measures commonly employed to "police" students in urban high schools, see Devine (1996).

skinny lockers—no one challenged Dr. Warner’s approach or tried to redirect the discussion. Instead, staff members launched oblique criticisms of one another by raising concerns about colleagues who had chosen not to enforce similar rules in previous years (fieldnotes, 8-23-04). These squabbles over rules actually hinted at deeper divisions within the staff that I would come to see as emblematic of Centerville’s culture. Understanding the nature of these divisions—and the dynamics that *produced* the school’s so-called culture of failure—eventually became the goal of this dissertation study.

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Dr. Warner was newly-hired at the time I made a series of preliminary visits to Centerville in the spring of 2004. Though I viewed myself as a novice ethnographer, I sought to establish relationships with Centerville staff members less for the sake of research than to establish a foundation for a federally-funded school-university partnership.<sup>7</sup> The partnership would provide context and support for Teachers for Tomorrow, a university program designed to prepare college undergraduates for careers in urban and under-resourced schools. As the program’s liaison to Centerville, I needed to develop firsthand knowledge of the district in order to support beginning teachers in

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<sup>7</sup> The partnership with Centerville was just one element in Teachers for Tomorrow, a program funded by a \$1.1 million Teacher Quality grant awarded to Professor Anne Ruggles Gere in 2002 by the U.S. Department of Education to support recruitment and retention of teachers for urban and under-resourced schools. TFT provided college undergraduates with a three-semester experience at the University of Michigan School of Education that complemented their regular teacher certification coursework. Students participated in a fall semester study group focused on explorations of personal identity and the Centerville school district; a winter semester English class focused on culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2001), imaginative exercises with multicultural literature, and ethnographic interactions in the Centerville community; and a final semester of student teaching in Centerville. TFT also provided discretionary money to fund professional development opportunities for teachers in Centerville. Central office administrators used this money to pay for workshops, keynote speakers, and staff members’ travel to out-of-state conferences.

their field experiences, but also in order to convince staff members that I and my university colleagues were trustworthy.

The need to establish trust arose directly out of tensions that surfaced during the first year of the partnership when I had not yet begun my role as university liaison. In anticipation of joining the project, I attended several meetings with members of the high school staff in the fall of 2003. Those initial meetings alerted me to the staff's heightened consciousness of Centerville students as a special population that presented challenges which most outsiders were not equipped to handle. During my first-ever visit to Centerville—for a late-summer planning meeting attended by a range of stakeholders from the school district and the university—staff members singled out previous generations of white preservice teachers for their behavior around Centerville students. “They were afraid to talk to our kids,” one veteran teacher said. “They treated them like monkeys in a cage. Their body language indicated that they didn’t want to teach in a school like this.”

I was struck by the protective quality of the teacher’s comment and by the race- and class-based tensions it underscored.<sup>8</sup> From the start of the meeting I had wondered

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<sup>8</sup> Like the aforementioned Centerville teacher, Ladson-Billings (2001) rightly emphasizes the limitations she has encountered in many white preservice teachers who enter into low-income and majority-minority teaching environments. “The prospective teachers with whom I have worked generally express a sincere desire to work with ‘all kinds of kids,’” she writes, “... but where is the evidence that the prospective teachers can get along with people different from themselves? When asked, most of my students admit that they have never gone to a movie or shared a meal or visited the home of a peer who is racially or culturally different. Some ... have worked in a soup kitchen or shelter or in other ‘helping roles’ with people different from themselves. But these brief forays into the lives of ‘others’ often serve to cement the impression that others are always needy and disadvantaged” (p. 82). When I took my first teaching job in Elizabeth, New Jersey, I could have been one of those prospective teachers Ladson-Billings writes about. My work with what we college students called “underprivileged youth” (and my work as a soup kitchen volunteer) while I was an undergraduate at Yale did not require me to interrogate the many assumptions and stereotypes I held about those “others,” despite my close relationships with them. Although I later became part of a group of Ivy League graduates recruited to teach in Elizabeth due to the district’s chronic teaching shortages, my education had not prepared me for the social, emotional, or political challenges of



uncomfortably about how the staff viewed me, a white woman brand-new to graduate school who had most recently taught in Eastham, a majority-white upper-middle-class suburban district only ten miles from Centerville. My discomfort led me to emphasize during whole-group introductions the ten years I had spent as a high school English teacher, including two years at an urban high school. I knew I was using my remarks to compensate for the liability that I perceived my suburban experience to be. Everyone in the room knew that the challenges in Eastham, where upwardly-mobile families flocked because of the impressive reputation of its schools, were nothing like those in Centerville, where some families went without heat in the winter. Given the race and class divide in the room, I believed that the staff saw me and my colleagues as similarly limited in our ability to work with Centerville students and teachers.<sup>9</sup>

When the TFT program director asked staff members to recommend resources to consult and areas to target in designing professional development sessions for district teachers, I learned more about staff members' concerns and preoccupations. The first book staff members named was Ruby Payne's *Framework for Understanding Poverty*.<sup>10</sup>

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that environment. Sleeter (2001) has also written extensively about the "cultural gap" that separates predominantly white middle-class teachers from low-income and minority students.

<sup>9</sup> While the racial differences between Centerville teachers and our group from the university were visibly apparent—over half of the Centerville staff members were black, but all of us from the university were white—class distinctions were less obvious. I include references to both categories, however, because I *felt* both as I observed the ways people dressed, talked, and interacted, and because throughout this dissertation I will attend to the role of race as well as class in my analysis of dynamics in Centerville. Race and class combined to shape the ways Centerville staff members viewed their students *and* the outsiders who came to visit, volunteer, and consult in their school district.

<sup>10</sup> Payne's (2001) book has been immensely popular among educators. Filled with anecdotes intended to illustrate the lifestyles, attitudes, and values of America's poor, the book presumes to demystify what Payne calls "Hidden Rules Among Classes" so that teachers can better meet the learning needs of students living in poverty. The centerpiece of Payne's material is a one-page chart that presents a comparative look at class-based attitudes of the poor, the middle-class, and the wealthy on a wide range of topics including money, food, clothing, time, and education. For example, the poor, she argues, value and revere education in the abstract but not as a reality, whereas middle-class people see education as crucial for climbing the success ladder and making money. Wealthy people see education as a necessary tradition for making and maintaining connections (p. 59). Payne wants educators to recognize "hidden rules of poverty" that can prevent poor students from learning and, at the same time, teach those students "middle-class values" that

Other staff members let us know they were about to begin working with a new curriculum at the high school called *Voices of Love and Freedom*<sup>11</sup> that focused on multicultural literature, character building, and problem solving. Teacher Neal Morton said he needed a theory of discipline and parent contact strategies, which had been holes in his teacher preparation program (fieldnotes, 8-19-03).

These comments spoke to the ways in which Centerville teachers made sense of the conditions in which they taught. They also hinted at the ways in which ideas about race and class informed teachers' meaning-making. Their praise for the Ruby Payne book and their use of a multicultural curriculum like *Voices* let us know that teachers were conscious of the influence of poverty and race on their work. At the same time, Neal's request for a theory of discipline and parent contact strategies signaled that all was not well in the interactions that occurred within Centerville between teachers, students, and families. Even as staff members gestured toward race and class as categories that shaped their interactions, it was less clear *how* understandings about race and class figured into their approaches to the students they served. In subsequent meetings we would continue to hear references to Centerville students as a special population with

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she argues are essential for success in school. For a general discussion of Payne's ideas, their appeal to teachers, and the vehement critiques of her work made by academics, see Paul Tough's June 10, 2007 article in the *New York Times* magazine, "The Class-Consciousness Raiser." I will discuss the ways Payne's ideas played out in Centerville in more detail in Chapter Two. For a very different look at a real-life family living in poverty, see Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's (2003) brilliant and compassionately written book, *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx*.

<sup>11</sup> According to the United States Conference of Mayors website, *Voices of Love and Freedom* "is a nonprofit educational organization that promotes a literature-based approach to literacy, values, and [violence] prevention. VLF helps students appreciate literature from around the world, develop their own voices as they learn to read and write, learn to use the values of love and freedom to guide their lives, and live healthy lives free of substance abuse and violence." The *Voices* program was developed in 1992 in response to crime- and drug-related problems that plagued Boston neighborhoods and public schools. *Voices* was adopted in the Boston Public Schools as a citywide model for character education and violence prevention. It has also been used in Memphis, New York City, and other urban schools across the country ([http://www.usmayors.org/bestpractices/bp98/09\\_1998\\_Preventing\\_School\\_Violence30.htm](http://www.usmayors.org/bestpractices/bp98/09_1998_Preventing_School_Violence30.htm), accessed 4-6-09).

unique needs, but no one spelled out exactly why the population was needy or what its needs were.

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The first university-sponsored professional development day occurred that fall in October. The morning session on strategies for teaching effectively in 90-minute “block” class periods was led by a young teacher-turned-consultant who, in the course of her presentation, made frequent references to her experiences teaching at an elite private school in the Detroit suburbs. Although some teachers dutifully participated in her activities, others sat talking and laughing in clusters throughout the Forum Room. Their resistant behavior made me uncomfortable. During an activity that required interaction with a partner, I met Sandra Altman, the new coordinator of grants at the high school. She looked around the Forum Room distractedly as we stood in the back and talked. I could tell from her frown that she was not pleased with how the session was going.

At lunch Sandra joined me and the others from the university to read through the feedback sheets. Most teachers made positive or neutral comments, but the negative ones stood out for their sarcastic and hostile tone. One teacher dismissed the session as “Education 101.” Another complained, “Not about our kids.” A third was bitter: “Experience? Private school? Not even close.” My university supervisor said that these comments came from outliers and encouraged us not to take them to heart (fieldnotes, 10-1-03). But all morning I had noticed a good number of teachers pointedly avoiding eye contact with the consultant. Few volunteered to answer her discussion questions. The comments on the feedback sheets indicated that her identity as a suburban teacher was at the heart of their resistance.

The afternoon session in the media center on strategies to prepare students for the state MEAP test<sup>12</sup> was no more successful. Led by a university professor who had conducted years of professional development with teachers in another Detroit suburb, the session was designed to help teachers explore the intellectual demands of the test. In order to demonstrate this approach, the professor brought a graduate student up to the front of the room who displayed test questions on overhead transparencies and talked through the logic behind his approach to answering them. Then teachers were asked to answer sample test questions themselves so they would have greater understanding of what the test asks from students.

From the talking in the back of the room, the number of teachers who got up to take breaks while presenters were speaking, and the blank stares on teachers' faces when presenters asked them questions, it was clear that the staff was even more checked-out than they had been in the morning. On the back of the handout I wrote notes from a hushed conversation between members of the university group during the break, including "disrespectful audience" and "don't worry, I'm used to it" (fieldnotes, 10-1-03). I was relieved when I had to leave Centerville early that day and dubious about the viability of the partnership.

A couple of weeks later we received a terse email from Sandra confirming that staff members had been frustrated by the professional development day. Summarizing discussion at a staff meeting, Sandra wrote, "The following is a list of the ideas and comments staff came up with for professional development at Centerville." Among other

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<sup>12</sup> The MEAP, or Michigan Educational Assessment Program, is the Michigan Department of Education's high-stakes test used to measure student achievement and hold public schools accountable under No Child Left Behind. Centerville students regularly scored around 20 to 30 percentage points below the state average on the MEAP in English language arts and math, as reported in the district's 2004-05, 2005-06, and 2006-07 annual reports.

things, teachers requested MEAP tutoring for students, help with curriculum development that parallels MEAP assessment, and help working with special needs students. The list then broadened into more general recommendations: “Don’t bring us theory, bring us what is happening in the real world ... Visit our school/classrooms and make observations about our school and determine what our needs are ... Speakers should have ‘same experience’ and work with or have knowledge of students like the students at Centerville.” On a more cryptic note, the last line read, “No grad student philosophy” (email, 10-15-03).

Despite my supervisor’s previous reassurances, this was loud amplification of the message we had received from the initial “outliers.” The tension that had been hinted at in the planning sessions was in full force now. While I appreciated Centerville teachers’ frustration and saw merit in their claim that presenters should have some understanding of the students and the conditions in Centerville, when I thought back on their behavior during our visit, I secretly questioned their professionalism. I kept thinking about their emphasis on the importance of experience with and knowledge of students like the ones in Centerville. What was it that made work with Centerville students so different? Centerville teachers seemed to *expect* outsiders to be out of touch with the realities of their schools. The worst thing possible, I was learning, was to be perceived as someone who didn’t “get it.” But figuring out exactly *what* outsiders failed to get—and exactly what kind of help Centerville people needed, given the range of issues their students presented—was still not clear.

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In a quick aside with Sandra before the start of the next professional development workshop in November, I acknowledged the concerns she had raised in the email, but I told her I was uncomfortable with the idea of us as university people coming in and “diagnosing” Centerville’s problems.<sup>13</sup> As teachers began to arrive in the media center, Sandra tried to explain the motivation behind their request: asking us to visit and determine their needs was a way of inviting us in. “We need help *seeing* these kids,” she said (fieldnotes, 11-11-03). There wasn’t time in the moment to ask her to explain what she meant about needing help “seeing.” Like so many remarks Centerville people made in passing, this one came with layers of implied meaning that went unexplained.

And yet Sandra’s comment shifted something in my understanding of the school-university dynamic. The staff’s critique of university-led professional development had pointed to an external problem located in the failure of outsiders to understand the needs of Centerville teachers, given the challenges presented by Centerville students. In contrast, Sandra’s comment about needing help “seeing these

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<sup>13</sup> Despite my years of experience as a high school teacher, I didn’t feel qualified to weigh in on what I saw in this new setting. Maybe it was self-consciousness about having taught in the suburbs, maybe it was insecurity as a new graduate student, or maybe it was anxiety about the tensions rippling through the partnership, but I felt profoundly inhibited in the role of professional development provider. Being asked to speak explicitly to the needs of low-income and minority students made me deeply uncomfortable. In hindsight I might say that I resisted essentializing these students, but at the time I was filled with self-loathing at what I perceived to be my race- and class-based hang-ups. My discomfort led directly to the stance I later took as an ethnographer—listening more than talking, attempting to withhold judgment, and striving to see things from Centerville people’s points of view rather than my own (Agar, 1980; Zaharlick, 1992). While my listening stance made me a better ethnographer and ultimately enabled me to develop deep, lasting, and meaningful connections with many people in Centerville, I still struggle to step out of my listening role in order to speak and write with authority about the nature of conditions there, even as people like Sandra wait expectantly to read my interpretations. I mention this struggle in order to acknowledge that the authority to represent others is not conferred to or assumed automatically by those who write from a position in the academy. Research authority is sometimes hard-won, particularly for first-generation academics like me, and it can be riddled with internal conflicts, ambivalences, and doubts on the part of the researcher. For a discussion of the tensions and dilemmas that may infuse the work of representing “others” for audiences in the academy, see Behar (1993).

kids” suggested that there was also an internal problem which had to do with teachers’ own perceptions of students. But what was it that Centerville teachers could not see?

In the weeks following the November workshop, I didn’t hear anything more from my supervisor about the Centerville project. Only in January did I learn that the high school staff had pulled out of the professional development piece of the partnership. The reason given was that Centerville’s most recent MEAP scores had come in and once again were extremely low, so the staff needed to focus its efforts on intensive MEAP test preparation. Although I was relieved, I knew there was more to the story. While we from the university may have failed to provide adequate professional development, in the mixed messages Centerville teachers sent us about the *kinds* of help they needed—with discipline and parent contact, with MEAP testing, with “seeing” kids—they revealed the extent to which they did not have a unified understanding of the problems they faced, the dynamics that caused those problems, or the interventions that were needed.

In my mind, taking up the staff’s call to visit Centerville and learn more about what I began calling “the culture of the school” (email, 5-14-04) was vital if we hoped to mend the strained partnership. In June I made a series of visits to Centerville, starting with a meeting in Sandra’s office where she reiterated that professional development providers in the fall “had not been in touch with kids’ needs” (fieldnotes, 6-2-04).<sup>14</sup> As I

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<sup>14</sup> It would be easy to omit from the narrative just how uncomfortable that June meeting was, but to do so would be to downplay the challenges involved in cultivating ethnographic relationships and to avoid acknowledging the complex choices involved in constructing an ethnographic account (Behar, 1996; Luttrell, 2000; Tedlock, 1991). When we met in June, Sandra was understandably wary and distant with me. She had postponed our meeting for several weeks after I contacted her in May, and she responded slowly to messages I sent over email. When I finally sat down to talk with her face to face, I sensed there was damage I needed to undo *and* that I needed to prove that I had something to offer. This put me in an awkward and delicate position. On the one hand, I needed to listen to Sandra’s frustrations and validate her criticisms of our professional development work in the fall. On the other hand, in order to align myself with Sandra, I ran the risk of criticizing the same university team that had provided me with the opportunity to work for TFT in the first place. These shifting forms of self-positioning heightened my

explained my plan to learn about those needs by visiting the school on a regular and predictable basis,<sup>15</sup> Sandra grew more receptive to the idea that I might also provide help as staff members worked to write new curriculum and design new courses. Thus began my multifaceted role as a researcher in Centerville—part university liaison, part curriculum consultant, part ethnographer. Later my work in Centerville expanded to include mentoring new teachers, tutoring students in the Writing Center, co-sponsoring a school club, and proctoring the MEAP test. These were natural tasks for me to take on as a participant-observer, arising out of my experience as a former teacher as well as my desire to make myself useful to staff members and students.

The ambiguity of my work created confusion for people in Centerville, however, as I sought to establish myself as a member of their school community. Each time I met a new person, I explained my presence by talking about the university partnership and my hope that by learning about the school, I could help channel resources and more effective forms of professional development support to teachers. In truth, I wasn't sure what my

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consciousness of the baggage that accompanied my university affiliation, at the same time that affiliation provided me with immense professional freedom. Over the next several years, I often felt torn between Centerville and the university. I also experienced shifting alliances: at first it was a relief to escape meetings in Centerville and return home to Ann Arbor. As time went by, however, I came to prefer the intensity of fieldwork in Centerville. I will talk further in Chapter One about the difficulty I ultimately had in leaving Centerville and the ways in which I experienced my own version of “going native” there.

<sup>15</sup> In the fall of 2004, I established that schedule, visiting the school in the mornings three days a week and occasionally coming back at night for special events like school plays, drumline competitions, and school board meetings. Halfway through the 2004-05 school year, I also began visiting the school one afternoon a week to help facilitate a writing club. I maintained this schedule throughout 2005-06. During 2006-07, I made daily visits to the school, staying late every Tuesday for the regular staff meeting and returning in the evenings twice a month for board meetings along with events like football, basketball, and volleyball games, the Black History Month celebration, the school talent and fashion show, honors night, and graduation. In the end I spent over 1000 hours in participant-observation at Centerville, and I wrote more than 4000 pages of fieldnotes. As a researcher coming to ethnography from the field of education, I was acutely aware of the expectations that accompany traditional ethnographic fieldwork, and I wanted to meet those expectations in order to ensure that my work would be viewed as more than “educational travel writing” (Wolcott, 2002a). Therefore I sought intensity and immersion in Centerville, and I strove to cultivate a long-term relationship with the site and its people. I will discuss my research methodology in greater detail in Chapter One. See Appendix A for a sample of the log I kept which documented the date of each visit to Centerville, the length of my stay, and notes on significant events. See Appendix B for a chronology of the phases of my fieldwork.



role was. I wrote fieldnotes each day because I took my commitment to learning about the school's culture seriously and I saw recordkeeping as a way to demonstrate to my supervisor that I was doing my job.<sup>16</sup> But I also knew that I would very likely write about the school someday as part of my graduate work. I felt conflicted about my dual motivations, but I couldn't find a way to explain the research side of my interest in Centerville when I didn't have a research question and hadn't yet figured out what I wanted to research.

Due to this ambiguity, interactions with Centerville staff members played on my inner conflicts throughout my time in the field. For example, the first time I talked with Al Ligget, my security guard friend, he questioned me about my role. "Now are you here as an observer, or are you writing your thesis, or what?" he asked. Later that morning when I thanked him for talking to me, he laughed. "As long as I'm not quoted in the *Ann Arbor News*, I'm cool with that!" (fieldnotes, 6-8-04). At times students wanted to know who I was and what I was doing in Centerville. "Are you training to be a security guard?" a boy asked me once as I followed Al on his rounds to various classrooms

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<sup>16</sup> I also began clipping newspaper articles about Centerville from the *Ann Arbor News* in the spring of 2004. Eventually I became a regular reader of reporting on Centerville by three newspapers: the *Ann Arbor News*, the *Wilmington Courier* (which was delivered to the school in several free bundles every Thursday), and the *Wilmington Community News*, assembling an archive containing hundreds of articles during the next six years. (Wilmington is the name of the city in which the Centerville School District is located). While I have not worked with that news archive directly in the context of this dissertation (and I hope to weave an analysis of news coverage of the district into my future writing about Centerville), my awareness of local reporting on Centerville proved to be an important element of my fieldwork, preparing me to have conversations with staff members not just about articles, but about events in the community that I wouldn't have otherwise known about. This awareness of local news was important to support staff members like Lynn Nation: it distinguished me in her eyes from many of the teachers, but it also revealed underlying tensions between staff members who lived in the community and those who lived elsewhere. "The teachers will, you know, they will talk about it, they'll pick up a little information here and there from the kids," she said, noting how little some staff members knew about events in their students' lives. "But other than that, I don't even know if they even read the Wilmington press. I don't even know if they read our paper ... You see [the newspapers] sit over there, we throw them in the trash can. I mean *we* read them. Some of the kids come in here and read them ... They *should* read the newspaper. They would at least find out what's going on in the community" (interview, 2-13-07).

(fieldnotes, 10-5-05).<sup>17</sup> Near the end of my second year when I began approaching administrators about the possibility of writing my dissertation about school culture in Centerville, assistant principal Elijah Davis cautioned me about the need to clarify my purpose with teachers. “The first question they are going to ask is, who is she and what does she want from us? What they’re likely to say,” he added gently, “is she’s just using us to get her degree.”

I was prepared for these forms of wariness and distrust, which are well-documented in ethnographic and qualitative research literature, but they still discouraged me.<sup>18</sup> Mr. Davis put into words things I knew about my relationships with Centerville staff members but didn’t want to admit. I *did* need them to get my degree. And though I thought I was coming to know and be known by them after spending two years in the building, outside of a few people, the Centerville staff still didn’t know much about me. “They may be used to seeing you,” Mr. Davis said, “but they don’t *know* you. They

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<sup>17</sup> Confusion over my ambiguous role continued even into my third year in Centerville. When Sandra Altman asked me to help out by proctoring the MEAP test, Trina Gallagher, the staff member I was assigned to work with but did not know well, regarded me warily. “So are you a teacher here now?” she asked skeptically (fieldnotes, 3-14-07). Our work together led to another set of awkward negotiations, in that even though I was ostensibly the outsider in the room, I took the lead in proctoring the test because I sensed it was what Trina wanted. Despite the awkwardness it caused, opportunities like this one proved to be extremely significant in my ability to win staff members’ trust, even in the late stages of fieldwork. A week after we proctored the MEAP test together, Trina came to my friend Al Ligget and told him, “You know who’s cool around here? That lady from U of M. We should get her to teach up in here!” (fieldnotes, 3-21-07).

<sup>18</sup> My reading of sophisticated ethnographic accounts by others led me to *expect* to encounter wariness and distrust in Centerville people at the time of my arrival, and then again at the moment when I proposed a research project. Still, it was hard to manage distrust when I encountered it directly. Although I later came to form close relationships with a variety of people in Centerville, I realize that my sense of their trust in me even now may be an illusion. Duneier (1999) spent an entire summer doing fieldwork among New York City sidewalk vendors and never realized the suspicions some of them harbored toward him until the fieldwork had ended and he listened to audio recordings made on site during the summer. Similarly, Whyte (1996) did not realize until years later that his key informant had ambivalent feelings about him and had objected to some of the things Whyte published about him. Despite the disappointment that may accompany such realizations, a lack of complete trust does not necessarily prevent the researcher from doing high quality, in-depth work. “Participant observers need not be fully trusted in order to have their presence at least accepted,” Duneier writes. “We may *feel* fully trusted and accepted by colleagues and ‘friends,’ but full acceptance is difficult to measure by objective standards and a rarity in any case” (p. 338).

don't know why you're here." Though he had been a guest speaker in our university teacher education class at my invitation, a staff member to whom I had turned for help in starting a writing club, and a friendly face throughout my time in Centerville, I discovered during our conversation that Mr. Davis was just as unclear about my purpose for being in the building as the teachers. "So why did you start coming here?" he asked. After I explained the origins of the school-university partnership, the interest I had developed in school culture, and my desire to do research that would be of some use to the school, he told me he applauded me for the work I wanted to do. But no matter how encouraging Mr. Davis was that day, when I looked ahead to the effort it would take to win the staff's trust, I felt as uncomfortable and self-conscious as when I had introduced myself to district stakeholders on my first visit to Centerville (fieldnotes, 6-5-06).

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The boundaries between fieldwork and daily living are often blurry for ethnographers. When the field is located close to home, when its environment and people are familiar, and when encounters with participants extend beyond the field site itself to include phone calls and social get-togethers, it can become difficult to discern the limits of fieldwork boundaries.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, while working in Centerville, I sometimes wondered where my need to make sense of personal experiences ended and where my so-

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<sup>19</sup> I regularly experienced the fluid boundaries of "the field" during my work in Centerville. While Centerville was "somewhere else" relative to my home, it was not geographically far. And yet life in Centerville did feel removed and distant from life in Ann Arbor. If no great journey or exotic border crossing was involved, could I still call the work I did there fieldwork? Similarly, if a Centerville staff member called me at home, ran into me on the street at the Wilmont Heritage Festival, or emailed me, was that just another moment in my everyday life, or was it fieldwork? Clifford's (1997) notion of the field "as a habitus rather than a place, a cluster of embodied dispositions and practices" (p. 69) helped me to see my work in Centerville as a legitimate manifestation of shifting and expanding conceptions of fieldwork and the field. Similarly, Gupta and Ferguson (1997) helped me by explaining the need to conceive of fieldwork in terms of "shifting locations rather than bounded fields," arguing that since much of the best new work in the discipline challenges existing conventions of "field" and "fieldwork," there is value in continued interrogation of those conventions (p. 38-39).

called research agenda began, particularly when I spent so much time thinking, talking, and writing about my fieldwork—sometimes late at night in my kitchen, sometimes during university meetings, and sometimes in parking lots where I would I stop to jot notes for an hour before I got home and lost the details of an important conversation. Thinking about the ways in which Centerville teachers navigated the challenges of their school environment was equally a matter of thinking about how *I* had managed when I taught in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and how I might fare if I were to begin teaching in Centerville, given the struggles I had witnessed among teachers there.<sup>20</sup>

I continued to write fieldnotes as my second year of fieldwork unfolded, but by then they were less to share with my supervisor in the TFT program than to make sense of what was happening to me as I interacted with a growing number of people, both in Centerville and back at the university, and formed more complex and entangled relationships. Sometimes my fieldnotes were handwritten scribbles on a napkin or a piece of scrap paper; sometimes they were elaborated into typed-up memos. Sometimes my notes contained recreated conversations written in the form of a script; sometimes

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<sup>20</sup> During her fieldwork in a community of elderly Jews, Myerhoff (1978) often asked herself whether that work was anthropology or personal quest. I felt a similar conflation of personal and professional motives while doing fieldwork in Centerville. Not only had I abandoned my job as an urban schoolteacher in Elizabeth after just two short years by fleeing from a school like Centerville to teach somewhere “better,” my entire elementary and secondary schooling experience had been predicated on an escape from urban and under-resourced schools like those in Centerville. When a federally-mandated desegregation order was imposed in 1975 on the Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky, I was a child in kindergarten. Fearing what I would experience if I was bused to a majority-black school, my parents moved our family to a majority-white rural community outside of Louisville. Working in Centerville caused me to grapple deeply with the ways in which my education and my life experience have been shaped by “white flight.” My parents’ choice enabled me to attain an extremely high-quality public education at one of the best public high schools in the state, and yet that choice also placed me in an environment where I could be complacent about racial inequities and oblivious about white privilege (McIntosh, 1989). I continue to grapple with questions and misgivings related to these issues as I make schooling choices for my own son, and as I reflect on my implication in racial injustices that have plagued American public schools for many decades.

they read more like confessional diary entries.<sup>21</sup> My notes became increasingly detailed as I gained experience doing ethnography, but they also became increasingly private as I recorded a growing number of personal confessions from staff members who were truly struggling to cope in Centerville.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time I went about my personal fieldwork, however, I was slowly and awkwardly being drawn into a more overt research role through my interactions with

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<sup>21</sup> These variations in the content and form of my fieldnotes resemble both the blurring of genres familiar to contemporary ethnographers (Behar, 1999; Wacquant, 2004) and the complexity of fieldnote writing as a practice. Sanjek (1990) describes the great range of content that can be found in an ethnographer's fieldnotes, from "scratch notes" to transcribed text, diaries, letters, lists, descriptions, and photographs. Jackson (1990) details the ambivalence which with ethnographers tend to regard their fieldnotes and the emotion often attached to them, especially since fieldnotes provide the site where an ethnographer "must work out one's relationship to the field, to the natives, and to one's mind and emotions" (p. 29).

<sup>22</sup> I wrote fieldnotes diligently during or after every visit to Centerville, following many of the processes and conventions outlined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). Typically I would engage in a conversation with a staff member, then retreat immediately to some quiet place in the school to write it up, and then emerge for the next conversation. Usually I wrote fieldnotes in the media center or at a table in the empty cafeteria, but I also wrote notes in the teachers' lounge, in the front waiting area of the main office, and at the table in the back of the office by the mailboxes. Sometimes I strategically posted myself in public locations around the office so that I could be present to listen in on conversations that might go on around me while I wrote notes. Other times I retreated to my car or left the building if I had just finished an intense conversation and I needed to be sure I had no interruptions while reconstructing it.

I carried many pages of blank looseleaf paper in a clear plastic file envelope each day, along with my tape recorder and extra batteries. In writing up fieldnotes, I would go through reams of paper, first getting down key phrases from a conversation, and then going back to record the conversation chronologically as it unfolded. I paid close attention to turns of talk, always striving to record my contributions as well as those of the person I was talking to. Methodologically I wanted to be sure of what I was contributing to conversations about school culture, and I also wanted to mark my reactions to comments and events in case they proved to be important later for the story or for my analysis. Sometimes conversations were so long and complicated that it took me an hour to write up what had transpired in 20 minutes. In certain cases, I used numbers to reorder parts of the conversation more accurately after I had written it, or I drew arrows to insert details about people's facial expressions, tone, or gestures alongside their words. Like MacLeod (1995), I learned to hold conversations in my mind until, with practice, I could reconstruct much of what was said word for word in script form.

Despite these efforts, a great deal got left out of my fieldnotes. I paid so much attention to conversations in Centerville that I usually neglected to attend to setting. I failed to record sensory details that would have helped me do a better job of evoking scenes when I went to write them up years later. Seasonal details would have helped me do a better job of using these scenes to portray chronological changes over time. Also, in the rush to get down the essence of an exchange, I usually neglected to elaborate on what the scene meant to me or to note aspects that seemed especially significant. I mentally noted these things, but much of my sense-making took place in "headnotes" (Sanjek, 1990) rather than in literal fieldnotes.

I wish I had done more sketches in my fieldnotes. I wish I had tried to write more evocatively and poetically. My fieldnotes were a coping mechanism for me, however, as much as they were a data collection device. I lived my experiences a second time when I wrote them in fieldnotes; therefore, my notes reveal what was important to me in the moment, possibly in ways I still cannot see. For sample pages from my fieldnotes, see Appendix C.

Saundra. Though much of our work together during my first year had focused on supporting Centerville's beginning teachers and helping to launch a program that placed our college students as tutors in the Writing Center, Saundra kept me apprised of the school's ongoing reform efforts under the auspices of High Schools That Work. Despite Dr. Warner's crackdown on student behavior and despite frequent professional development messages from HSTW about raising expectations, by the fall of the second year, the staff hadn't made much progress in finding ways to increase student achievement. At times, staff members seemed to work against each other.<sup>23</sup> Frank Simpson, the new athletic director, told me that teachers as well as parents had complained when he introduced a policy that required all student athletes to have academic progress reports signed on a weekly basis (fieldnotes, 10-5-05). I watched teachers recoil as Dr. Warner grew increasingly angry, launching into frequent public tirades about the shortcomings of Centerville students and their parents.<sup>24</sup>

Students took note of this hostile dynamic, interpreting it as a problem that encompassed more than Dr. Warner's outbursts. Teachers, students, and support staff

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<sup>23</sup> Teacher Roz Nelson made this same observation a year and a half later: "Sometimes it feels like we're fighting ourselves," she said (fieldnotes, 1-31-07). Saundra Altman agreed with her: "You'd need a psychologist to understand the group dynamics here," she joked (fieldnotes, 4-3-07). Staff division later surfaced as a key theme in my analysis of Centerville's culture. I will discuss the nature of the staff's divisions throughout the dissertation, but I will give particular attention to the reasons for that division when I analyze the concept of "toxicity" in Chapter Two.

<sup>24</sup> One such tirade occurred on a morning when I was helping a teacher to run photocopies in the main office. As the copy machine did its work, the teacher greeted Dr. Warner. "How you doing, Doc?" she said. "I'd be doing a lot better if I had some help around here," he fumed. "What help do you need?" she asked. "It's these parents! They need a wakeup call. I don't know how you get this far in life living this way. This morning I saw a 14-year-old boy who weighs 300 pounds. Where were his parents? What world are they living in? Not the world I come from." While Dr. Warner ranted, teacher Reggie Bridges came by to check his mailbox. He stood with his back to Doc and listened with a concerned look on his face. When I left the office, I saw the 300-pound boy. He had been sitting just a few feet away from us in the nurse's office the entire time, his leg propped up on a chair. Later that morning I met Reggie in the hallway, and I told him how conflicted I felt not speaking up about Doc's rants. "I tell myself, the man is 75 years old," Reggie said. "But this is unacceptable. Does he not think? Does he not realize that what he says affects people?" (fieldnotes, 11-2-05).

were all involved, creating and sustaining hostility in the course of their daily interactions. At a meeting of the TFT study group, a college student who had been working in Centerville that fall as a tutor brought in a poem that a teacher had shared with her. Without ever using the term school culture, which had been bandied about in initial conversations with HSTW consultants a year earlier, the student's poem raised serious questions about the daily environment in Centerville and its effects on student learning:<sup>25</sup>

### **Who Runs Centerville?**

Centerville Centerville  
Who runs the Ville?  
Do the teachers run the Ville?  
Do the students run the Ville?

Standing in the hallways you hear a big ol' bear  
You feel hot breadth like the sun on the back of your neck  
When you turn around you see Roughhouse  
With a mean old stare  
You can see the mean glare in his eyes  
He hollering "pulls your pants up!"  
People just turn and stare.

Centerville Centerville  
Who runs the Ville?  
Do the teachers run the Ville?  
Do the students run the Ville?

In the classroom it is like a football field  
Loud cheers and roars everywhere  
The classroom smells like the boys' locker room  
The kids act like wild animals  
They don't listen or pay attention  
They just keep on doing as they please  
And keep on pissing of teacher

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<sup>25</sup> The poem appears here exactly as it was typed on the student's paper. I have preserved the small number of typing and grammatical errors, but I replaced the school's name and "Roughhouse's" name with pseudonyms.

The teacher try and try but they always fail  
That's why some of the students always fail

Centerville Centerville  
Who runs the Ville?  
Do the teachers run the Ville?  
Do the students run the Ville?  
(fieldnotes, 10-14-05)

While one might read this poem as nothing more than a student's exaggerations, I saw countless interactions that confirmed his account of adults yelling at students to pull up their pants, of students "pissing off" teachers, and of adults giving up. Dr. Warner may have helped set the tone for these teacher-student conflicts—he often repeated statistics to me about the disproportionate number of ninth graders who had been enrolled in special education or socially promoted from middle school, followed by comments about Centerville's "culture of deprivation"<sup>26</sup>—but plenty of other adults engaged in similar forms of student disparagement.

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<sup>26</sup> Out of 228 ninth graders, Dr. Warner said that 54 were certified as special education students and 50 had been socially promoted from the middle school. "That says something about the culture of deprivation here," he said (fieldnotes, 9-16-05). (See O'Connor and DeLuca Fernandez (2006) for a discussion of how schools situate minority youths as academically and behaviorally deficient, thus placing them at greater risk for assignment to special education classes). Sandra reported that Dr. Warner invoked the concept of cultural deprivation even when he was still new to Centerville. "He talks a lot about cultural deprivation," she told me as we chatted after a summer curriculum meeting at her house. "His message is, you can't continue to hide behind the race card" (fieldnotes, 7-19-04). Dr. Warner told the *Ann Arbor News* earlier that same month that cultural deprivation was to blame for the high number of special education students he had encountered in Detroit Public Schools: "Sometimes it was cultural deprivation ... parents who knew nothing and couldn't teach them anything. A lot of things are missing from their lives that some of us as parents forgot to do." Though Dr. Warner was himself African American, his comment about "hiding behind the race card" showed that he viewed black students in Centerville as deprived in ways that he wasn't, largely due to their lower class status.

While I hesitate to mark Centerville staff members racially, given the arbitrary and socially-constructed nature of racial markers (cf. Pollock (2004) on the mutability of racial identity), and while it is never my intention to suggest that participants' racial identities *determined* their viewpoints, comments like the ones I've presented from Dr. Warner raise questions about how race—of both students and staff members—*did* at times play a role in shaping adult perceptions. I will present this argument in extensive detail in Chapter Four. When I do identify staff members racially in this dissertation, I base my identifications on the comments staff members made about themselves in the context of conversations with me about their lives and their experiences in Centerville. For a comprehensive list of staff members and the racial identities I ascribed to them, see Appendix D.



Meanwhile, a small group of teachers had been assigned to look at school culture directly as part of their work with HSTW.<sup>27</sup> The product of their first year of work together was a list of five rules that they brought to the staff for approval during an inservice workshop with HSTW consultant Joan Dunmore in the spring of 2005.<sup>28</sup> Teacher Tina Olsen led the group's presentation, explaining their hope that coming to agreement on five basic rules would "change our whole culture." The rules included treating others with respect, reporting to class on time, coming to class prepared, adhering to the school's code of conduct, and doing your best original work the first time, every time. Tina noted that the group saw agreement on those rules as a way "to have higher standards" in the building.

When Joan opened up the floor for discussion, group member Louise Tolbert said she had discussed the proposed rules with her students that morning, and they wondered why teachers gave students so many second chances. Noting the common practice of rescheduling detentions that students skipped, Louise recommended that administrators automatically suspend students the following day if they didn't show up for detention. Teachers responded enthusiastically, but a few argued over the details: How could they be sure that administrators would enforce the policy? Who would call home to let parents know of the scheduled suspension? Why should students get a day off from school for being irresponsible? How much extra paperwork was this going to create?

Later that afternoon I asked teacher Shaun Coleman his opinion of how the work with HSTW was going. He said the problem was that groups were expected to boil down

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<sup>27</sup> To promote participation and involvement, each teacher had been assigned to work on a focus team, one of which was dedicated to school policy and culture. Other HSTW focus teams included Literacy, Numeracy, Student Advisory, Ninth Grade Transition, and Data and Assessment.

<sup>28</sup> All consultants mentioned by name in this study, with the exception of nationally-known consultant and author Glenn Singleton, are represented by pseudonyms.

hours of brainstorming and conversation into a fifteen-minute presentation, and then staff members were expected to vote on major policy changes on the spot. “There’s no deliberation or discussion,” he said. “They’re not willing to take the time to really look at these things.” Shaun also expressed concern about the staff’s emphasis on discipline. “Did you see the body language when Ms. Olsen and Ms. Tolbert’s committee proposed automatic suspension for students who skip detention? It was like, rah! Take back control!” He pantomimed pumping his fist in the air. “This emphasis on discipline has hijacked our dialogue.” Shaun wondered why staff members weren’t talking about their relationships with students or what they were doing in the classroom (fieldnotes, 5-12-05).

While the five rules were quickly adopted and posted throughout the school, the suspension policy never really took hold. Like Shaun, I wondered why school culture work had come to focus exclusively on discipline. But then through a chance conversation with Sandra five months later, I discovered that something had begun to shift in a small group of teachers’ thinking about school culture. Sandra wanted my role to shift as well, which raised another round of thorny questions for me about my purpose in the building and the role of research in my ability to contribute something to Centerville.

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One day in October when I stopped in the Writing Center, Sandra mentioned that she and a group of four colleagues (including Reggie Bridges, Tina Olsen, Shaun Coleman, and teacher Kate Seabrook) had just come back from Charleston, South Carolina where they had attended an entire conference focused on school culture.

Saundra told me that during the trip, their group had come to the conclusion that culture in Centerville was “toxic.” We laughed at her choice of words. “Basically it stinks!” she said. “Something’s rotten in the state of Denmark!”

Although Saundra didn’t specify what she meant by toxic, I had been in the building long enough to understand the shorthand meanings embedded in such a term. All I had to do was think back on the student poem “Who Runs Centerville?” or recall Dr. Warner’s many outbursts in front of students. Saundra explained that she and her colleagues (who I came to refer to as the Charleston group) now wanted to engage the entire staff in a different approach to examining and improving school culture, but they worried that teachers didn’t have the tools to address culture issues. The group needed help. “And then I thought, who’s been observing us?” She looked at me and nodded. “Jennifer has.”

Saundra said that I had a different pair of eyes and that teachers could benefit from my observations. “I think people have gotten comfortable enough with you being around. You’ve laid the groundwork. At this point you could be a real asset to the team. You’re so insightful, and you take your work here so seriously.” Saundra imagined that as the staff got started in a wider conversation about school culture, I could be present to provide observations and help guide the discussion. At the same time, I could share some of the data that I had been gathering. “I know you’ve been writing things about us,” she said. “You have artifacts we need! You have data we can use!”

Here was my chance, I thought, to put fieldnotes to use and finally *do* something with all my thoughts, observations, and questions. I felt excited and inspired to be invited in on work that was just beginning. But even as I considered Saundra’s idea, I was filled

with hesitancy and caution. Who actually wanted me to become involved? And what actually could I do? How could I distill something useful for the group out of pages of notes that no one had explicitly given me permission to write, notes that showed more about the idiosyncrasies of my daily movements than any systematic evaluation of building culture? I was both flattered and afraid. My anxiety increased as Sandra began to question me. “What exactly have you written?” she asked. “Have you formulated a position?”

I fumbled as I explained the handful of course papers I had written as assignments for graduate classes. I added that mostly what I did was collect stories and anecdotes so that we could use Centerville as a backdrop in our discussions of urban teaching in TFT; it wasn't about forming a position. I wondered how much I even understood about the place. Mostly I just spent a lot of time walking around the halls with Al Ligget. “I know you do,” Sandra replied. “What have you learned?” I told her that I had grown intensely aware of my whiteness.

Sandra didn't linger on my ambivalences or pick up on my reference to race. Instead she shifted the conversation to the risk of introducing one more item that could take attention away from the staff's focus on raising student achievement by improving classroom instruction. I thought back to the series of professional development workshops I had attended on literacy and numeracy. Moving into conversations about school culture—whatever that entailed—seemed likely to take the staff in a very different direction. Sandra said the Charleston group hoped to tie work on school culture into work the staff was already doing. They worried, though, about how it would go over. “Teachers don't have the tools to address culture,” she explained.

Saundra didn't explain why she expected the staff to resist or what tools teachers lacked, but she did emphasize the Charleston group's belief that a focus on culture was essential to making change in the building. "These folks made a conscious decision to pursue this, but they're going to have to sell it to the staff. They're convinced that our failure to understand our building culture is at the root of our kids not being successful. If we don't focus on this, none of the rest of it will get better" (fieldnotes, 10-19-05).

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I share these layers of back story on the evolving conversation about school culture in Centerville and on my shifting forms of involvement at the school for a number of reasons. Partly I want to call attention to the gray areas around research ethics by raising questions about where research begins, especially for educational ethnographers who often gain access to field sites indirectly as they go about the tasks of coordinating school-university partnerships or supervising student teachers. I also want to call into question the nature of institutional sanctions for research. If permission to conduct research comes from the university's Institutional Review Board three years after one first sets foot in one's research site—as mine did—does that mean that the previous three years of experience are off-limits in the larger analysis?<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> I have no good answer to this question, other than to say that I understand it as an ethical dilemma of the kind that inevitably arises in the course of doing research. I will argue, however, that ethical dilemmas need to be interpreted and evaluated in the context of a particular project and field site. In my third year of fieldwork, Centerville people frequently expressed appreciation for depth of understanding I had developed of their school. In order to bring that understanding to bear on this study, I had to draw on experiences I had and material I collected before I received official permission to conduct research. I began forming understandings of Centerville from the moment I set foot in the district, and my work is richer for having a record of patterned beliefs and interactions that extends back for multiple years. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) acknowledge that ethical dilemmas are inevitable in the course of doing research, and they go on to identify the gulf that exists between "procedural ethics" as established by Institutional Review Boards and what they call "ethics in practice." To address this gulf, they advocate that researchers adopt a reflexive research stance which requires them to engage in "a continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation, not just in relation to the research methods and the data but also to the researcher, participants, and the research context" (p. 275). That is the stance I have tried to take in relation to this

I have chosen to tell the story of my work on school culture by drawing on key moments *throughout* my many years in Centerville, as shown in this introduction, even moments that occurred before I knew what I was researching. Patterns often fall into place—or get imposed—when one looks back over experience retrospectively, and those patterns can aid in the telling of a more complex and textured story. Particularly in the case of school culture in Centerville, patterns took years to build; my account shows the slow and halting process by which a group of staff members came to grips with the nature of “toxic” patterns in particular and then sought ways to intervene and change them. The fact that I was present as staff members surfaced the problem of toxic school culture and began to grapple with it deepens my understanding of their experience as well as the power and validity of their retrospective accounts.

Finally, I want to complicate naïve assumptions about the contributions that research can make to the lives of participants. Though I never sought to do action research in Centerville, I did tell many people there that I hoped my work would do some good in the school and would be of some use to people.<sup>30</sup> Having finally reached the stage of writing up that work, I now have a far more humble idea of what research can do. What follows in this dissertation is an in-depth look at how a building full of people made sense of their school’s culture, constructed a collective self-concept based on their beliefs and assumptions about students, and, in the case of the Charleston group, pursued

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project. For a detailed discussion of the ways in which qualitative researchers in education have wrestled with issues of ethics, see Deyhle, Hess, and LeCompte (1992). For a provocative discussion of issues of ethics in representing research “others,” see Appleman (2003) and Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2000).<sup>30</sup> And Centerville people were fairly responsive to this message. When I explained my project to Shaun Coleman, he affirmed the value it could have for staff members. “Your project could be good for the school. The topic is something people would actually want to know about” (fieldnotes, 9-12-06). Similarly, when I introduced myself to school board member Jacqui Ford and explained the nature of my work in the building, she too jumped on the idea that my work could be of use to them. “You may be able to help us,” she said (fieldnotes, 4-19-07). Other staff members made similar comments which I will discuss in Chapter One.

changes in race and class consciousness. I undertook an analysis of school culture because I wanted to understand what staff members meant when they talked about toxicity, and I wanted to explore where the phenomenon of toxicity originated. As a former teacher with my own set of experiences working in “toxic” school culture, I wanted and needed the perspective that this analysis would provide. I believed such an analysis would potentially have value to staff members in Centerville, but also to me as I embarked on a career as an educational researcher, given that part of my work would involve teacher preparation. I still believe in the value of the work I have done, but I know that it is up to the people of Centerville to decide for themselves what to make of it.

I never did become explicitly involved in the Charleston group’s effort to lead conversations on school culture, though I will share their individual accounts of that effort in Chapter Two, and I will revisit their work in Chapter Five. In part my own logistical constraints kept me away from their meetings and conversations, but I also did not feel ready to take an active role in work that I felt more comfortable observing and documenting. This raises questions about the purpose of educational ethnography. When should an ethnographer hold back, and when should she take action in response to events that arise at her site?

As I took on a more active research role in 2006-07, explaining my project individually to each staff member and asking individuals to sign formal consent forms, several people expressed doubt that I could complete such a project. They cited the murkiness of culture as a concept and the impossibility of reconciling all the different views that people would express. “Your topic is too nebulous,” teacher Helen Granville told me. “You’re never going to get a clear definition of culture. You’ll have people tell

you it's a black/white issue. You'll have people tell you it's a class issue. You'll have people who are actually on the same page who are divided" (fieldnotes, 9-27-06). Louise Tolbert also expressed skepticism at my desire to study school culture. "It's hard for me to believe that you chose this as your topic, because I'm not sure how you're going to do this! It's a huge subject, and there's so much to it, and I don't know what the answer is. I don't have a clue" (interview, 2-1-07). Helen was still dubious about my project as we neared the end of the school year. "I just don't know how you're going to do this," she said. "It's such a hard topic." At the same time, however, after months of conversation, her stance had softened somewhat. "Intellectually, I'll sure be interested in what you come up with," she added. And then she went on to tell me more about patterns of conflict in the building (fieldnotes, 5-3-07).

I had doubts myself about undertaking such complex analysis with such a massive data set. But the more I listened to people talk about conditions in Centerville and debate the reasons for the school's chronic failure, the more convinced I became that culture *was* the issue that needed to be studied. Without realizing it, staff members were invoking culture all the time as the *source* of their frustrations. Culture was to blame for the intractable nature of problems in the school: "It's like nothing changes here!" Helen Granville said. "Once you've got to a place where you shouldn't be, it's just etched in stone" (interview, 5-3-07). Culture was also the cause of the discouragement staff members felt as they tried to disrupt patterns that seemed permanently locked in place: "It just drains you," teacher Wendy Swensen explained. "To feel stalled all the time. And to kind of get your hope up that something's going to be different the next year, because



you know there's going to be a new principal, or you know there's going to be a new superintendent, and then it's just kind of the same. It's hard" (interview, 3-29-07).

But culture was also the *product* of staff members' attempts to explain their predicament in Centerville. "You know, we have all the excuses in the world why things are what they are here," teacher Andy Ellis told me. "But we've never really done anything to, you know. I mean it's always someone else's fault, it's, 'All the good kids are leaving.' Therefore the culture here changes. 'It's tough, the environment here's tough because of school choice killed us, and everybody's able to leave now.' I mean, that's an excuse. I mean, you know, is it true? Yeah, it's true. We've lost a lot of good kids. We lost a lot of bad kids, too. We've lost a lot of in, in-between kids, so I, I don't know" (interview, 12-19-06).<sup>31</sup>

Even when they weren't talking about culture, Centerville people were talking regularly about their school's problems. And just as Helen Granville predicted, they offered conflicting accounts and interpretations. "The problem is the community," one parent told me as we talked about her children and grandchildren's experiences in Centerville schools (fieldnotes, 1-22-07). Two custodians took up the subject as they picked up trash in the cafeteria one day after lunch. "The problem is at home," Darryl Trueman said. "No, the problem is that all these kids failed math!" Roseanne LaChance replied (fieldnotes, 1-25-07). Another parent raised the subject as an earnest question

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<sup>31</sup> Andy's critique reminded me of a time when I had heard another teacher make this exact argument in the context of a larger rant about No Child Left Behind. "No Child Left Behind is going to destroy this school," Matthew Meissner told me on the way to lunch one day earlier that same year. "So what they do is, they take the schools that are struggling, like ours, and they send all the parents a letter saying, you need to go to a better school. And any parent who knows anything is going to do that. So what are we left with? The 60% of kids who don't want to be here and don't care. And we're supposed to get better? As they leave, we lose money, so we cut the staff and hire the cheapest teachers. Then we're left with the least qualified teachers. And we're supposed to get better?" He looked down the hall at the students heading towards the cafeteria. "It's gotten to the point that I wish I didn't have ten more years until retirement" (fieldnotes, 10-25-06).

posed to my friend Al Ligget. “Is the problem what’s going on in the classroom, or is it what they’re bringing from outside?” (fieldnotes, 2-21-07). Finally, on a day when a different HSTW consultant, Dodie Partington, had come to evaluate Centerville’s progress as a school, Belinda Edwards, a teacher who had been brought in from another building to do site evaluations, put her own spin on the subject. “Teachers are invested in blame,” she said. “They blame the students for not doing their homework. They blame them for failure. It’s too threatening for them to look at the teaching they’re doing that leads to that failure. You can’t change the context, but you *can* change the teaching. We have *so much* failure here, and to me, that’s a reflection of teaching, but the teachers can’t go there” (fieldnotes, 5-2-07).

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In the chapters that follow, I will draw on ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) with more than 50 staff members,<sup>32</sup> contextualized by three years of participant-

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<sup>32</sup> I took a semi-structured approach to interviews, beginning each one by outlining the same three objectives. First, I told participants I was interested in hearing them define school culture, since the term was commonly used around the school but was fairly abstract. Second, I wanted to hear them talk in detail about culture in Centerville, including what it was like in the building and what distinguished Centerville from other places. Finally, I wanted to know how culture affected day-to-day work in the building, including adults’ ability to do their job and students’ ability to learn. After that “grand tour” opening (Spradley, 1979), participants tended to go in different directions. Some talked at length about students and the community, while others talked about internal dynamics involving the staff. Some told personal stories about their life histories and experiences, while others kept the focus solely on business within the school. I listened as intently as I could while participants talked, taking care not to interrupt and mentally noting “markers” (Weiss, 1994) that I wanted to come back to. My intent was to follow the lead of each participant, probing into the issues they raised so as to construct the best understanding I could of how they made sense of conditions in Centerville.

I got much better at this over time. I forced myself to stop taking notes after the third interview I conducted. Subsequently, I trained myself to hold provocative words and phrases in my mind until participants paused and gave me the space to ask about them. The best interviews were ones where our exchange was like a conversation, with participants reflecting deeply and at length about their experience in the school in relation to my questions and reactions. I was struck by the number of participants who thanked me for the interview or in some other way acknowledged that they appreciated having an opportunity to reflect on school conditions.

Interviews took place in empty classrooms, in the teachers’ lounge, in the custodial break room, in administrators’ offices, in the media center, in the cafeteria, and, in one case, at a participant’s home. Most interviews took place during teachers’ planning hours or during breaks in support staff members’

observation in Centerville, in order to present an analysis of the origins and the consequences of Centerville's toxic culture. Helen Granville was right in that I heard many different takes on school culture as I talked to staff members who brought different degrees of seniority, different political perspectives, and different experiences as raced and classed people in a school where tensions over race and class were palpable. Each chapter of this dissertation will take up one aspect of Centerville's culture, concluding with a discussion of the potential for Centerville staff members to change their culture.

Chapter One outlines the theoretical, methodological, and analytic approaches that inform the study. I begin with a review of school reform literature in order to introduce the concept of school culture and the ways in which it has been conceptualized by other researchers. I illustrate the dialectical process by which I read the literature, thought about Centerville's problems, and designed the theoretical framework for the study, responding both to conditions at the site and to calls in the literature for new approaches to school culture research. I then describe the methodological decisions that guided my interviews and fieldwork, the analytic process I used to find patterns in the data and generate arguments about culture in Centerville, and the thinking that informed my approaches to representing people and events in Centerville as I wrote the dissertation.

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schedules; a handful occurred after school. Conversations usually lasted about 45 minutes, but some were as short as 20 minutes and others lasted for more than an hour. Interruptions were common, with students or staff members knocking on closed doors, hand-held radios going off, phones ringing, and announcements over the public address system breaking in on our talk.

Some participants agreed readily to be interviewed, while others deflected or put off my request for months at a time, claiming that they were too busy or in other ways conveying ambivalence about talking with me. I always persisted in the face of these deflections, and I usually got to conduct the interview eventually. Unfortunately two staff members became so busy at the end of the school year that we were unable to hold the interviews they had promised. I still spent significant time with these individuals, so the lack of an interview didn't mean a lack of access to their views. Two other staff members declined to be interviewed, one after an extended period of wavering.

For a chronological list of the interviews I conducted with Centerville staff members, see Appendix E.

Chapter Two traces the origins of the concept of “toxicity.” I first describe the dynamic of antagonism in the school that arose out of staff members’ competing ways of thinking and talking about the reasons for their school’s failure. I introduce discourse as a theoretical construct that helps to explain the sources of staff members’ ideas about Centerville students, and I then illustrate patterns in staff discourse that took shape based on staff members’ beliefs about students as raced and classed beings. I explain how tensions over race and class differences prevented staff members from talking about the problems that most hindered them in their work with students and each other, and how dilemmas over race in particular further inhibited conversation and exacerbated staff conflicts.

Chapter Three describes the ways in which competing ideas about Centerville students’ values and potential immobilized the school by producing an enduring stalemate among staff members in the ongoing debate over academic and behavioral expectations. I explain how widespread helplessness and frustration among staff members developed in large part because people were unable to talk publicly about the dilemmas that shaped their work with low-income and minority students. I analyze the sources of what I call “place-specific expectations,” which staff members used to justify lowered academic standards and to rationalize the differences in educational quality that existed between Centerville and more affluent area school districts. I also trace the ways in which staff members’ discourse positioned students as low achievers based on their race and class status, and how students responded to this positioning by engaging in patterned interactions with staff members that contributed to a self-fulfilling prophecy of academic failure.

Chapter Four examines the role that race played in staff members' readings of students, parents, and each other. I describe the role of racial tension in staff members' resistance to working together, and I illustrate how ideological differences produced social networks in the school organized around shared beliefs. These networks precluded talk across differences and increased the likelihood that interpersonal conflicts would be left unresolved. I present an analysis of interview transcripts in order to show how strong beliefs about race lurked under the surface of staff members' denials that race mattered. I also discuss how white staff members were sometimes blindsided by race in their interactions with students and each other—even staff members who were racially self-aware and who were invested in raising their own and their colleagues' consciousness about race.

Chapter Five offers concluding thoughts on the Charleston group's work and on the potential for that work to carry over to other groups of staff members scattered throughout Centerville High School. I trace the ways in which conversations within the Charleston group provide a model for staff members who want to grapple with the race- and class-based dilemmas that are entangled in school reform efforts and in everyday work in urban and under-resourced settings. I argue that moments of uncertainty and not knowing provide important opportunities for staff members to learn ways of managing the challenges of teaching and collaborating across race and class differences. I summarize my claims about the implications of talk for student learners and for school culture, and I offer suggestions for future research into the complexities of school culture and school context. I conclude with final thoughts on the role of discourse more generally in creating, sustaining, and *changing* school culture.

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Teachers who work with low-income and minority students frequently rely on ill-informed notions of “culture” as they assess students’ attitudes, behaviors, and intellectual ability— notions that are often shaped more by cultural stereotypes than by authentically-grounded understandings of cultural difference (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The white middle-class norms that dominate many schools create a context in which teachers often develop relentlessly negative beliefs about students who come from low-income and minority families.<sup>33</sup> Because the culture of many schools allows these limiting beliefs to remain unchallenged, the low expectations which result come to serve as self-fulfilling prophecies that are kept in place by a school’s norms, policies, and practices (Weinstein, Madison, and Kuklinski, 1995). Because definitions and

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<sup>33</sup> Studies of teachers who work in low-income and majority-minority communities have shown that teachers often attribute students’ lack of skills to their backgrounds or their families (Warren, 2002). Even teachers who self-identify as good teachers of African American students may perceive students’ families and cultures as deficits rather than strengths (Hyland, 2005). School personnel working with African American parents living in poverty have been shown to systematically silence parents’ strengths by maintaining deficit orientations toward parental behaviors and worldviews (Lawson, 2003) and to form beliefs based on pathologies of neglect rather than any firsthand knowledge of families’ lives (Harry, Klingner, and Hart, 2005; Lipman, 1998).

The cultural mismatch that exists for many students between home and school usually results in a profoundly compromised educational experience for students from low-income and cultural minority families (Anyon, 1981, 1997; Au, 1980; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2000; Michaels, 1981; Oakes, 1985; Rist, 1970). Negative beliefs about students and their home cultures are frequently translated into attitudes and actions that substantially limit students’ opportunities and their ability to thrive in school. Rolon-Dow (2004) showed how teachers used their own culturally-biased frames of reference to evaluate Puerto Rican girls’ behaviors and appearance, constructing identities for the girls that were based on stereotypes even when the girls seemed to defy stereotyped representations. Similarly, Ferguson (2000) showed how teachers without any firsthand knowledge of their students’ lives drew on culturally-constructed images of black males as criminals in order to interpret and evaluate the misbehavior of African American boys, while the misbehavior of white boys was interpreted as harmless. Even in all-black schools populated by a large number of African American teachers, Tyson (2003) found that negative perceptions of black youth led teachers to place an exaggerated emphasis on African American students’ behavior, and that this practice served to convey messages of cultural deviance to the students.

Monroe (2005) interprets these dynamics by arguing that teachers draw on culturally-based constructs in approaching school discipline and that this results in a “discipline gap” that disproportionately punishes African American males. Morris (2005) documented the discipline gap in a school where teachers focused inordinate attention on disciplining African American and Latino students’ bodies by strictly monitoring their behavior and mode of dress while virtually ignoring the behavior and dress of white and Asian American students.

expectations of appropriate behavior are culturally influenced, conflicts are likely to occur when teachers and students come from different cultural backgrounds (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran, 2004). These conflicts are all the more likely when school culture serves to reinforce belief systems that marginalize and pathologize low-income and minority students.

Teachers who go to work in urban and under-resourced schools are frequently unprepared for interactions with students from backgrounds that differ racially, economically, and culturally from their own.<sup>34</sup> These teachers need preparation for and support in addressing the struggles and dilemmas they will inevitably face, especially when school and classroom-based struggles threaten to strain their sense of professional competence and/or their relationships with colleagues (Obidah and Teel, 2001). Work in urban and under-resourced schools will most likely challenge teachers personally as well as professionally (Conference on English Education, 2005; Fecho, 2004). Unless teachers are prepared to respond critically to the challenges of context—including the presence of deficit discourses that are likely to be in circulation (Compton-Lilly, 2003)—they will be vulnerable to adopting beliefs and positions that will limit their students’

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<sup>34</sup> In part this is because of the racially and economically segregated lives that people tend to lead in the United States. In addition, however, teacher education programs fail to attract large numbers of working class and minority certification candidates, leaving the majority-white, majority-middle-class population of beginning teachers isolated from encounters with peers who might stretch their thinking and perspectives. Consequently teacher education programs continue to prepare “a monolithic, monocultural, and monolingual” nationwide population of teachers for an increasingly multicultural population of schoolchildren (Nieto, 2000). Many new white teachers would prefer not to teach in urban settings in schools that primarily serve students of color (Grant, 1989, qtd in Ladson-Billings, 1999), and most current teachers would prefer to work in a suburban setting teaching white, middle-class youth (Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996, qtd in Nieto, 2000). Zimpher & Ashburn (1992) characterize this tendency of beginning teachers to want to return home and teach at a school just like the one they attended as a problem of parochialism. Furthermore, teacher educators who attempt to prepare beginning teachers for work with students who are racially and economically different tend to encounter resistance (Chizhik, 2003; Cochran-Smith, 1995a, 1995b; Garmon, 2004; Gay and Howard, 2000; Gay and Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Swartz, 2003).

educational opportunities and that will contribute to divisiveness and immobilization within the school as a whole.

Most teachers do not approach their jobs thinking about the institutional conditions that will shape their work. Instead they think almost exclusively about the classes they are assigned to teach and the students who will be on their course rosters. Because attention to context is seldom taken up in teacher education programs, teachers enter their jobs without tools to make sense of larger building-level dynamics that will influence their ability to teach effectively. Even when a teacher's individual classroom conditions are good, if dynamics in the building are negative, the teacher may come to believe that it is impossible to achieve success in the school. Even if the teacher finds a small group of like-minded colleagues, conditions in the building may still erode her morale and sense of agency.

In order to help teachers better manage the challenges of the urban school context, more attention must be given to the ways adults in urban schools talk, to the beliefs and dispositions their talk reveals, and to the process by which talk gives rise to school culture. The beliefs of Centerville staff members were most clearly presented when individuals described the challenges and opportunities they associated with teaching in Centerville. In their accounts, adults made visible their beliefs about low-income and minority students, beliefs which were further revealed and manifested in the context of day-to-day interactions with students and other adults. By using discourse analysis to examine the role of race and class in staff members' internal sense-making processes as well as their interpersonal interactions, this dissertation uncovers the sources of "toxic"



school culture while at the same time suggesting ways for staff members to intervene in changing toxic culture for the better.

## CHAPTER ONE THE PROBLEM OF SCHOOL CULTURE

The bottom line for me with school culture is I don't think I understand it enough to really put my finger on what the problem is ... I'm not sure I know fully, exactly what the culture is, or what's, what's wrong here.

—Louise Tolbert

There's just kind of this sense of what's allowable and what's not ... that's the prevailing culture of a building. And the newcomers come in and learn it very quickly .... They listen in the lunchroom, and, and hear stories ... It was amazing to me when we had the buyout ... how quickly the new teachers conformed to the old norms.

—Wendy Swensen

### **Conceptualizing school culture**

Even when Centerville staff members like Louise Tolbert claimed that they weren't sure what school culture was, they still understood on some level that Centerville's school culture was a problem. Staff members recognized that the same negative patterns of perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting (Goodenough, 1981) were sustained in Centerville year after year despite retirement buyouts, changes in administration, and the influx of new generations of students. As Wendy Swensen notes in the above quote, many staff members who were new to Centerville quickly conformed to the attitudes they encountered and the practices they observed in the people around them, sometimes in ways they weren't aware of. Culture may have been hard for Centerville staff members to define, but cultural patterns were even harder to disrupt.

In the words individuals used to describe Centerville's culture, they revealed the influence that school culture had on their understandings of the kind of school Centerville was and what they could hope to achieve there. When Ellen Garrity decided after only four months that she was teaching in "a culture of failure" (fieldnotes, 2-13-07), she conveyed an assumption that academic outcomes were predetermined, regardless of her efforts. When Dr. Warner announced that he was working in "a culture of deprivation" (fieldnotes, 9-16-05), he communicated his belief that student deficits were insurmountable and that students themselves were the source of Centerville's problems. And when members of the Charleston group concluded that Centerville's culture was "toxic" (fieldnotes, 10-19-05), they acknowledged the damaging and unhealthy influence of everyday interactions on the mindsets that staff members and students formed.

The degree to which staff members doubted that I could study school culture was just one indicator of the helplessness they felt in the face of it. Staff members' views of culture as fixed and unchanging in Centerville are reflected in the literature on school culture, where studies have focused far more on *defining and describing* school culture than on examining how it gets produced and maintained. Arising from the fields of business and organizational behavior,<sup>35</sup> these studies tend to be aimed at an audience of administrators who need to address school culture in the context of reform efforts. As such, they often recount researchers' efforts to *assess* school culture through survey instruments and other quantitative measures (Gruenert, 2000, 2005), and they advise

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<sup>35</sup> For example, Owens (2001) introduces his book *Organizational Behavior in Education: Instructional Leadership and School Reform* by saying that "like business organizations, schools today must be nimble, quick, and proactive if they hope to be seen as effective. Like business organizations, also, they must understand that they are in a competitive world and that their competition is global" (p. xv).

school leaders on the importance of “reading” school culture by asking questions about school traditions, interpersonal interactions, and the attitudes of staff members (Deal and Peterson, 1999).<sup>36</sup>

These approaches, and the various definitions that inform them, are important in that they help to identify *where* school culture is produced. They also informed my understanding of *where and how* culture was being produced in Centerville.

Cunningham and Gresso (1993) emphasize the presence of school culture in the ways people think and in the learned behaviors they adopt.<sup>37</sup> Prosser (1999) argues that school culture finds concrete representation in the form of artifacts and behavioral norms, and that it is sustained implicitly through jargon, metaphors, and rites (quoted in Solvason, 2005). Hopkins, Ainscow, and West (1994) maintain that school culture is implicit in the language that teachers use in the staff room and in the norms that evolve as they work together.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, discussions of school culture repeatedly emphasize the deep and enduring influence of staff members’ *beliefs* on their actions and interactions and on the way a school operates (Dalin, Rolff, and Kleekamp, 1993; Deal and Peterson, 1999; Evans, 1996; Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996; Gruenert, 2000; Owens, 2001;

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<sup>36</sup> Deal and Peterson (1999) advise school leaders to explore school culture by asking questions such as: What does the school’s architecture convey? How is space arranged and used? What subcultures exist inside and outside the school? Who are the recognized (and unrecognized) heroes and villains of the school? What do people say (and think) when asked what the school stands for? What events are assigned special importance? How is conflict typically defined? How is it handled? What are the key ceremonies and stories of the school? What do people wish for? Are there patterns to their individual dreams? (p. 86-87).

<sup>37</sup> Cunningham and Gresso (1993) argue that culture in its most basic form is an informal understanding of “the way we do things around here.” Culture is also the powerful yet ill-defined conceptual thinking within the organization that expresses organizational values, ideals, attitudes and beliefs. Furthermore, as a strategic body of learned behaviors, culture gives meaning and reality to participants (p. 20).

<sup>38</sup> Hopkins, Ainscow, and West (1994) also understand culture to reside in the *dominant values* espoused by a school through its aims or mission statement; in the *philosophy* that guides the dominant approach to teaching and learning of particular subjects; in the *rules of the game* that new teachers have to learn in order to get along in the school or in their department; and in the *feeling or climate* that is conveyed by the entrance hall to a school (p. 88).

Solvason, 2005). This emphasis on the role of staff members' beliefs as a key element in school culture proved central to the study that I would eventually design.

While these discussions provide a valuable map of the existing work on school culture, they also present calls for new approaches to the topic. Nias (1989) notes that the term school culture is used with a willful lack of precision, and that terms such as climate, ethos, culture, and atmosphere have been used interchangeably (quoted in Solvason, 2005).<sup>39</sup> Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) critique the inordinate emphasis in school culture literature on the principal as the shaper of culture. Along those lines, Donnelly (2000) questions the implicit assumption that school culture is static,<sup>40</sup> asking whether culture is something that is established and accepted as a goal of the school, or whether it is something that is produced through interactions within the school (quoted in Solvason, 2005). Similarly, Owens (2001) notes that if school culture is characterized by staff members' perceptions, it is important to ask how those perceptions are developed, communicated, and transmitted.

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<sup>39</sup> I noticed the same slippage in terminology as some participants invoked both "culture" and "climate" in their descriptions of school culture in Centerville. When I asked teacher Shaun Coleman to define school culture, he said that it included "everything that the students experience in the school, both explicitly and implicitly," including relationships between staff and students as well as the curriculum, in terms of what kind of knowledge is valued in the school. Shaun added that climate also played a key role in school culture, in terms of how it felt to be in the building. Shaun acknowledged the overlap between school culture and school climate, but he emphasized the important links between them: "I think that school climate is maybe a little bit of a separate, an egg that's in a separate basket, but I think the two are very closely related" (interview, 11-3-06).

<sup>40</sup> School culture was also presented as a static concept at the conference in Charleston through an exercise that defined school culture in relation to a fictional place called "the Gray School." Both Tina Olsen and Kate Seabrook mentioned the Gray School in their interviews, emphasizing the idea that culture there was unchanging. "We read about this fake school called the Gray School," Tina said, "where the expectations just stay the same ... you know, the halls are gray, the kids are gray, some students pass, some people, some students did well, that's just the way it is. That line was repeated over and over in the story. That's just the way it is. That's just the way it is. That's just the way it is. And that's how we feel a lot of times, like we're just making it through the year, trying to survive, things just stay the way they are" (interview, 12-1-06).

School culture researchers suggest several approaches for getting at the ways in which perceptions are developed and transmitted within school culture. Deal and Peterson (1999) maintain that what people talk about and avoid talking about can reveal aspects of school culture.<sup>41</sup> Owens (2001) also acknowledges the importance of talk, arguing that in order to describe and assess the culture of a school, it is necessary to get inside and talk at length with people, to find out what they think is important to talk about, and to hear the language they use to reveal their assumptions. Owens adds that the use of qualitative research methods makes it possible to produce richly detailed “thick” descriptions of the organizational culture of schools, which are necessary in order to explain what is happening in them. More specifically, Gruenert (2005) calls for ethnographic research on school culture that can reveal factors not considered in studies using survey analysis. Evans (1996) agrees that while it is possible to draw inferences about a school’s culture by studying its artifacts, researchers can understand school culture only by participating in the life of the school for a long time.

In emphasizing the importance of talk, the need to get at people’s assumptions through language, and the importance of taking a long-term participatory approach in order to understand how school culture gets produced, these calls in the literature led me to design a study that conceptualized school culture as a *language-based phenomenon produced through everyday interactions*. Language struck me as important from the moment I arrived in Centerville. Staff members repeatedly indicated through offhand comments that working in Centerville was challenging because of the population of

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<sup>41</sup> Because Deal and Peterson (1999) define school culture as “symbolic glue” that holds a school together, they argue that when new teachers are hired, it is important for school leaders to “tell stories that exemplify what the school stands for, what is valued, and what has been accomplished” (p. 55). Not only does their approach focus solely on the role of the principal in telling these stories; it ignores the possibility that some of a school’s stories might be stories of failure.

students the school served, but they only hinted at the reasons why. The more staff members talked about “these kids” as a special population (“Nobody expects these kids to succeed” ... “Professional development was not about our kids” ... “We need help seeing these kids”), the more I realized that buried in this term were allusions to students’ race and class identities, along with a host of assumptions about what teaching low-income and minority students entailed. In the ways staff members tended to *talk and not talk* about the role of race and class in their work with students, the more it seemed that they were signaling something important about the beliefs and assumptions that shaped interactions in Centerville and gave rise to its particular school culture (cf. Agar, 1994).

At the same time, in order to analyze the ways in which *interactions* played a significant role in the production of school culture, I needed a definition of culture that went beyond simply listing elements *within* culture such as history, traditions, unwritten rules, attitudes and beliefs, and ways of thinking and behaving. Just as Wendy Swensen understood school culture as something that new staff members absorbed by listening to stories and interacting with veteran teachers, I understood school culture to be socially produced, linguistically disseminated, and structured in ways that preserved and sustained shared meanings over long periods of time. Hays’ (1994) definition of culture as a *social structure* which is revealed in *systems of social relationships* and *systems of meaning* captures the dynamic yet patterned ways in which staff members were able to shape and maintain school culture in Centerville. Staff members’ attempts to make sense of their work were profoundly influenced by the social networks through which talk circulated and by the systems of meaning that developed in the school around race and class.

Studying school culture, then, requires a theoretical framework that takes into consideration the shaping effects that these systems of social relations and systems of meaning have on the interactions that take place in a school and on the forms of common sense that arise there. According to Hays, these systems are durable, normative, embodied in artifacts, embedded in behavior, passed about in interaction, internalized in personalities, and externalized in institutions. I argue that *talk* played a key role in the circulation and preservation of these systems in Centerville. By theorizing talk as discourse, it becomes possible to analyze the patterns of belief embedded in the patterns of staff members' everyday language use (Johnstone, 2002) and the ways in which language use effectively created the world that Centerville teachers expected to see (Thomas and Loxley, 2005).

Because teachers' beliefs about a school and its students actively shape what teachers come to perceive is possible for those students in that school (Warren, 2002), an ethnographic study focused on language provides a theoretical structure for unearthing the beliefs that were unique to Centerville and for illuminating the ways in which those beliefs were circulated through Centerville's social networks until they became naturalized as forms of cultural knowledge within the school. Only through extended ethnographic participant-observation could I gain access to the patterned ways Centerville people talked over time; to the social networks that formed, dissolved, and reformed as the composition of the Centerville staff fluctuated; and to the everyday behaviors and interactions that resulted from and reinforced patterned forms of talk.

This dissertation, then, combines the rigor of traditional ethnographic fieldwork with the theoretical tools offered by discourse analysis to examine not just what the



norms in Centerville's school culture were, but the processes through which those norms were constructed, reinforced, and kept in place. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

- What systems of meaning about low-income and minority students were revealed in the discourses that circulated among staff members at Centerville High School, and how were those discourses disseminated through various social networks to become the norms of the larger school culture?
- How did competing discourses about Centerville students produce conflicts among staff members and create dilemmas within individuals as they sought to meet low-income and minority students' educational needs?
- How did competing discourses about race contribute to tensions and divisions among Centerville staff members?
- In what ways did staff members' individual and small group discourse practices suggest possibilities for *changing* school culture in Centerville?

### **A method for studying school culture**

As teachers like Helen Granville and Louise Tolbert noted, school culture was a rather abstract subject to study. And yet when I asked Centerville staff members about culture, I gained access to a whole world of topics, opinions, experiences, and thought processes that were deeply revealing of the *causes* of toxic dynamics in the school. In the course of conversations about school culture, staff members told me about student behaviors and values, the history and reputation of the Centerville community, the problems of inconsistent and ineffective administrative leadership, and individuals' relationships with other staff members. Our conversations were meaningful in large part because of the familiarity I had already established with the site during two years of tutoring students, mentoring new teachers, attending school events, reading the newspaper, and spending time in the community.

Given the opportunity to layer these conversations in with the countless scenes and stories that I would accumulate over time, I believed that I could produce a study that would attend to both the nuances of individual experience *and* the shaping effects of institutional patterns in the construction of school culture. I was particularly interested in attending to the interplay between individual sense-making and group dynamics: I wanted to trace the ways in which individual belief systems played a part in the formation of social and professional networks; the ways in which the shared understandings that arose in these networks influenced the beliefs of individuals; and the ways in which different groups of staff members interacted and clashed within the context of school-wide reform work. I also wanted to read daily interactions in the school against the beliefs expressed by individual staff members; that is, I wanted to understand people's behavior in the context of their beliefs. In order to achieve these goals, I needed to be present in the school for large amounts of time. I also needed to form close relationships with a wide variety of individuals in the building and keep myself constantly open and available for new conversations in the hopes of gaining access to groups and staff members *throughout* the school, not just in small pockets.

### ***Seeking consent***

Though I did not seek official permission to conduct dissertation research until the start of my third year in Centerville, the time I had already spent forming relationships with a subset of informants proved to be invaluable in the connections I would eventually be able to make with so many others. I relied on the relationships I had already established in Centerville in order to summon the courage to approach staff members I

perceived to be less receptive to me and my work. It was important to me to seek contributions from staff members who occupied a range of positions and stances in the school rather than rely exclusively on teachers or on informants I had already worked with. I believed that people in different roles would bring a range of views that I could not anticipate, and I wanted to produce a study that featured those voices.<sup>42</sup> For this reason, when it came time to seek participants' consent, I approached custodians, secretaries, paraprofessionals, maintenance workers, and security guards as well as teachers, counselors, social workers, police liaison officers, and administrators. It helped that I had already become a familiar face in the building, even if people weren't clear on the nature of my work.

While Dr. Warner invited me to present my study to the staff as a whole at the second staff meeting of the year,<sup>43</sup> Sandra Altman asked me to wait, citing the number

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<sup>42</sup> In total, I formally interviewed all but two members of the teaching staff during the 2006-07 school year, along with numerous members of the support staff, resulting in 58 audiotaped interviews with 60 individuals (two of the interviews featured a pair of informants who requested to be interviewed together). Over the course of my time in the school, however, I had significant fieldwork interactions with every staff member. My commitment to soliciting as many viewpoints as possible exceeded what Marshall and Rossman (1999) refer to as a "maximum variation" sampling strategy in qualitative inquiry, and it proved to be extremely valuable for the study. In a place as socially fractured as Centerville High School, some staff members made a point of never interacting with one another. Only when I interviewed people individually did I learn some of the causes of deep fissures within the staff and come to understand how silenced some staff members felt by toxic dynamics in the school. Had I not pursued the number of interviews I did, I would not have been able to comprehend the full range of reasons for staff conflicts, which significantly informed the analysis I would later perform in Chapter Four. My interest in interviewing everyone probably also helped people in the school to view me positively in light of these factions. Had I only interviewed people I perceived to be "key stakeholders," I'm sure I would have further alienated people who already felt marginalized and excluded.

<sup>43</sup> I approached Dr. Warner to ask permission to conduct my study near the end of the first week of school when he was standing in the hallway outside of the cafeteria during lunch duty. Though I came to the conversation with great anxiety, fearing any number of objections Dr. Warner might raise, I needn't have worried. Doc responded as impulsively to my research request as he did to Centerville students, carrying on in his usual style while we talked. I began timidly: "Dr. Warner, when you have a moment, can I ask you a question about a research project?" Doc stood with his hands on his hips, glaring at the crowds of students before answering me. "When I get done kicking some *butt!*" he finally said. "Well, it is the start of the school year," I replied, hoping to acknowledge that it always takes a while for students to settle into the school routine. "It's not just the students, it's the parents!" he boomed. "I think some of them didn't even go to high school! I did a study out here myself twenty years ago. I wasn't impressed then and I'm not now. I taught on the east side of Detroit, and culturally they were light years ahead of this place!"

of items already on the agenda. In a way this delay came as a relief. Though I was prepared to do so, I was *afraid* to get up in front of the whole staff and explain my project. I knew the group to be deeply divided, and past experience had taught me that most staff members lacked patience with people from the university. I wanted to avoid the conspicuousness that would accompany a public presentation and the possibility that after hearing me talk, large numbers of staff members might simply choose to opt out of participating. I resolved that I would approach staff members individually to explain my study and seek consent. This strategy proved to be productive, despite its time-consuming nature: through individual conversations with each staff member, I had an excuse to reach out to people I had not yet gotten to know and respond in the moment to any wariness, concerns, or misgivings they expressed.<sup>44</sup> I also found out who in the

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Then turning to me, he asked, “So, what can I do for you?” After I quickly explained my study, he replied, “Let’s do it! We’ll put you on the agenda for the staff meeting on Tuesday” (fieldnotes, 9-7-06). I was shocked but deeply grateful for his quick and decisive response.

<sup>44</sup> This approach not only heightened my awareness of sensitive issues in the school; it also allowed me to secure the participation of some staff members who initially told me they could not participate. For example, when I approached one staff member and explained my study, the first question she asked was, “Who will have access to the data you collect?” I said no one but my dissertation committee. “But once it’s published, who will have access to it?” she asked. I explained that dissertations are public documents, but that I would disguise the identity of the school and all participants. “Then I can’t participate,” she replied, shaking her head and avoiding eye contact with me.

Whether it was right or wrong, in situations like this, I always persisted, often by emphasizing my attempts to figure out challenging aspects of research as I proceeded with my work, such as the issue of risk to participants, and asking individuals to give me advice. “I’m aware of the vital importance of confidentiality and minimizing risk for people,” I said, “but I am a novice at this. If you have any advice for me as I go forward and talk to others, anything about how I can make it safe for them to participate—” She interrupted me. “Come in here,” she said. I followed her into the galley kitchen in the back of the main office, where she closed the door and talked to me for the next 30 minutes about the problem of racism in the school. “I happen to *believe* that all white people are inherently racist,” she said. “It comes from our position in the world. And it makes me *angry*. But a lot of white teachers can’t see it. They’re *blind* to it.” I told her how helpful she was already being to me, and why uncovering perspectives like hers reinforced my conviction that I needed the participation of as many staff members as possible. “Oh, I can tell you who’s participating in your study,” she said. “I bet I can predict it. *You* know which white teachers are the racists. You can tell who they are. Just look around the staff meetings. Who’s sitting with the black teachers?”

As she told me more about the views she had heard white teachers in the building express toward their black students—all the while refraining from naming any names—I thought to myself that I wasn’t so sure who the so-called racists were. People had not yet begun to talk that freely in front of me. Instead of responding to her comment, I proceeded to tell her a little more about the motivation behind my study and

school was generally supportive of my work. I tried to minimize any pressure people might feel to participate by encouraging them to read over the cover letter I had written to explain my study, to think about it, and to tell me when would be a good time to check back. It turned out that many people signed the consent form on the spot, and in the end, only one person refused to participate.

### *Becoming an insider*

In some ways it was easy to show up at school each day and make myself available for whatever experiences might arise. Many staff members embraced me in my research role by openly acknowledging the fieldnotes I was writing and, at times, joking about my presence by asking if I was wearing a microphone or if I had gotten down what they just said. I laughed along with these jokes, but my laughter was often a thin disguise for the awkwardness I sometimes felt in writing notes so publicly. Many times one staff member would approach me to chat while I was in the midst of writing fieldnotes about another.<sup>45</sup> Despite the discomfort this caused me, I believed it was more honest to write my notes out in the open than to hide somewhere and write them alone. As time went by, however, I employed both methods in order to get down the thousands of conversations I participated in or overheard. My note-writing became so familiar to staff members like

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my hopes that it would make a contribution to teacher education, given the number of beginning teachers who come into urban schools with the potential to embrace those racist views. She then told me stories about how she had come to consciousness about issues of race and racism through her personal experience. At one point, she cried. Finally I thanked her for her time and managed to hand her a consent letter, feeling the awkwardness of slipping overtly back into my research stance. "Okay, I'll look it over," she said. "Come by and talk to me any time." Together we walked out of the galley kitchen. After she left, I stood in the main office and exhaled. One week later she agreed to participate in the study (fieldnotes, 10-9-06).<sup>45</sup> "Are you miked?" Neal Morton asked when he joined me in the bleachers for the fall homecoming pep rally. Since I was in the middle of writing fieldnotes recreating a conversation I'd just had with Wade Anderson, he caught me off guard, and I felt a little sheepish. "No, I swear!" I laughed, and then I waved my pen at him. "This is my mike," I replied (fieldnotes, 9-29-06).

James Merrick that he joked about how someone should put me to work behind the front desk in the main office. “All she does is sit around and write all day, spying on everyone,” he said (fieldnotes, 3-22-07). James smiled at me and winked when he said this, but I knew there was always a degree of tension underlying the work I was doing. I labeled these explicit references to my presence as a researcher as “ethnographic moments” when I indexed my fieldnotes. Ultimately there were too many such moments to count.<sup>46</sup>

Some staff members talked enthusiastically about the “book” I was writing, mentioning anecdotes that they thought would be important for me to include. Dorothy Loveland gave me these kinds of tips periodically as she told me stories that demonstrated her fondness for Centerville students. Once in Dorothy’s presence, a student lit up when she learned that I had ties to a student teacher who had graduated from college the previous year. As the student rattled off a long list of special things the student teacher had done for her, Dorothy stood there, listening and nodding. “You should put that in your book, Jen. She’ll never forget that” (fieldnotes, 3-29-07). Several days later, Dr. Warner also mentioned my book while we stood together outside the cafeteria during lunch duty. After telling me that over half the students in the school had again failed one or more classes during the most recent marking period, and then ranting about parents who wanted handouts and students who lacked intelligence, Doc paused to address me directly. “It’s a blessing to have you here,” he said. “Writing a book will make a difference for some people. I pray to God it will. We’re lucky to have you here, talking to the teachers and observing what goes on” (fieldnotes, 4-2-07). I felt surprised

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<sup>46</sup> For a sample page from my fieldnote index, including additional examples of these “ethnographic moments,” see Appendix F.

and touched by his statement, but also conflicted, wondering how Centerville people would react to the representation I would someday produce.

Wade Anderson was one staff member who began coming to me on a regular basis with information he thought would be useful for my study. Sometimes he shared anecdotes about his experience in the form of venting.<sup>47</sup> Other times, he would apologize that he didn't have something more significant to talk about. "I keep wanting to drop something profound on you," he said one morning when we met in the main office. I protested that he shouldn't feel that kind of pressure. "Here, come over here and I'll tell you a few things," he said. I stood and listened to him talk as he stuffed a handout in each teacher's mailbox (fieldnotes, 11-3-06). Moments like these were instructive: through his stories, Wade taught me both directly and indirectly about issues and dynamics in the school.<sup>48</sup>

As was the case with many staff members, my interactions with Wade took on an increasingly friendly quality as time went by. His awareness of my position as a researcher almost always provided a lead-in for what he chose to say to me and how he

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<sup>47</sup> "I hate my job," Wade announced one Wednesday morning in late October as we stood in the hall before school started. "I decided on Monday, I hate my job. If I were younger, I would quit and go back to a school for a different degree. A degree in law enforcement. Then I could kick some butt and throw some of these people in jail, because that's where they belong. Like that one." He pointed at a boy who was sprinting to get to class on time. "He belongs in jail." Wade sighed. "You see, my room is a fuckhead magnet. Anybody in the school who's a fuckhead, they send him to me." Wade explained that a female staff member had just told him that he was better able to handle Centerville's difficult students because he was male. "I have a hard time believing that just because I have the proper plumbing, I'm more qualified to do this job than a woman is. If that's true, then no woman in this building should have a job! Give me half her pay!" He paused, fuming. "Sorry, I've got to get in there and get started. But you can put that in your paper" (fieldnotes, 10-25-06).

<sup>48</sup> As a listener during these instructive moments, I consciously took the stance that Agar (1980) refers to as being in the "one-down" position. Agar explains that two of the metaphors ethnographers use to explain the nature of their relationships to field informants are that of child and student: "Both the child and the student are learning roles; they are roles whose occupants will make mistakes, which is perfectly acceptable as long as they don't continue to make the same ones. They can be expected to ask a lot of questions. They need to be taught—both will look to established members of a group for instruction, guidance, and evaluation of their performance" (p. 69).

chose to address me. One day he called to me from across the room at the end of a staff meeting: “Hey! School culture! I’ve got something for you!” (fieldnotes, 1-30-07). On another morning, I found him standing outside his classroom in a more subdued frame of mind, zoning out as he waited for students to arrive. “I don’t have anything for you today,” he said by way of a greeting. “I haven’t had my coffee yet” (fieldnotes, 3-21-07). Over the course of my fieldwork I came to feel tremendous affection for Wade, even though he said things that at times made me cringe.<sup>49</sup>

So along with moments of belonging, I also experienced moments of discomfort as an ongoing part of my fieldwork. The longer I worked in the school, the more critical I found myself becoming of certain staff members and practices. Even as I tried to set aside my judgment, it was hard for me not to feel anger at staff members who used class time poorly or seemed not to expect students to take their work seriously. I watched as one staff member doubled over in feigned hysterics when he met a group of his students in the hallway and they told him that they had completed yesterday’s homework (fieldnotes, 2-22-07). A couple of weeks later that same staff member shrugged off the fact that he had lost an entire class period because the Forum Room, where he had

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<sup>49</sup> The morning after second semester parent conferences, I stood in the hall talking to Shaun Coleman about the small turnout. He only had eight people come, but he had four times that many in the fall. “I can’t know the circumstances people are dealing with,” he said. Then Wade walked up to join on our conversation. “You know what I say?” he asked. “Fuck ’em. How do you think I get through each day? Fuck ’em. I know, you want to say each one has their own situation ...” His voice trailed off in a singsong cadence designed to tease Shaun, with whom Wade engaged in regular banter. “No, *fuck* ’em,” he repeated. “I can pick ’em out in a classroom.” He pretended to point at invisible students. “Prison. Welfare. Dead. Eighteen kids.” I told him that was pretty harsh. “I’m not even going to respond to that,” Shaun added. Wade, however, was undeterred. “Look, I had a kid last hour who rolled up his pants leg so we could see his tether! But you know my mantra. I never go home angry.” A little while later he came over and sat with me at a table in the media center where I had gone to write up my notes. “What would my reality be if I worked in Prospect schools?” Wade asked philosophically. Prospect is one of the wealthiest districts in the county, as well as the whitest. Without elaborating on his question, he turned his attention to the student with the tether, who had just walked into the media center. “I bet the tether is for drugs,” Wade said. “Possession, distribution. He’s not violent. I can pick out the ones that are going to end up in armed robbery.” I paused in my note-writing to glance at him. “You think I’m joking,” he said, looking at me pointedly. “But I’m not” (fieldnotes, 3-16-07).



scheduled his class to meet for a special activity, had been taken over by secretaries who were required to write disciplinary referrals on the large number of students who had been tardy to class and caught in a hall sweep.<sup>50</sup> “Well, that killed that hour. And I had reserved the room! That’s okay,” he said. “We’ll just try again tomorrow.” I couldn’t understand why this staff member would blow off the class period when he could have simply taken his students back to his own classroom. At the same time, I felt guilty for thinking critical thoughts because he had never failed to treat me with kindness (fieldnotes, 3-7-07).<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, I observed many classes come into the media center so that students could select books for free reading, but instead of choosing a book, students would sit and talk for the whole hour while their teacher chatted with a colleague, completed other work, or patrolled the room ineffectually (fieldnotes, 3-12-07).<sup>52</sup> I knew from past experience that students got away with not working hard in all kinds of schools, but it

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<sup>50</sup> Hall sweeps were chaotic but frequent events in Centerville, scheduled by administrators (but also sometimes by security guards and secretaries) in response to the chronic problem of getting students to report to class on time. When a hall sweep was called, teachers were instructed to lock their doors as soon as the bell rang. All students who were left out in the hall were rounded up by security guards and taken to the Forum Room, where their names were recorded for disciplinary purposes. Students who received their first offense were let go with a warning. Students on their second offense were assigned after-school detention. At the third offense, students received a one-day out-of-school suspension. I was familiar with hall sweeps because they had also been employed by administrators when I taught at Jefferson House in Elizabeth, New Jersey. There students who were caught in hall sweeps were sometimes suspended on the spot, which tended to decimate attendance for afternoon classes when up to 90 students might be suspended at one time. In contrast, hall sweeps were unheard of at the school where I taught in Eastham. On the day that the aforementioned staff member lost his class period to the hall sweep, one of the security guards commented, “I guess we did pretty good today. 39 last hour. 40 this hour” (fieldnotes, 3-7-07).

<sup>51</sup> Misgivings about my own critical reactions to people and incidents—and my decision to allude to them in this account—remind me of the ongoing professional discussion about the risks and hazards of field research, which, according to Miles and Huberman (1994), “can at bottom be considered an act of betrayal, no matter how well intentioned or well integrated the researcher. You make the private public and leave the locals to take the consequences” (cited in Wolcott, 2002b, p. 145).

<sup>52</sup> It was particularly frustrating to see students fail to connect with books in the library when I knew that the librarian had just spent \$10,000 in grant money that fall to buy new young adult literature titles. Most of the titles were ones I had recommended, but students had no way of finding out about them because there were no book clubs, no book talks, and no organized book sharing activities in language arts classes, and the library staff never made visits to the language arts classes to talk about new books, either. I had some good conversations with the security guards, however, when they read some of the new books I talked about (fieldnotes, 1-30-07, 3-7-07).

was hard to see it happening right before my eyes, and I wasn't the only one who noticed. One staff member complained to me about teachers who brought their classes to the media center and then sat and read the newspaper all hour while the students did a word search. "You drawing little old circles around words?" she asked in disbelief. "In preschool they're doing more! ... What are they gaining? This is abuse! To me it's child abuse. You're getting paid to abuse these kids. Big money. Ooh! Makes me want to cry" (interview, 11-28-06).

But my presence in the building also seemed to raise people's consciousness and to get them thinking and talking about the culture of the school in ways they might not otherwise. One morning I was writing fieldnotes in the empty cafeteria when teacher Kevin Shulty walked up to me. "You talk about culture," he said, gesturing to the pile of papers I was working on. "We don't have a culture of high expectations here. There's so much negativity! What we do is tell kids what they *can't* do, not what they *can* do. Just listen to what they say to the kids around here! Listen!" He mimics an angry adult, pointing and hollering. "Go to class! Where's your pass? Pull up your pants!" Everybody's walking around here with their heads down." He starts stumbling around the empty cafeteria, imitating a group of beaten-down kids. "They say places have spirits, that you can feel the spirit of a place. What else explains the difference between one place and another? This place isn't a school! It's a reformatory! It's a prison! What happens in a prison? People shuffle around like zombies! That's what we have here!" (fieldnotes, 10-25-06).

While Mr. Shulty connected with me and my project through frequent critiques of the school, other staff members wanted to know when I would be able to solve the

school's problems. In the wintertime, Neal Morton began to ask me on a regular basis whether I had come up with any solutions for the school, based on my research. "How's your project going?" he asked me one day while he stood at the copy machine in the office. I had stopped in to check my mailbox. "So," he added, "you got any solutions for us?" I laughed and said no, not yet, but the process was going great. He laughed with me. "Well, you'll fit right in here. We seem to be great on process, but we can't figure out how to solve our problems" (fieldnotes, 2-8-07). A month later I met him again by the mailboxes and he asked me the same question. "I'm waiting for you to give us a solution. You come up with anything yet?" No, I replied, mumbling something about needing time over the summer to make sense of all my notes. "Well, we're waiting," he said. "Hurry!" (fieldnotes, 3-5-07).

While I appreciated Neal's interest in my work, I was always self-conscious when I had to dodge his questions, but I didn't know what else to do since I didn't *have* any solutions. I had to do the same thing when Sandra Altman asked me how my work was going. "I can't wait to read it," she told me one day after I had just completed an interview with another teacher. "But what are you going to say about us? When are you going to tell us what you think? Will you be able to tell us what the problem is?" Although I evaded her questions just as I had Neal's, I was grateful for Sandra's interest. "You must have so much," she said. "How many boxes of notes do you have? Aren't you overwhelmed?" I nodded. "Wow," she said (fieldnotes, 12-4-06). I suppose she was shaking her head at the magnitude of what I was trying to do, but maybe she just thought I was nuts for making so much work for myself.

At the same time these staff members were beginning to anticipate solutions and answers, I was growing more worried about how I would shift out of the dailiness and connectedness of fieldwork into the greater isolation and remove of data analysis. At one point in March, Wade Anderson stopped in the empty cafeteria where once again I was writing fieldnotes. I complained to him that my adviser had recommended that I take a break from fieldwork in order to start in on some writing. “She was asking me to tell her what the themes of the study are, and I don’t know!” I confided in despair. “Our last meeting didn’t go very well. I should get a job here. The university frustrates me.” Wade just looked at me. “You should get a job *here*?” he finally said, dumbfounded. “They’re closing buildings! I’m worried about whether *I’m* going to have a job next year!” I felt embarrassed at how entitled I must have sounded with my talk of getting a job in Centerville. “You’re right,” I said. “I don’t know what I was thinking.” But when I thought of leaving Centerville, I felt like crying. Wade shrugged. “Anyhoo,” he said, and headed over to the office.

A few minutes later, he came back to my table. “Knock, knock,” he said. “You know, your professor’s right. You need to start writing. You know you’ve got mounds of data. You’re not going to find any magic piece that ties it all together. Or solves our problems. Or fixes our culture. You *need* to take some days. Start sorting it out into categories. Maybe you already have.” I looked at him plaintively. “I know, but it gets me emotional!” I said, feeling my voice quaver. “You *need* to do this,” he replied firmly. “Otherwise you’re just going to be on the same treadmill as everyone else around here. Anyhoo, I was just standing at the copy machine, thinking about it” (fieldnotes, 3-12-07).

The following week, Wade found me in the media center. “So how much longer are you going to be doing this?” he asked. “Face it. You’re not going to get a job here. And you’re not going to solve our problems. So you document our problems in your paper, and you move on.” I squirmed uncomfortably. “Hey, I like talking to you,” he said. “I share my thoughts with you. But there’s got to be more for you than hanging around here” (fieldnotes, 3-19-07). I knew deep down that Wade was right. I began working more at home, mostly catching up on typing interview transcripts,<sup>53</sup> but I stubbornly continued to follow events at school. I had a lot more people still to interview, and I wanted at least the semblance of a complete narrative when my fieldwork was done. I had lived each year of my life bookended by the start and the end of the school year. I needed that same feeling of consistency and completion in Centerville.

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<sup>53</sup> I chose to transcribe every interview myself using a foot-pedal transcription machine for two reasons. First, I knew that the emphasis I was placing on language necessitated very precise analysis of people’s words, and I wanted reassurance that the transcripts I would be analyzing were produced with meticulous attention to detail. To that end, I attempted to transcribe every word I heard on the interview tapes, including stutters, stumbles, partial articulations, repetitions, and pauses, as well as laughter and crying. This proved to be embarrassing for some participants when they saw the inelegance of their spoken language on paper, but it was important for my analysis to note topics where people had trouble articulating their ideas. For the sake of readability, however, and for the sake of participants’ dignity, I omitted most repetitions, stutters, and stumbles when I embedded excerpts from transcripts in dissertation chapters. I only preserved instances of fumbling language use when I wanted to make a point about participants’—or my own—struggles in talking about certain topics. These struggles were particularly apparent in discussions of race. (For a more in-depth analysis of the discursive manifestations of these struggles during discussions of race among white preservice teachers, see Haviland, 2008). Second, I knew that many participants were wary of talking on tape, given the contentious and sometimes hostile environment in Centerville. Transcribing the interviews myself was a way to reassure people that I meant what I said in the consent form when I claimed that no one would have access to the interview tapes other than me and my dissertation committee. It seemed to impress people and heighten their confidence in me when I came back to school to deliver a transcript within a day or two of an interview (although at times when I accumulated a backlog of tapes, my turnaround time was much slower). In the end, every participant was given a copy of his or her interview transcript for review. I emphasized to participants that if there was anything they wanted me to omit from the record after reading their transcript, I would do so. No one made such a request, and only one person identified a place where I had misunderstood a phrase on the tape. Transcripts varied in length between 10 and 23 single-spaced pages, with most averaging about 15 pages. In total I worked with over 800 pages of interview transcript during data analysis.

My efforts paid off to the extent that many staff members came to embrace me, acknowledging me explicitly as a part of their school in ways that often took me by surprise. On the last day before winter vacation, I worked in the cafeteria while staff members attended mandatory professional development sessions run by outside consultants in various classrooms. During a coffee break, teacher Marty Cahoon came over and sat with me for a few minutes. We talked about the high price of consultants and how little they—and the administrators who hired them—sometimes seemed to understand about the realities of schools. “The problem is, you have people calling the shots who haven’t been in the classroom for more than a few years,” Marty said. I commented on how I missed being in the classroom, and how spending time in Centerville helped me to feel I was still connected in some ways to schools. “Hey, I’ve seen you around, in the halls, with the kids, more than any college professor or even administrator,” he reassured me. “I would listen to what you have to say way more than any of them” (fieldnotes, 12-22-06).

Wade made the same complaint about Nancy MacArthur, a local consultant brought in to work with the staff near the end of the spring semester. I had participated in Nancy’s session on reading strategies with the staff the afternoon before; both her passive-aggressive approach with teachers and her lack of sophisticated content knowledge made me crazy. I found myself working to suppress the same hostility toward her that I imagined Centerville teachers had felt toward me and my university colleagues when we had come in to lead workshops almost four years earlier. “You know what was running through my head the whole time she was standing by our table?” Wade said, pausing on the stairwell for a quick conversation. “You’re not in my chain of command.

You're nothing to me." I said I had felt resistant, too, thinking, who are you? Do you know these kids? Do you understand this context? Do you know anything about us? Wade nodded. "I mean, *you're* one of us," he said. "You're not a teacher, but you're more inside than outside. You're here every day, you make your observations, you understand. You're *almost* an insider." We commiserated on whether Nancy would come back and how long she might stay. Then Wade had to get back to work, but he reached out to me even in parting. "Say, I'm going out to the gas station right now to get a diet Coke with lime. Can I get you anything?" I said no, but I thanked him for asking, and then I went off to find a place to write about the feeling of going native (fieldnotes, 5-9-07).

### **A method for analyzing school culture**

When I complained to Wade in March that I didn't yet know what the themes of my study were, I underestimated the degree to which I actually did have a strong sense of what was going on in Centerville. Implicitly I was engaged in a constant process of data analysis, considering what one person said in relation to what I heard from another; reading new school events against established institutional patterns; looking for exceptions to patterns and trying to understand the causes of deviation. I recognized recurring themes as I listened to participants talk; I noted how certain individuals used the same expressions over and over; and I observed the predictable ways in which staff members grouped themselves together with some colleagues and avoided others. In these ways, the analysis implicit in my daily forms of sense-making resembled what qualitative researchers refer to as "Constant Comparative Analysis" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

At the time, however, I was inhibited by the magnitude of my data as well as by participants' dubious talk about the feasibility of school culture as a research topic. Sometimes I questioned the nature of the work I was doing, and I certainly didn't know how I would translate the patterns I saw into findings that the school could use. A couple of weeks after Wade advised me to finish my research and get out of Centerville, teacher Reggie Bridges asked me what I had been noticing lately. I mentioned how frequently I heard people using the language of blame around the school. Reggie agreed. "Blame of parents, blame of students. It's a lot easier to point the finger of blame at them than at yourself," he said. Then he hurried off to a meeting with Sandra Altman.

I felt more aimless than usual that morning, holed up at my table in the empty cafeteria. *Sitting around, waiting for something to happen*, I wrote gloomily in my notes during a rare moment at loose ends. The pressure to surface some findings was starting to get to me, but I couldn't help still grappling with basic questions about the nature of the work I was doing, which I recorded in my notes: *Am I characterizing how it is here, or trying to find an explanation for why it is this way here? Or both? Am I trying to understand what school culture is, or is that too abstract and all I can do is describe what's here?* Despite my misgivings, I went on and made an attempt at what I called "memo-type thinking," brainstorming everything I could think of that seemed significant about patterns in Centerville. I began the list by asking myself, *So what am I noticing here?*

So what am I noticing here?

- People working at cross-purposes.
- Contrasting belief systems.



- Inconsistency.
- The school running itself—no oversight, no common vision, like a car without a driver.
- Lack of discipline, work ethic. Lack of high standards.
- Inferiority complex cited by many teachers (passed back and forth between students and teachers?)
- Low expectations.
- Lack of opportunity.
- Hostility towards kids and parents.
- Lack of self-scrutiny and reflection.
- Frustrations and institutional critiques, with nowhere to go, no channels, no outlets.
- Consequently, people on the staff acting as free agents.
- People not feeling a part of anything.
- People feeling dogged by a sense of failure: adults and students.
- People feeling their hands are tied in ways that make change impossible but that also abdicate them of responsibility.
- Ambivalence and uncertainty about how to respond to, account for, community/context issues. People grasping for ways to think about race, class, the divide between school and community.
- Or people holding staunchly to a deterministic framework, reductive ways of thinking fostered by Ruby Payne. Even very thoughtful people grasping at this.
- Or hostility toward addressing the role of race.
- People at their wits' end, wanting to make things better but not knowing how (fieldnotes, 3-28-07).

The themes I identified that morning are striking for the strong resemblance they bear to themes I would later surface using the grounded theory approach to data analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), in which I generated an extensive list of codes as I read through my data, collapsed “open codes” into “axial codes,” and developed warranted assertions—a process which I will explain in detail below. Without realizing it, I had already identified many of the focal issues around which I would construct the chapters that have come to comprise this dissertation. Though I never looked back at this instance of “memo-type thinking” during data analysis, that page in my notes demonstrates the intuitive understanding I had begun to form of my material while still in the field. The

themes captured there are all the more powerful when read against an explanation of the systematic process by which I identified a very similar series of findings analytically.

### ***Coding procedures***

When the 2006-07 school year ended and I emerged from the daily intensity of fieldwork, I felt I could finally sit down and develop a rigorous, methodical, and consistent process for examining my data. Because my analysis would attend in large part to participants' discourse, I began with the interview transcripts, which, though they were only approximations of participants' talk, provided the most extensive and precise evidence of staff discourses.<sup>54</sup> I clustered participants into three broad categories: beginning teachers (those who had worked in the school for three years or less), veteran teachers, and support staff, and I organized their transcripts alphabetically into three two-inch binders. Initially I wanted to compare discourses and belief systems across these three groups, but during analysis I found that there were no significant discursive or ideological differences between participants based on role or seniority. Discourse use *transcended* participants' roles and seniority, as well as their race, class, and gender identities.

In reading through each transcript, I took an open coding approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). First I underlined statements that I found to be significant; then I created a code for each topic or issue the participant raised, and I wrote that code in the margin of the transcript. In order to keep track of the fast-growing list of codes, I kept an

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<sup>54</sup> According to Gee (1999), it is tempting to believe that a detailed transcript represents "some pure, objective, and unanalyzed 'reality,'" but in fact it does no such thing. As Gee explains, transcripts reflect judgments of what is relevant in spoken language to the analysis at hand, and in that sense, "a transcript is a theoretical entity. It does not stand outside an analysis, but rather, is part of it" (p. 88).

alphabetized running list of codes in a separate computer file. (For a partial list of my interview codes, see Appendix H.) Beneath every code I created, I copied and pasted corresponding interview excerpts to illustrate the code. The result was a massive index linking each code back to the various places where it appeared in the interview data. I made one of these “master lists” for each of my three participant groups, although the codes were, for the most part, consistent across groups. Combined, the three master lists contained 81 codes which filled 272 typed pages. (For an example of the index I created for one such code, the “colorblindness” code, see Appendix I.)

These master lists proved to be invaluable as I worked with my data: I returned to them again and again during data analysis as well as chapter drafting for easy access to a range of staff viewpoints on each topic. By coding each one of my interviews systematically, and then by establishing a comprehensive index of examples available to support each category in the data, I increased the likelihood that I would attend equally to the views and contributions of all the participants in my study. Certain voices did emerge as stronger and more influential than others as I drafted chapters, but I knew I had drawn on contributions from everyone in developing my assertions and my argument.

In order to make use of the master lists and begin the process of collapsing “open codes” into “axial codes” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), I stored the three master lists in yet another binder where I made further underlinings, marginal notes, and codings within particularly large and significant categories such as “race consciousness” and “staff division.” At the end of each individual transcript, I also jotted notes about discourse themes specific to that participant, and I stopped periodically to elaborate my observations of emergent patterns and themes in my dissertation notebook. I would

eventually fill five 80-page dissertation notebooks during the analysis and drafting phase of the dissertation.

### *Developing assertions*

When I finished coding all of the interviews, I began working on a series of “integrative memos” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995) in which I made note of my process, summarized my findings so far, wrote about codes that seemed particularly significant, and searched for connections across codes. For example, in my first memo, completed in January, 2008, I clustered various open codes such as “colorblindness,” “race consciousness,” “racially-coded language,” “segregation,” “professional development frameworks for talking about race (Glenn Singleton) and class (Ruby Payne),” and the concept of “overcoming challenges or adversity” into an axial code called “The role of race and class in dynamics within the building.” In that memo I also noted differences in the ways participants defined school culture and built explanatory frameworks for making sense of the school’s problems. I further outlined dimensions of discourse I had identified, including examples of people “constructing worldviews” and “living conflicts, dilemmas, and tensions.”

I wrote five integrative memos over the next four months. Each memo further refined ideas developed in the one before as I worked to map my interview data. In February I made five broad assertions which, like the “memo-type thinking” in my fieldnotes, would later come to form the basis of the argument I would make about school culture. Those assertions appeared in the memo as follows:

Big picture in the interview data:

1. People disagree on what the **key issues** are here.
2. There is some awareness of the **role of (negative) talk** in the building (as well as the tendency in staff meetings to talk about things that don't matter).
3. There is some awareness of how new teachers have to **negotiate the differences** between where they come from and what they encounter in Centerville.
4. People don't always know **what other people believe**. This leads to mistaken assumptions and missed opportunities to work together.
5. People's **beliefs aren't always reflected in their actions** ... people's beliefs evolve and change ... **beliefs can be contradicted by actions**.

I further noted things people talked about a lot across the three groups in my interview data:

- *The role that race is or isn't playing in the building*, as seen in the ways staff members deny race, claim race, or express dilemmas in relation to race
- *The ways that the staff is divided*, as seen in different stances toward school rules, the students, and the community
- *Certain things that people don't want to talk about*, such as problems that have no solution and any trends related to race
- The phenomenon of *talking about things that don't matter* as a way to avoid uncomfortable issues
- The phenomenon of *talking about social class as a way to avoid talking about race*
- The influence of *students' home lives* on their attitudes and commitment to education
- *Centerville's reputation* and how it shapes attitudes and perceptions inside and outside the building

I supported each of these topics and assertions with copious examples from the interview data. My intention through this recursive and iterative process was to create a web of

assertions that linked as many pieces of evidence as possible,<sup>55</sup> moving toward an understanding of *interlocking dynamics* in the school that would explain the nature of “toxicity” that plagued Centerville’s culture.

I made the biggest conceptual leaps in a lengthy (64-page) integrative memo written in March. There I attempted what I called “a broad synthesis of assertions” by casting back over my previous work and trying to see how the various threads worked together to explain school dynamics. My newest assertions appeared in that memo as follows:

Attempt at broad synthesis of assertions:

- The **staff is divided** (which is ironic considering the number of references to “the Centerville family”).
- There are **reasons—spoken and unspoken—for this division** and the accompanying simmering animosity on staff.
- The unspoken reasons, in particular, come down to **things people aren’t talking about**. This may be a new discovery since my last memo.
- **Race is at the heart of things that people aren’t talking about**. Unsolvable dilemmas are also at the heart of what people won’t talk about and the different stances they develop.
- **Explicit conversations** could disrupt the invisible perpetuation of patterns.

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<sup>55</sup> Erickson (1986) likens this web of assertions to a set of strings: “An appropriate metaphor for this kind of pattern discovery and testing is to think of the entire data set (fieldnotes, interviews, site documents, videotapes) as a large cardboard box, filled with pieces of paper on which appear items of data. The key linkage is an analytic construct that ties strings to these various items of data. Up and down a hierarchy of general and subsidiary linkages, some of the strings attach to other strings. The task of pattern analysis is to discover and test those linkages that make the largest possible number of connections to items of data in the corpus. When one pulls on the top string, one wants as many subsidiary strings as possible to be attached to data. The strongest assertions are those that have the most strings attached to them, across the widest possible range of sources and kinds of data” (p. 148).

Based on these assertions, I then began a comprehensive effort to relate *talk patterns* in the school to *belief systems*. Because a number of staff members had referred explicitly to topics that their colleagues would and would not talk about, I approached this final round of analysis in the attempt to make as many specific claims as I could about the ways in which talk revealed beliefs that arose *in relation to* adults' race- and class-based views of students. This memo helped me to form my first comprehensive understanding of the *race- and class-based discourses* in circulation at Centerville High School. I went on to support each claim with every piece of evidence I could find in the interview data, attempting to build a comprehensive set of "evidentiary warrants" (Erickson, 1986) that I would use to construct the argument in each dissertation chapter.

Searching back and forth for relevant evidence *across* categories from my interview index in order to create these evidentiary warrants provided me with another way to collapse open codes into axial codes and otherwise synthesize my data. I also embedded numerous comments, notes, and summary statements within each set of evidentiary warrants, which further fleshed out and articulated my understandings. (For a summary of my data analysis procedures, see Appendix J. For a distilled version of the claims that helped me to surface race- and class-based discourses and build evidentiary warrants, see Appendix K.)

Throughout this time, I was not working explicitly with the data in my fieldnotes, although my memory of what was in those notes provided important background against which I developed codes, warrants, and assertions. When it was time to begin drafting material for chapters, I started flipping back through my notes to refresh my memory of significant events and draw out the details of specific incidents and interactions. This

proved to be time-consuming and overwhelming since I had eight two-inch binders full of handwritten fieldnotes: no matter how well-organized they were chronologically, it was very hard to find what I was looking for. In order to get control over my notes, I began with a simple labeling system. When I located an important scene, I created a caption for the scene, wrote it on a post-it note, and used the post-it note to tag the page. Later, in order to get a stronger grasp of the sequence and timing of events, I also created a partial fieldnote index that listed daily incidents involving specific participants over a period of several months in the fall and winter of 2006-07 (see Appendix F for a page from this index). Typing the index into a computer file gave me a rudimentary way to quickly search my notes for specific names, words, and situations, but I never found a way to thoroughly manage the magnitude of information in my fieldnotes. I expect that I will continue to work with the material in these notes for many years to come.

### **A method for representing school culture in Centerville**

Drawing on my emergent understandings of race- and class-based discourses and the ways in which these discourses contributed to staff division and other cultural patterns in Centerville, I began drafting the dissertation. Within another strongly recursive and iterative process involving forward and backward movement from data to argument and back to data, several principles guided the decisions I made while writing. As I have already explained, my goal was to weave together patterns of discourse use with patterns of behavior and interaction: that is, I wanted to draw on interviews as well as fieldnotes to show how people's beliefs gave rise to patterned practices that contributed to Centerville's low achievement and lack of progress in school reform.



More specifically, I wanted to show through an analysis of talk how competing beliefs about low-income and minority students kept staff members divided and kept an antagonistic dynamic alive in the school.

At the same time, I was acutely aware of audience as I wrote. I knew the dissertation needed to conform to basic academic conventions and satisfy university requirements, but I also wanted to tell a compelling story and write something that would be readable for people in Centerville and other schools like it. This desire to tell a good story led me to spend several months writing up ethnographic scenes based on my fieldnote data before I began drafting chapters. I selected scenes to elaborate based on their power to illustrate themes and ideas in the study: that is, I searched my notes for moments when staff members were articulating understandings of the school and what it meant to work there, or when staff members were struggling in some way with students, the school context, or each other. Through these scenes, I could introduce characters and school settings, but more importantly, I could *illustrate* the ways in which people talked and interacted. I hoped the illustrations would convey the complexity of Centerville as a site and staff members' struggle to do good work and manage frustration under challenging conditions. In an effort to triangulate my data and provide as many interlocking examples as possible, I selected some of these scenes to include as ethnographic interludes that anchor each chapter, and I embedded others in footnotes.

Not only do these scenes illustrate daily life in the school; they also introduce individual staff members in more richness, detail, and humanity than excerpts from interview transcripts can provide. Because I thought about Centerville in narrative terms based on my own attempts to understand the site over time, it made sense to structure the

dissertation chronologically around the work and contributions of a few key characters. Since it was the Charleston group's work which provided the original seed for this study, members of that group—Saundra Altman, Reggie Bridges, Tina Olsen, Kate Seabrook, and Shaun Coleman—play a recurring role in the narrative. Throughout my time in Centerville, I relied on glimpses of their work in the moment as well as retrospective accounts later on in order to tell a story about the way a small group of like-minded colleagues attempted to change the culture of their school. That story has much to offer those who still work in Centerville, and it may also be illuminating for those who work in urban and under-resourced schools elsewhere.

My intention is that in telling this story, a sense of progress and forward movement will emerge despite the many larger patterns of conflict and immobilization in Centerville. Telling a readable story about a struggling school does not seem worthwhile if the story does not also offer some spark of hope. For better or worse, in ways both constructive and destructive, staff members were learning, adapting, and growing each day they worked in Centerville. Their daily interactions and adaptations both created and sustained toxic culture. With a clearer understanding of the “toxic” patterns they were immersed in, staff members in Centerville may choose in the future to engage in *new* forms of learning, adaptation, and growth, which may in turn lead to new patterns of interaction with students and each other. In doing so, they have the opportunity to alter toxic culture and author a new and more hopeful chapter in their continuing story.

## CHAPTER TWO TOXIC SCHOOL CULTURE

“I don’t think there’s *any* consensus amongst *anybody* here about what’s the proper way to teach kids, what’s the proper method to discipline kids, what school rules are important, which aren’t, there is *no* consensus here. At all. None. We’re a feudal society. You know, what goes on in my kingdom doesn’t mirror at all what’s going on in the next kingdom next door .... I think we’re all trying to do a good job. We just have different visions of what a good job is.”

—Wade Anderson

### **Defining the problem, the conditions, and the consequences**

Everyone at Centerville High School, from teachers to security guards, agreed that the school was a difficult place to work. Centerville’s struggles were well-documented in objective measures like test scores and graduation rates, in local news articles reporting on the district’s challenges, and in everyday comments by staff members about how things were going. As Reggie Bridges told me more than once, “We’re not succeeding, we’re surviving” (fieldnotes, 9-13-06).

When members of the Charleston group returned from a professional development workshop talking about the school’s “toxic” culture as a fundamental problem, I found a compelling term to describe the dynamics I had witnessed in the building. Under constant pressure to raise test scores under No Child Left Behind, adults engaged in a persistent internal debate over the reasons for Centerville students’ widespread academic failure. Some maintained that students failed because they didn’t

value education; others countered that teachers did not do enough to form relationships with students and present opportunities for meaningful learning. Still others argued that the school was paralyzed by low expectations and a lack of administrative leadership and vision. Rather than serving as a force that led adults to rally together in search of solutions, chronic failure only increased staff conflict. By labeling the school's culture toxic, the Charleston group shifted the conversation, at least among themselves, away from assigning blame for students' poor academic performance and toward an examination of the underlying causes.

On a metaphorical level, toxicity implied a condition of sickness. While many people recognized that the district's finances were in poor health due to declining enrollment, few acknowledged the extent to which sickness festered in the context of everyday interactions. Disagreement simmered in the building, but rarely did staff members engage directly with those holding opposing points of view. Instead, like-minded colleagues constructed and circulated explanations for school failure among themselves. When teachers came together in staff meetings to discuss significant problems the school faced, conversation tended to break down. Many teachers resisted participating in these meetings by arriving late; some also routinely graded papers, read the newspaper, or flipped through Avon catalogues. Others resisted by telling jokes at others' expense and making facetious remarks in response to serious questions. At most meetings, teachers grouped themselves together in cliques and factions, content to sit back and listen while a few individuals dominated the conversation. More often than not, however, staff meetings did not even take up discussions of the school's core problems.

Instead, administrators used the time to announce schedules for testing, parent conferences, or athletic events.

The divisiveness that underscored staff meetings reflected a deeper pattern of negativity in the building that Shaun Coleman called “cancerous.” In the staff lounge, teachers complained bitterly about colleagues whose practices they disdained and about students and entire classes they found to be incorrigible. In the front office and the custodial break room, members of the support staff criticized teachers and administrators who they thought performed their jobs poorly and told stories about students who had recently been suspended or were rumored to be pregnant. Teasing banter between adults in the hallways looked playful, but at times it belied deeper disagreement and hostility. “There are some ways in which the veneer in this building suggests that things are better than they actually are,” Shaun explained. “But when you start scratching that surface, and you start asking questions, you very quickly find out there’s just this huge current of negativity that runs right underneath the surface .... And I think it’s much worse than people are willing to admit” (interview, 11-3-06).

At times when discipline problems were getting out of hand, small groups of staff members would come together to devise a new set of policies and procedures. But underlying animosity in the building produced an environment in which staff members worked at cross-purposes. Teachers enforced different rules, communicated different expectations, and held students to different standards. Individuals acted as free agents, undermining the efforts of teacher leaders to unify the staff around a set of common goals. “I’m in my own little world,” teacher Camille Plumley said. “I don’t let the politics keep me from doing what I’m supposed to do with the kids” (interview, 4-4-07).

Other teachers grew highly frustrated by this approach. “You have teachers that look at their classroom as their little kingdom,” James Merrick complained. “‘It’s my classroom, you don’t tell me what I do in my classroom. I determine what happens in there.’ And it irritates the heck out of me” (interview, 11-29-06).

Low-grade hostility toward students was widespread, demonstrated by the tone adults took with students in the halls and the number of students who were routinely kicked out of class or suspended. Individual teachers tried to counter the toxic effects of pervasive negativity, but they were fighting ingrained patterns of interaction. “I just think we attack our students,” Tina Olsen explained, “Instead of trying to talk to them. Verbally, all the time.” While some adults took a relational approach, appealing to students to cooperate as though good behavior was a personal favor, others yelled at students on a daily basis for minor infractions like wearing hats indoors or sagging their pants. The strong emotional bonds between some teachers and students stood in stark contrast to the routine conflict between others. Some administrators seemed to thrive on conflict, playing escalation games in which they doled out suspensions and then threatened to tack on additional days if students talked back. Administrators who took a less confrontational approach to misbehaving students led teachers to worry that they were inconsistent or soft. Chronic negativity was seen by most as part and parcel of daily life in Centerville, though individual staff members were deeply disturbed by what went on. “You would never go and talk to somebody at a different job like that,” Tina said. “But we think it’s okay to talk to our students like that because, I don’t know, we’re older than them? Because we’re smarter than them? I don’t know” (interview, 12-1-06).

Many adults justified their interactions with students by drawing implicit parallels between students' behavioral tendencies and their race and class status. "We already know certain groups get into more difficulty," teacher Helen Granville said. "It just says that their behavior isn't school appropriate! It doesn't say anything about, that that's bad to be that color or that culture or to be poor, but the fact is, you can't teach a bunch of kids who can't *behave*" (interview, 5-3-07). Another teacher, Pat Waddell, was both more explicit and more defensive about the racial pattern to her disciplinary problems. "The problems that I've had with students are minority students. Like where I'm actually, I've met in the principal's office with, they have been in most cases minority students. And it seems like if they're not getting justification for why they're upset from the principal, it automatically turns to, 'You're racist.' And I get very upset and very emotional when that, because ..." She sighed. "It's like, it has nothing to do with that. It has to do with your child" (interview, 2-23-07).

Though most staff members were hesitant to bring up race, racial tension was often an underlying cause of friction. Teachers who saw racial patterns in their colleagues' treatment of students had no tolerance for denials of racism. Robin Riley described the kinds of comments she heard in the building. "Some of the people say, 'Oh I'm not racist, I don't have to deal with that.' You know, 'I treat all these kids.' Then why do you go around saying that they're retarded, and they can't learn, or they're low achievers, and they're the bottom. If you have those negative attitudes about kids, period, that's a problem" (interview, 5-2-07). Even worse, others explained, was the refusal by the staff as a whole to examine the role of race in the school. "Sometime I feel that, um, we have racial issues in our building," Grace Thomas began. "No one wants to deal with

that issue. And it should be dealt with. I've ran into some racial issues where I've tried to talk to people, and it doesn't go anywhere ... We as a staff, we as a community, we have to learn. Everybody don't have people skills. You know what I mean? Everybody don't have people skills" (interview, 6-12-07).

For a long time, I was unaware of the vehemence that underscored adult disagreement about the problems in Centerville. Although I recognized different "camps" in the building, and I knew of a few adults who didn't like one another, I didn't pick up on the deeper and more widespread forms of antagonism underlying interactions. In part this was because staff members who didn't get along simply avoided each other. It was also because people were not as likely to speak candidly about their experiences in casual hallway conversation as they were in confidential interviews with me. The more people I interviewed, the more I realized that disagreements between colleagues weren't merely matters of professional difference. Conflicts were personal, and staff members nursed deeply-felt emotional wounds. As an ethnographer, I became a central repository for people's personal stories and grievances as well as their deep-seated and wide-ranging opinions about the culture of the building. When people expressed conflicting points of view on the nature of the school's problems, it often felt like they were speaking to each other through me.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the undercurrent of animosity, I heard staff members talk frequently about Centerville as a family. The discourse of family was invoked as a point of pride in both

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<sup>56</sup> This sense that staff members were speaking to each other through me was particularly apparent during discussions of the role of race in the building, which I will address in Chapter 4. For example, I felt myself to be the repository of competing viewpoints every time a staff member claimed to be colorblind, at which point I would recall how another person had said staff members were lying to themselves if they said they didn't see race. My growing awareness of the stark contrasts in different staff members' positions and their different interpretations of the problems in the building helped orient me analytically to different discourse groups and belief systems.



public forums and private conversations. The community's small size and underdog status in the local area bred fierce loyalty among its inhabitants. Teachers often praised students for the way they stuck together, especially in the face of derogatory remarks made about the school by outsiders.<sup>57</sup> Students' commitment to defending and taking care of their own was cited by some teachers as their best character trait. Even teachers who commuted to their jobs from affluent communities nearby saw themselves as members of the Centerville family, though relations within the family were strained. As administrators came and went, and as departing teachers were replaced by permanent subs, veteran staff members worried openly about the family's decline. "The way I used to describe it to people is, this is a close-knit group," said teacher Louise Tolbert. "That's the way it's always been at Centerville High School. This has always been a family atmosphere. I don't see that so much anymore" (interview, 2-1-07). Others used humor to acknowledge the family's problems. "It's a family with a lot of serious concerns," said support staff member Dorothy Loveland. "What do you say when you've got a family with, um, dysfunctional?" She laughed. "We are a dysfunctional family" (interview, 11-28-06). Like many real families, the intensity of their shared circumstances brought out an underlying dynamic of antagonism. Different opinions about how to cope with those circumstances fractured the family and degraded its overall health.

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<sup>57</sup> Staff members who had roots in the community had strong reactions of their own to what they perceived to be derogatory remarks by outsiders. In defending Centerville, their loyalty to the community showed, along with underlying pride in it. "We had a, a lady a couple years ago for professional development," explained support staff member Debby Harrington. "She came and she gave a big spiel about how we have got to let our Centerville history go. We've got to put it in the past, we've got to bury it, um, the schools didn't want us here because, the colleges didn't want us here, because we were a bunch of dumb hillbillies, and we need to just forget our Centerville history and we need to just let it go and become a new, vibrant community. I think that's bullshit. I will never, ever let go of Centerville's history. My parents worked in Centerville, um, Centerville is what made this town .... I'm very proud of Centerville. Very proud of it" (interview, 11-8-06).

As part of my fieldwork, I spent quite a lot of time visiting with teachers and security guards in the hallways while class was in session. I listened while staff members chatted with each other about school events, and I tagged along when security guards were called to individual classrooms to deal with disruptive students. This put me in the position to witness many antagonistic interactions firsthand. Just one week after members of the Charleston group shared their revelation about toxic school culture, I observed an exchange between Dr. Warner and a student that I would come to realize was a routine example of toxicity in Centerville.

**Ethnographic Interlude: “I’ve walked into a cesspool.”**

Al Ligget, my friend the security guard, is escorting Deion, an African American male who has been kicked out of math class, to the principal’s office. Because Deion is repeating ninth grade, Dr. Warner will handle him, as he does all ninth grade disciplinary cases. While they walk ahead of me, I listen to Deion telling Al he’s the best basketball player in all of Centerville and nearby Fern Creek.

When we get to the main office, Dr. Warner is standing at the front counter filling out a form. Seeing Deion, he barks, “What is *he* doing here?”

Al explains that Deion was kicked out of class. Dr. Warner glares at him.

“I had my coat on. It was cold in there,” Deion says.

“You had your *coat* on?” Dr. Warner shouts. “I told you to put it away! You got it back out again?” He shakes his head in disbelief. “Al, tell Mr. Simpson to give him five days!”

Deion protests. “Five days?”

“You want to make it ten?” he spits.

Dr. Warner sends Al back to Deion’s math class with a referral for the teacher to fill out. I follow him. While Al goes inside, I wait in the hall. I look up and see Dr. Warner coming toward me with a clipboard in his hand.

“When I meet with these parents, I think I’m talking to people who have never *been* parents. They way they send these kids to school.” He points to a student who’s heading into the bathroom down the hall. “The way they dress. Look at that. You call that dressed and ready for school?” The student is wearing cargo pants that sag to his knees, an oversized white T-shirt, and a sweatband across his forehead.

“This is a joke,” Dr. Warner says disgustedly. “They can’t read, they can’t write. I’ve walked into a cesspool! People used to say, I’m going to work in the factory. I don’t need school. Not any more,” he says, shaking his head. “No sir.”

Al comes out of the classroom and flashes the referral, still blank, at Dr. Warner. “She said she wanted to do it later.”

Dr. Warner reaches for it. “I want to add something to that.” He takes a seat in a student desk that’s been placed in the hall. “He’s an ass. My son said, ‘Daddy, you’ve walked into a sewer.’”

I watch as Dr. Warner writes, *Stopped for not wearing belt*, and I realize this is not Deion’s first run-in with Doc today.

“The bastard,” he says, lifting his pen from the referral. “He’ll never graduate high school. He hasn’t learned anything.”

When Al and I get back to the office, Deion is standing in front of a framed poster-sized photograph of last year’s boys’ varsity basketball team, which hangs

alongside photos of other varsity teams. He points to various players. “He’s in jail. He’s in jail. He’s in jail.” Then he walks across the room to take a seat in one of the chairs lined up against the wall. Another student already sitting there laughs. “Everywhere you go, people hate you,” she tells him.

“I hate this school,” Deion says.

—Fieldnotes, 10-26-05

### **Discursive roots of the toxic dynamic**

Exchanges like this one highlight the role of language in Centerville and why I began to take note of it in my fieldwork. Over the course of many confrontational exchanges between staff members and students, I came to understand the ways in which language use both contributed to a toxic school environment and exposed the ideologies<sup>58</sup> underscoring adults’ worldviews. The exchange between Dr. Warner and Deion revealed the class-based ideology that shaped Dr. Warner’s views. I learned over countless subsequent conversations that Dr. Warner saw his middle-class life and values as worlds apart from the lives and values of students in Centerville.

When Dr. Warner criticized the clothes students wore for their ghetto style, when he assessed their life chances in terms of factory jobs that were no longer available, and

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<sup>58</sup> In the course of this dissertation, I refer to both beliefs *and* ideologies in my analysis of staff members’ language use. While the two concepts are related, I use ideology to refer to broader and wider societal “repositories of meaning” (Edley, 2001, p. 202) which are comprised of interlocking beliefs that derive from the overarching ideology. For example, Dr. Warner ascribed to a class-based *ideology* that was comprised of a series of specific *beliefs* about low-income people: they didn’t want to work hard, they expected handouts, and they lacked the motivation necessary in order to acquire needed skills. Another way to explain the difference between ideology and belief (which is not explicit in the analysis I perform, but which informs the way I read adult interactions with low-income and minority students) lies in notions of power and hegemony. Ideologies “are representations which produce and sustain relations of domination between different groups in societies” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 238). As such, ideologies reflect and preserve power relations, while beliefs are shared (and sometimes fleeting) meaning-making constructs that have greater potential to be challenged and revised.

when he bragged about his own sons who had grown up to become doctors and lawyers, he revealed the race and class-based lenses with which he judged Centerville students. “When I see these youngsters with their pants below their buttocks, dragging on the floor,” he often began, “I’m wondering, are their parents a part of what they call the hip-hop world?” Comments on sagging pants were usually followed by comments on students and their families refusing to work hard and instead expecting handouts. “It’s not about, I want to be somebody great. It’s gimme. And gimme got gone when I was born” (interview, 11-14-06). Standing outside the cafeteria during lunch duty, I heard Dr. Warner repeat these expressions *literally* on a daily basis.

Initially, though, I was taken aback by his blatant hostility toward students, and I wondered if I was the only one who found Doc’s language to be unusually harsh. A few weeks before the incident with Deion, I commented to Al that Doc seemed awfully hard on kids. “Yeah, that’s that fire he breathes,” Al said dismissively. “I say treat ’em with a little respect. It goes a long way” (fieldnotes, 10-5-05). Though Al and Doc were both African American, Al’s reaction to Doc let me know that he had a very different view of Centerville students.

Dr. Warner’s comments, in contrast to Al’s, demonstrate that toxicity in Centerville was more than just a matter of adults being frustrated with students for their disruptive behavior or poor academic performance. Toxicity had its roots in adults’ underlying beliefs and assumptions about low-income and minority students. Although staff members seldom articulated these beliefs explicitly, they became profoundly apparent in the ways adults talked. Furthermore, differences in the ways adults talked helped to shed light on the nature of the conflict that embroiled the staff.

Debates over who was responsible for student failure in Centerville hinted at deeper disagreements over how staff members should work with low-income and minority students and whether success with those students was even possible. Divisiveness within the staff reflected not just different approaches to teaching, but different ideologies about the students as raced and classed beings. I came to recognize these ideologies when I began paying close attention to *what* adults said about the school and the students, *who* individual staff members chose to associate with, and *how* those same staff members went on to interact with Centerville students. The differences across groups were both visible and pronounced. Although individual staff members came and went in Centerville, patterned ways of talking about the students and the school remained the same. These patterned forms of talk, or discourses, were stable, consistent, and powerful (Bialostok, 2002).

When teachers used similar phrases to describe Centerville students and offered similar descriptions of the challenges they faced in the classroom, they drew upon common discourses. These discourses provided ready-made ways of speaking and thinking about complex topics. They operated as forms of common sense, and they made contrasting worldviews visible. The discourses which circulated in Centerville both shaped adults' understandings of the students and offered competing ways of making sense of educational conditions. Adults recognized like-minded colleagues through their language use; consequently, groups formed around shared discourses. But while group affiliations were clearly apparent at staff meetings and at lunch, specific group membership changed from one year to the next due to retirements, layoffs, and attrition. Discourses, however, endured.

The animosity that persisted in the building can be better understood by examining the ideologies that divided people. These ideologies—which surfaced in everyday conversations at lunch, in discussions at staff meetings, and in formal interviews—were both preserved and perpetuated through discourses. Discourses simultaneously unified individuals into groups and polarized groups from each other. Staff members searching for confirmation of their ways of seeing and working with students could find it in the discourses of colleagues who held similar beliefs. When staff members encountered discourses they disagreed with, they had little incentive to talk *across* differences because it was so easy to turn to those whose beliefs they shared for confirmation and reinforcement.

It is important to point out that for many teachers, the fundamental need to survive in challenging circumstances necessitated quick and sometimes reductive interpretations of the conditions they faced. Discourses provided these interpretations. With different and contradictory discourses in circulation, however, staff members were presented with contradictory frameworks for making sense of their experiences. Since there were no mechanisms in place to foster deeper and more reflective conversations that *transcended* reductive discourses, the same ideological conflicts erupted year after year while educational conditions in the building remained the same. Looking closely at the ideological differences underlying staff members' discourses helps to explain *why* conversation was so often stymied and why the school remained stuck in its efforts to change.

### **How different groups framed the school's problems**

When staff members talked about the challenges facing Centerville High School, they almost universally drew on discourses about class and/or race in order to frame the school's problems. Though staff members invoked race and class in different ways in order to make different points, the patterns in their discourse use showed that interactions around race and class shaped everyone's understandings of the school's dynamics.

Because the majority of Centerville students lived in poverty, and because more than half of Centerville students were African American, adults in the building were highly conscious of students' race and class status. Adults split into opposing camps, however, when they referred to the role that race and class played in teaching and learning. One group of adults drew on deficit discourses about families in poverty and discourses about black culture in order to make blanket claims about students' failure to value education and their limited intellectual ability. In contrast, another group drew on class-conscious and race-conscious discourses in order to argue that the mostly white middle-class teaching staff was ill-equipped to work constructively with the Centerville population.

### ***Low-income and minority students are the problem***

When staff members complained that Centerville students were difficult to teach, they often made overt comments about students' race and class status, arguing that the challenges they faced existed *because* students were low-income or African American. Teachers invoked discourses of poverty in order to make categorical claims about the values of Centerville students, linking student values directly to their membership in low-income families. In describing what she had found as a new teacher in Centerville, Ellen



Garrity unselfconsciously referred to her middle-class worldview, which she distinguished from the values of her lower-class students:

They're low socioeconomic here. And they don't value anything but a paycheck. That's another thing that I find with the culture here in this particular school. If it doesn't relate to a paycheck, they could care less. They don't associate grades with how they're going to do when they get in the outside world ... To me it just, I come from a background of middle-class values, and I have to remind myself *constantly* that the culture and the values in here are low (interview, 12-11-06).

Teachers made similar associations between class status and values when they described beliefs about education in Centerville homes. Parents' class status was linked not just with a certain kind of job, but with a lackadaisical attitude toward the importance of education that parents passed along to their children. Marty Cahoon claimed that these values undermined teachers' efforts to motivate students:

There's very much I think a blue-collar-type attitude about it. I don't think education's as highly valued here as I'd like to see it ... If you took an average, I don't think you see as many that see education as the way to advance themselves, as much as it actually is. A lot of it I think is simply because education's not really impressed at home as much, and I think that whole attitude carries over to school (interview, 12-14-06).

While some teachers expressed hesitation when making broad claims about what students did or didn't value, they usually made those claims anyway in the course of trying to explain "culture" in Centerville. Joyce Jones explained, "Another thing that I find is part of the culture is, and I don't want to say this generally to everybody, but um, education is not valued like I think it should be" (interview, 5-9-07). Similarly, Andy Ellis acknowledged parents' reasons for viewing the school with distrust, but still pointed

to those parents as the source of the problem, attributing students' lack of value for education to their parents' socioeconomic status:

One of the frustrations I have is I sometimes don't think that our kids value education the way that they should .... In a lot of cases, the parents have struggled academically in high school and perhaps in college, and so they had a negative experience ... so I don't think they really get involved heavily with their children, perhaps even are counterproductive at home, like the school's almost the enemy. And you see that every once in a while in conversation. And even when I talk to parents, you can get kind of that tone a little bit. And whether that's socioeconomic, I don't know, it's more about value systems ... and it's not just African American kids, or Mexican American kids, it's kids in general in this school (interview, 12-19-06).

Claims associating students' failure to value education with their class status were made by adults of all kinds in Centerville, from custodians to administrators. I heard discourses of poverty invoked by adults who had grown up and attended school in the district, by staff members who had worked in the district for decades, and by new hires who were just getting acclimated. Many staff members seemed to take it as an article of faith that low-income students and their parents were incapable of understanding the value of education. The evidence they offered, however, was behavioral. "If they valued education," teacher Eleanor Shillington said, "they'd be in the classroom on time" (interview, 12-4-06).

One explanation for the ubiquity of discourses about poverty is that teachers had been encouraged to think about social class in relation to values through professional development workshops featuring the work of popular educational consultant Ruby Payne. Copies of her self-published book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, were widely available in Centerville. During my three years in the district, I heard

references to her ideas in the superintendent's office, at staff meetings, and in casual conversations with individual teachers. A small group of staff members went to see Payne in person when she presented a seminar in the area, while other staff members elected to attend in-house versions of Ruby Payne workshops led by their colleagues on professional development days. At a school board meeting, district curriculum director Cora Nicholas announced that she was willing to pay the \$10,000 fee to bring Payne in for a district-wide keynote speech, but Payne was unavailable on the date she needed to fill (fieldnotes, 1-12-06).

Teachers like Roz Nelson spoke facetiously of their fatigue with Payne's ideas. "Everybody's like, okay, yeah, we've heard Ruby Payne. Okay, you're telling me Ruby Payne again. Since I've been here they've talked about Ruby Payne every year. Okay, we got the point about Ruby Payne" (interview, 4-20-07). Others, however, found Payne's ideas to be clarifying and useful. According to Shaun Coleman, Payne's book "organized some ways in which to frame or see some of the baggage that our students come with ... and why it's so important to understand the student population that you're dealing with." For Shaun, Payne's textbook descriptions of students living in poverty closely resembled students in Centerville, and her suggestions about what these students needed gave him constructive ideas about how to teach. "It was interesting to me to see that stuff laid out in such a way that, the characteristics, the behavior patterns, all this stuff. I read it and I was like, I *see* that, *daily*, and then she took it from those observations to, here are some instructional strategies that you can use to incorporate those characteristics into some positive learning in the classroom" (interview, 11-3-06).

Other teachers, however, used Payne's ideas to develop reductive and potentially damaging views of Centerville students. As teachers absorbed information about "the culture of poverty" from her book, they developed stereotypical understandings of the values and conditions in low-income homes. In the homes they imagined, noise and chaos dominated.<sup>59</sup> Sheila Pitcher believed that this chaotic environment caused physiological damage to students' brain "wiring," rendering them incapable of performing simple analytical tasks:

This overriding culture here is more kind of culture of poverty. They fit the description almost to the bill, if you read any of the research .... One of the books I read on that, actually I think it's *Understanding Poverty* and I can't think of the author, um, spoke of reading comprehension, being able to compare and contrast. They said students coming from a household where all the TVs are on, the radio might be on, people are talking loud but nobody's really having a conversation, um, there's not a lot of organization in the household .... And so when they read something or they listen to something and they're asked, okay, you need to compare and contrast. We're going to make a Venn diagram, what were the differences and what were the similarities of these two characters. They haven't even gotten so far as to have the picture of the two characters in their head. And it's just that, you know, the brain isn't wired that way if you grow up around all that static (interview, 12-4-06).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> On one of Payne's checklists, "background 'noise'" was listed as a characteristic of low-income homes: "Almost always the TV is on, no matter what the circumstance. Conversation is participatory, often with more than one person talking at a time" (p. 68). In addition, "lack of order/organization" was to be expected: "Many of the homes/apartments of people in poverty are unkempt and cluttered. Devices for organization (files, planners) don't exist" (p. 70).

<sup>60</sup> While Payne never talks explicitly about "wiring," she does claim that "increasingly, students, mostly from poverty, are coming to school ... without the cognitive strategies" (p. 120). This claim is followed by a list of "cognitive deficiencies" that arise in students who have not learned to develop "cognitive strategies," including, as the teacher explained in the preceding example, the inability "to hold two sources inside the head while comparing and contrasting" (p. 123-124). Given Payne's argument about the cognitive capabilities of low-income students, many teachers come away from her workshops, like Sheila Pitcher did, with lowered expectations of low-income students' intellectual ability. In an essay exploring the messages teachers absorbed from Payne's materials, Bohn (2006) notes that one teacher concluded, "poor people can't think abstractly." For further discussion of the racist and classist stereotypes in Payne's work, see Bomer, Dworin, May, and Semingson (2008) and Gorski (2006). For an African-centered response to Payne, see Kunjufu (2006).

An unquestioning acceptance of Payne's ideas was also encouraged by outside consultants who perpetuated the myth that the environment in low-income homes causes brain damage. When Joyce Jones repeated the same theory about brain "wiring" that her colleague Sheila Pitcher put forth in the previous example, it became clear that a discourse about poverty had given some Centerville teachers a deterministic framework for interpreting students' academic struggles. Within this framework, students' home environment was understood to have damaged their capacity for learning almost beyond repair:

Um, that Nancy MacArthur that was here yesterday? She said something really interesting in our meeting on Monday. She said that by the time a child is three years old, there's some wiring that goes, and you know, this is just the way she said it, because I'm not an expert by any stretch, but it was real interesting to me, as relevant to my job ... she said they can become mis-wired or mis-, kind of not wired correctly as they hear a lot of noise, you know, a lot of screaming and shouting, a lot of chaos in their life .... And I asked her, I said, do you think it can be undone. And she said, oh yeah. But I think honestly, my experience has been that it takes a lot longer to undo it than it does to do it right the first time (interview, 5-9-07).

Passages like these suggest that many Centerville teachers turned to theories about the role of social class in education because they recognized Centerville students' challenging life circumstances and genuinely wanted to learn how to teach those students effectively. I got to know many Centerville students over the course of my fieldwork, and through our conversations in the library, hallways, and cafeteria, I learned firsthand what staff members already knew. Students did sometimes come to school without having had enough to eat; they did sometimes move from one relative's house to another's because of violence or abuse; they did sometimes live in disorganized

environments. But by relying so heavily on the discourses of poverty perpetuated by Ruby Payne, teachers adopted simplistic explanations for students' lack of academic success and kept their attention focused solely on students' limitations. Rarely did teachers talk in terms of low-income students' strengths, despite the fact that these, too, have been documented "in the research."<sup>61</sup>

According to Dworin and Bomer (2008), Payne's approach is persuasive because it "appeal(s) to what teachers already think they know about the poor" and encourages teachers to adopt discourses "that represent the poor as responsible for their own plight through degraded characters, attitudes, and behaviors" (p. 101). Although few Centerville teachers spoke openly of students and their families as "degraded," fewer still spoke in terms of families' resources or students' gifts.<sup>62</sup> Discourses of poverty kept the focus on students' social class as the source of the problem. Rarely did teachers examine the influence of their *own* social class on their stance toward students.

While talk about class was pervasive in Centerville, teachers were far more reluctant to bring up race. White teachers in particular used a variety of discursive strategies to avoid or deflect race talk. Often these teachers mentioned race only to deny its salience to the discussion, as in the Andy Ellis example where the problem of poor "value systems" among the students was framed solely as a matter of social class that had

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<sup>61</sup> I heard no teachers refer to alternative portraits of families in poverty such as those provided by Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines (1988), who argued that the Shay Avenue families in their study "created structured home environments in which there were family expectations of cooperation and participation within a framework of rules that were understood by the children and reinforced by the parents" (p. 194).

<sup>62</sup> Compton-Lilly (2003) acknowledges that although "it is easy to get caught up in discourses that sensationalize the experience of teaching in an urban school ... it would be better to comment on our successful students, our involved parents, and the joys that accompany being the teacher of talented, capable students. Unfortunately, negative conversations too often occur in our staff rooms as teachers swap stories about their students and their students' families, with each story more terrible than the one before. We must not allow discourses of degradation and dismissal to pervade our schools and communities" (p. 141).

nothing to do with race (“it’s not just African American kids, or Mexican American kids, it’s kids in general in this school”). Those who did refer to race as an influence on students’ behaviors or values usually did so obliquely by making claims about “hip hop culture.” Teachers’ claims about hip hop culture actually drew upon discourses about race in much the same way that teachers’ claims about the values in low-income homes drew on discourses about poverty. For example, the race-based claims that Matthew Meissner makes about Centerville students’ values in this example are almost interchangeable with the class-based claims made by teachers in earlier examples:

I think there is a culture that these kids have. That they bring here and that is allowed to continue. And prosper. And that’s a culture of the hip hop generation. You know, they want to be the hip hop kids and they don’t really *value* much. Outside of image. I mean their value in life is image (interview, 12-13-06).

By talking about “culture” instead of about race, white teachers were able to make claims about the characteristics of black students indirectly. But in the ways they defined hip hop culture by referring to black-dominated sports and musical genres, as in the following example, teachers like Jimmy Wolfe made it clear that they were talking about black students and their values in relation to a particular strand of black culture popularized by the media:

So these guys have different values ... you know, the whole hip-hop culture and the whole, what they see on TV, celebrities, and that’s the cool thing, that’s what I should look like, and they just don’t get it. The kids that tell me they’re going to be a professional football player. Or going to play in the NBA. Don’t have a clue what it takes to get there .... We’ve got these kids, we’re trying to deal with them on an academic level, and they’re more concerned with the fame and fortune of, you know, rapper or celebrity or sports figure or somebody. That’s what their priorities are, a lot of these kids (interview, 4-25-07).

Whether or not a significant number of Centerville students wanted to be rappers or professional athletes, essentializing discourses about race made it appear that *all* students in Centerville—at least all black students—wanted these things.

On the rare occasions when white teachers talked about black students directly, some like Henry Schultz revealed their belief that students themselves presented obstacles to learning:

I think some of our African American kids are being, holding each other back and, and, uh, uh, letting others, you know, establish their expectations for them. That to me is very frustrating. I mean you can just almost see it sometimes happening....There's a culture there, it's pretty strong, and how to overcome it (interview, 12-8-06).

In stating that students needed to “overcome” black culture in order to be successful at school, Henry drew upon a familiar discourse about black students’ “culture” as the problem, signaling with his use of the code word “culture” his underlying beliefs about race: that black students were different, deviant, and responsible for their own failure (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Even as these teachers made sweeping claims about black students, however, they simultaneously maintained that race was not an issue at Centerville High School. This was a common discursive contradiction. Individual teachers would invoke discourses about race one minute and then shift to discourses of colorblindness the next. Teachers claimed that they treated all students the same, even as they noted that black students were distinguishable from white students because they were “a color.” Matthew



Meissner, the teacher who complained about students who wanted to be “hip hop kids,” argued that race was not an issue in the school:

Unless you make it an issue, race is not an issue. I mean I have the same expectations from, you know, my girls as I do my boys. My black kids as I do my Mexicans, my Russians, and my Americans. Or my, my Caucasians. Europeans, whatever the term is, the PC term of the day. I mean I expect them to do the same things. And, you know, I don't sit here and go home and grade a paper and think, I'm grading this black kid's paper. I'm grading whoever's it is. I'm grading Jazminn's paper. Jazminn's Jazminn. That's who she is, and I'm not going to treat her differently because she's a color (interview, 12-13-06).

Most white teachers also maintained that they simply did not *see* race, despite the fact that many people in Centerville were quite preoccupied with the segregated seating patterns that were common at staff meetings, in the cafeteria, and in classrooms that did not have deliberately integrated seating charts.<sup>63</sup> Jimmy Wolfe, the teacher who blamed “hip hop culture” for students' poor values, insisted that despite some people's claims to the contrary, there really wasn't “a racial thing going on” in Centerville:

I mean we talk about culture, we can talk about all different kinds of things, race. Uh, I don't really see a big, I don't know. Some people have told me that they think there's a racial thing going on in our school, separated blacks, whites. I don't see it too much (interview, 4-25-07).

As teachers went to great lengths to deny they saw race, they also revealed through their discourse how anxious they actually were about race. They showed their

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<sup>63</sup> Sandra Altman *did* admit that she saw race, and she believed that those segregated seating patterns presented an obstacle to changing school culture. “I think you've noticed the way culturally we, uh, associate with one another in this building. I mean that's huge!” she told me in an interview. “It, it's very racial. It's, it's, uh, it goes from being departmental to, to racial, to, to sexual orientation ... We've kept very clear groups, you know, in this building. Very clearly defined. And until we interact with one another better, how do we, how do we change culture in a building? We don't model that when we're together, so how do we model that in a classroom? How do we bring about those changes in a classroom?” (interview, 6-13-07).

discomfort by repeating their denials, getting stuck on the same phrases as they tried to get through a sentence, and conceding that maybe I saw something racial going on that they didn't. Most importantly, they invoked the discourse of caring—Centerville teachers “just cared about kids”—in order to stave off the possibility that these same teachers could also be racist. Henry Schultz argued that African American kids were holding each other back, and then claimed not to see teachers responding to students racially:

I don't see, I see teachers trying, uh, very hard. And uh, I don't see race amongst teachers, I don't see that as, as a, I just don't, I haven't, I haven't seen it. You know, they just care about kids .... I don't know, maybe you have, I haven't seen anybody that, and yet now and then you hear it from the kids. You're racist. I don't, you know, no I'm not, you're just misbehaving! (interview, 12-8-06).<sup>64</sup>

In order to understand the anxiety that white teachers in particular had about race, it's important to acknowledge the ways in which claims of racism were routinely invoked by Centerville students. Students most commonly accused their teachers of being racist in relation to discipline and grading. Sometimes they invoked race by making what student teacher Amber Sandstrom called “black jokes,” while other times they made accusations in the heat of an emotional outburst. Teachers responded to these accusations

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<sup>64</sup> Even though Henry denied that racism drove staff interactions with black Centerville students, he acknowledged the persistence of racism in our society: “Everybody, I think I mentioned, is, is, can be racist. Everybody. Racism, you cannot say to somebody, you're not, I'm not, I'm not racist. I couldn't say that. Because every minute, of every day, when you start using the word *they*, or, you start doing something, you just, I mean there's certain little, uh, thoughts that sometimes will enter your head, you know, why don't *they*, and, that's racism. Or whatever. It's prejudice” (interview, 12-8-06). This poignant contradiction between what Henry understood about the prejudices that drive human nature, and what he did not see about the interactions between staff and students in Centerville, can be understood as an example of dilemmatic thinking. I will discuss the concept of dilemmatic thinking (Edley, 2001) in more depth in Chapter Three.

in the same ways students made them, sometimes turning them into a joke, other times lashing out at students in anger.

When teachers responded to claims of racism with humor, as teacher Allison Gratsch did, they undercut the potential seriousness of students' charges by reassuring themselves that students were "just playing":

And then he said something about me being a racist. You know, and he's just playing. He's just joking around. And I said okay, you found me out. I, I, I just, I don't like anybody (laughs). You know, I, that's right, you know, I'm a racist, and the kids just laughed. Because they know. You know, nothing like that is even an issue with me (interview, 2-15-07).

Here Allison's joking claims that she was a closet racist, and her report of the class's subsequent laughter, positioned the student's accusation as impossible and even ludicrous. By claiming that "nothing like that is even an issue with me," Allison insulated herself from self-examination and shut down the possibility of a genuine conversation about the role of race in her classroom. At the same time, her own joke—and the nervous laughter that accompanied it—shows that she was quite conscious of and concerned about race.

Teacher Rachel Moses described a different approach to shutting down student claims of racism. While her tone was very different, she too inoculated herself by framing students' accusations as "play":

I mean I've had kids say to me before, you know, accuse me because I'm white. "You're just saying, you're just making me because I'm black." And I'll just look them straight in the eye and say, "Don't even play me. You know, don't even, don't even start that." And they know, okay. She's not going to take that crap.

You know, and I've never had anything go further than that. As far as a race issue. Nothing further than that (interview, 6-6-07).

By taking a physical stance of looking students “straight in the eye” and by framing claims of racism as “crap” that she didn't have to take, Rachel made the topic of race into a battle line in her classroom and forbade students to cross it. In reassuring me and herself that no race issue had ever “gone further” than the level of accusation, Rachel implicitly acknowledged that she must remain poised to defend herself against the possibility of another charge of racism.

In both cases, defensive reactions to accusations of racism suggest how vulnerable these white teachers felt. Their ability to function in a racially-mixed school was dependent upon their ability to mentally eliminate the possibility that they were racist. This was hard to do in a place where race issues were frequently lurking in the conversation. No matter how the topic of race came up, the majority of white teachers reacted defensively. A small number of white staff members saw that defensiveness in their colleagues and actually called for greater engagement with race. But these staff members were simultaneously wrestling with their own conflicted views about race in the building, which can be seen in the following example. Note the ways in which Assistant Principal Frank Simpson called for greater work on equity issues in the building, then hedged when considering the possibility that some of his colleagues could be racist:

We need to be gathering information about equity within our building ... Once we have that put together, we can actually ... have something concrete to give the staff to look at. And it's not going to be easy. Because a lot of people are not going to be real thrilled. They'll get defensive. They'll think they're being attacked as racist. When that isn't the case at all. I don't believe anyone who teaches in here is a racist. Okay ... I don't think anyone outwardly is a racist. I

think that people don't want to be accepting of certain things about different cultures (interview, 3-22-07).

Frank's need to reassure me (and perhaps himself) that no one who taught in Centerville was racist is certainly understandable. Accusations of racism were deeply upsetting for adults who wanted and needed to believe that they were doing right by kids in Centerville. Statistics, however, told a different story, as black students failed at higher rates, were suspended at higher rates, and dropped out at greater rates than white students. By reframing racism as a lack of acceptance "of certain things about different cultures," Frank created a way to avoid talking directly about the role of racial belief systems in adults' treatment of black students in the building. However, in correcting his initial claim that no one in the building was racist by saying no one was *outwardly* racist, he revealed his awareness that there was something deeper going on than simple lack of acceptance of different cultures.

While there were noticeable patterns in white staff members' talk about race, certainly not all white staff members spoke and thought in the same way. Neither did all black staff members. Even more importantly, however, as shown in earlier examples, patterns of discourse use were contradictory *within individuals*. These contradictions were apparent when teachers denied seeing race and then engaged in color-conscious discourses. They also were visible when staff members denied the possibility of racist teachers and then conceded that there were problems with teachers' treatment of students from different cultures. Discursive contradictions demonstrate the degree to which individuals' discourse use was both patterned and inconsistent. As individuals struggled to make sense of the challenging conditions they faced in the building, particularly with

regard to complex racial dynamics, they drew upon competing discursive frameworks which muddied their thinking. Individuals would demonstrate hints of race consciousness as they acknowledged the possibility that race was a factor in their interactions with students, and then they would pull back into the familiar territory of race avoidance (cf. Frankenberg, 1993).

Andy Ellis, the teacher who denied the salience of race in an earlier example, later acknowledged that he had occasionally been accused of being racist. The contradictoriness of his discourse use—as well as his discomfort with race—can be seen as he worked through his thoughts about the accusation. While moving back and forth between considering the possibility that race “is an issue” (race-conscious discourse) and denying any “racial trends” in his interactions with students (race-avoidant discourse), he stumbled repeatedly:

And you know, I've had in ten years, five or six different claims that, you know, it, it's uh, you know, with African American students and the fact that I'm a white guy. And in the f-, you know, and, “We got a lot of white teachers down there that, that are, you know, uh, treating these, these black kids this way,” and you know, that, you know, it, again, reference, implications along those lines. And I, I usually let that just go right off, but it's *there*, you know .... Maybe it *is* an issue. Maybe, maybe the kids aren't relating to us, or we're not relating to them because of, you know, our, our culture, both cultures, I don't know. It's hard. You try to think that that's not an issue. But you know, I've got to step back and say, you know what, but I'm, I'm a white guy, so, you know, may-, maybe I'm not seeing what's there, too ....

Yeah I try not to, try not to turn into it .... I mean I, you know, I have, in terms of good relationships, and conflicts with students, I think it, I don't see any racial trends in them. I mean I have just as many good relationships with African American students as, you know, Caucasian students, and vice versa, just as many personality conflicts .... But I, I don't really, ever really see a racial trend, it's more of a behavior trend, know, you know. So I, I usually don't get too involved with it, and it's never been taken too far (interview, 12-19-06).

Though he recognized that race frequently shaped Centerville parents' interpretations of interactions between teachers and students at the high school, Andy resembled his colleague Rachel who reported that she had "never had anything go further" than the accusation of racism. Like Rachel, Andy never experienced race issues being "taken too far" because when parents suggested that race was a factor in his interactions with students, he chose not to engage with them in discussion of the subject. Instead he just "let that go." Unlike Rachel, however, Andy acknowledged that race as an issue was *there*.

Like his colleague Henry Schultz, Andy also used the word *culture* instead of race to discuss teachers' challenges "relating" to students. With this discourse move, Andy distanced himself from engagement with race. At the same time, however, he showed that he was aware of his avoidance when he noted that he was "a white guy" and that "maybe he's not seeing what's there." But he demonstrated the influence of race-avoidant discourses on his thinking as he tried to resolve the subject of race in our interview. After considering the possibility that race played a significant role in his interactions with Centerville students, he concluded that he "[didn't] ever really see a racial trend" in his classroom interactions. Any trends in his differing relationships with students were simply behavioral. As for examining race itself, he "[didn't] get too involved with it."

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that Centerville teachers were well aware of their school's academic problems, and they genuinely wanted to understand the reasons for their students' chronic academic struggles. In their search for explanations for students' poor academic performance, many teachers focused on behavioral and

attitudinal characteristics that they associated with students' race and class identities. Discourses of poverty and discourses of race provided teachers with often-damaging deficit frameworks for making sense of students' mental capacities, attitudes, and "values" toward education. The similarities of teachers' claims about students demonstrate the pervasiveness of these discourses. At the same time, teachers' contradictory use of race-based discourses—seen in the ways they slipped back and forth between race-conscious and race-avoidant forms of talk—hints at the contested nature of these frameworks and teachers' underlying ambivalence about the role that race was playing in their interactions.

While the majority of adults were convinced that the school's problems were rooted in students' attitudes, values, and behaviors, other adults believed that it was *staff responses* to students as differently raced and classed that created the school's toxic culture. However, disagreement over whether staff or students presented the problem actually signaled a deeper degree of conflict, both within the building and within individuals, about the ways in which adults should think about and handle the race and class differences that separated them from students—and from each other.

### ***White middle-class teachers are the problem***

Although most staff members in Centerville focused on students in discussions of the school's problems and thus participated unselfconsciously in the circulation of deficit discourses about race and poverty, a smaller number drew on race-conscious and class-conscious discourses in order to describe the influence of *adult* attitudes and beliefs on toxic culture in Centerville. Among these were members of the Charleston group. Just



as other staff members circulated common claims about the influence of poverty and race on students' values, the Charleston group developed common ways of thinking and talking about adults' role in the interactional dynamics in the school.

As they searched for ways to explain toxicity in the building, members of the Charleston group focused on adults' race- and class-based views of Centerville students. Shaun Coleman invoked discourses of class difference to argue that middle-class teachers were too socially distant from Centerville students to understand students' attitudes and motivations. Explicit in the discourse of class difference was the notion that adults from the middle class needed special tools in order to work effectively with the Centerville population:

Some people who work here may be frustrated because they lack the tools to understand why some of our students are coming to this school with some of the assumptions about education that they have .... Teaching as a profession is dominated by middle to upper-middle-class people ... who bring with them a different set of experiences, a different set of assumptions, a different set of expectations, maybe even, than folks who have struggled in, in the lower working classes. It is something that I think should be explicitly addressed.

While Ruby Payne's influence can be seen here in the argument that there are class-based differences in the ways teachers and students *view* education, unlike others in Centerville, Shaun chose not to blame students by invoking discourses of poverty to claim that they fundamentally did not *value* education. Instead he focused on the limited understandings of middle-class adults as most salient to the problem.

At the same time, Shaun also acknowledged that the social distance between teachers and students could foster deeper and more insidious forms of middle-class bias:

As I said, some teachers, maybe they lack the skills to know how to work with the population. Some just flat out, unfortunately, may have very classist views, and culturally biased views, that are deeply rooted and were never explored, in terms of unpackaged so that those layers could be peeled back a little bit and they could be encouraged, or better yet, forced to examine some of their own assumptions before they got into the profession (interview, 11-3-06).

Though Shaun positioned teachers differently in these two examples—first as somewhat innocently lacking tools, then as more dangerously lacking in the ability to see beyond their own bias—in both cases, he framed the problem as residing not in students, but in the class-based limitations of Centerville teachers. And while in the first example, he suggested that teachers were simply missing a skill set they needed, in the second example, he positioned teachers as active resisters who may need to be “forced” to examine the assumptions arising from their middle-class worldviews.

Some members of the Charleston group—but not all—wove race into their arguments about the damaging effects of social distance between teachers and students. When they did, they tended to include race as a marker of social identity that was on a par with social class in shaping adults’ views of students. This can be seen in the following example, where Tina Olsen adds “white” to the existing discourse of class difference in order to explain adults’ failure to understand students’ attitudes and behaviors:

A lot of us teachers are, you know, middle-class white people. We come from families and a culture that we’re familiar and comfortable with, and we think is normal, where there’s certain expectations of what you do when you’re in school, and that education is important ... and we’re dealing with students sometimes who don’t come from that same background, and we don’t understand it, and we’re judgmental, I guess, of it. And instead of trying to stop and understand the differences between us and then address those, we just come across as being really judgmental and angry and hypocritical sometimes (interview, 12-1-06).

Here again is the assumption, fueled by discourses circulating in Ruby Payne's work, that there were fundamental differences in how people from separate social classes viewed education. Tina acknowledged that staff members tended to judge what they didn't understand, and she indicated that this tendency to be judgmental led to emotionally-charged, often destructive interactions between adults and students. However, what she didn't unpack were the ways in which race differences potentially added to and complicated conflicts arising out of class-based differences in the school. Instead, she conflated race-based and class-based perspectives into a single "white middle-class" way of viewing what was "normal."

Obviously not all Centerville teachers were white, and not all white Centerville teachers were middle-class. "White middle-class" happened to be just one lens among many that shaped adults' views of Centerville students. But because the discourse of "white middle-class-ness" was invoked so frequently by race- and class-conscious staff members, a white middle-class lens shaped most of their critical discussions of the school's problems. Unfortunately, this white middle-class lens served to oversimplify staff members' understandings of the complex interactional dynamics between adults and students. Furthermore, no staff members described race as a socially-constructed category that contributed to systemic inequality, and no staff members identified racism as a system of white privilege in the school. In addition, no teachers introduced the idea that there could be social or ideological differences *within* ostensibly homogenous social classes and racial groups.

White members of the Charleston group were not the only ones who conflated race and class into a single explanatory framework. At times black members of the group also lumped race and class differences together in their discussion of the gap separating teachers and students in the school. In this next example, Reggie Bridges identifies numerous dimensions of teachers' "backgrounds" that shape their views of Centerville students. Although he included race as one salient dimension, he mirrored the moves of his Charleston colleagues by placing more emphasis on the role of poverty:

The majority of our teachers come from backgrounds that, and when I say backgrounds, family, socioeconomic, *cultural*, and racial backgrounds that are not like the majority of the kids we have in the Centerville district, meaning our teachers, I don't think, for the most part, have very much up close and personal experience with poverty. Our staff does not mirror, our professional staff, does not mirror our student body ... and I think that I have a much different perspective. Because I know firsthand what poverty looks like. So when I hear teachers make comments, I say, I was one of those kids. I don't know if it's a lack of sensitivity, a lack of value, a lack of respect, a lack of fundamental respect, I, I don't know what it is. But there's a huge disconnect between our students and teachers, and I think that that disconnect manifests itself in the classroom (interview, 11-29-06).

Although Reggie "[knew] firsthand what poverty looks like," he also knew firsthand what it was like to be black in a white-dominated school. But he didn't emphasize that point here. Like Tina, he included race in the discussion but relied more heavily on a class-based framework of social difference popularized by the Ruby Payne materials.

These similar discourse moves by staff members who inhabited racially different positions reveal the extent to which class-based discourses were more familiar, more accepted, and more widely utilized in the school than race-based ones. Staff members had fewer discursive resources and conceptual tools to draw upon where race was

concerned; consequently race-based discourses tended to surface briefly in the discussion and then fall out again.

In fact, the predominance of class-conscious discourses led members of the Charleston group and their allies to propose that teaching students “middle-class values” was *the* solution to their problems—a solution that obviated the need to grapple with race. Again, the discourse of “teaching middle-class values” was introduced in the Ruby Payne book, then adopted by teachers like Kate Seabrook and introduced into circulation:

In order to function in this society and be productive ... you have to know the middle-class values because that's what our school system is functioning on, that is what our work system is functioning on. And so as teachers, instead of being judgmental, and looking down on them ... we could accept them, understand them, and then teach them middle-class values ... instead of being, um, judgmental (interview, 1-24-07).<sup>65</sup>

This argument about the need to teach students middle-class values was embraced by quite a few members of the teaching staff, including those who saw students as riddled with cultural deficits as well as those who were attentive to students' strengths. Discourses were slippery that way; individuals might employ some discourses in common and then clash over others. Teachers from different “camps” who agreed on the need to teach middle-class values might have found ways to work together, but in many cases, differences in other aspects of their discursive positions prevented them from seeing their common investments.

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<sup>65</sup> Payne's book promotes countless forms of reductive thinking, one of which is seen here. In the same way she writes of “the” cognitive strategies, as discussed earlier in this chapter, Payne also writes of “the” middle-class culture, implying that there is one singular, unified way of being middle-class (p. 79). When Kate referred to “the” middle-class values, she was quoting Payne's usage and perpetuating Payne's reductive framework (cf. Dworin and Bomer, 2008, p. 108).

The problem with this strong emphasis on the role of class differences in teacher-student interactions was that it tended to push aside or mask attention to the role of race in the school. The danger here was not just that race got overlooked as a significant factor in school dynamics, although to a large extent it did. What was more dangerous was how even those teachers who were beginning to develop critical race consciousness would slip racial claims into the conversation without awareness of stereotypes and inaccuracies in what they were claiming. Kate Seabrook, the same member of the Charleston group who advocated teaching middle-class values, also recounted the process by which the group had entered into powerful conversations about race in Charleston. She talked about how “liberating” it felt to be able to ask questions about race, to talk about racial issues in a racially-mixed group, and to become close to Reggie Bridges, a colleague who encouraged her to use him as her “black resource.”

Though she wanted staff members throughout the school to experience that same feeling of liberation with regard to race talk, Kate and the other teachers on the school culture team decided that in order to start a conversation about toxic school culture, they needed to reframe the race issue in the building as a class issue:

We also had the Ruby Payne. We started some of that, too, in our culture and policy [team], saying, instead of dealing in a race issue, let's do it as a socioeconomic issue. And that's less sensitive. But it tends to be more poor blacks in our nation, so they go hand in hand, actually. Um, but that's how the culture and policy did try to do that, and started some conversations, but it really never went anywhere (interview, 1-24-07).

Kate may have been right that class issues were “less sensitive” for staff members to discuss than race issues. But her casual aside that “it tends to be more poor blacks in our

nation, so they go hand in hand” shows the danger in conflating race with class. Large numbers of both whites *and* blacks live in poverty, and yet to Kate, poverty was marked by blackness. By focusing on class at the expense of race, the Charleston group missed an opportunity to develop a critical race framework that might have helped Kate and others like her to recognize the racial lens with which they made sense of poverty.

Regardless of how members of the Charleston group understood the relationship between race and class, they believed that the way to move the school forward was through a conversation about the role that race and class were playing in the building. They understood that not only did they have to find a way to get this conversation started in the context of formal staff meetings; they also had to shift the school-wide conversational framework from fixation on students’ limitations to an examination of adult perceptions of students as “others.” Staff members were not prepared to talk in these new ways. As a result, the Charleston group faced intense staff resistance that ultimately derailed the conversation.

### ***Our failure to talk is the problem***

In the end, the strategy of trying to get to race through class backfired: the Charleston group couldn’t get a staff-wide conversation started about either topic. Instead, according to Tina Olsen, they encountered “a lot of resistance and even resentment of our attempts to bring these topics up.” Even worse, they faced “a basic denial of the fact that there was a problem in this school.” Tina attributed staff resistance to the Charleston group’s attempts to introduce “issues that people were really uncomfortable about” (interview, 12-1-06). According to Louise Tolbert, a member of

the school culture team who collaborated with Tina and Kate on attempts to bring the conversation about race and class to the staff, teachers resisted the conversation primarily because they felt helpless in the face of daunting problems. Although the team wanted to get to discussions of race and the achievement gap through discussions of socioeconomic issues, they found that both race *and* class issues shut teachers down. “People just don’t even want to talk about it,” Louise said, referring to their efforts to begin with a critical discussion of poverty and then move into an examination of the achievement gap. “And I think it’s because they don’t know what the answers are. Why should we talk about something we can’t find an answer to? .... There’s nothing we can do about it. We don’t have any control over that, it’s the parents, it’s, you know, it was all of that. It was all the why we *can’t* overcome these issues, not, what can we do to overcome” (interview, 2-1-07).

The Charleston group’s failure to begin a new conversation among the staff certainly hinged on staff resistance and helplessness in the face of overwhelming problems. But on a deeper level, that failure can also be understood as a clash of discourses. The Charleston group tried and failed to introduce a new discourse that would have shifted the focus of discussion away from the class- and race-based deficits of students and toward an examination of the attitudes and belief systems of adults. For staff members who already felt beleaguered and stigmatized by chronic school failure, the prospect of examining deeper underlying reasons for that failure was a non-starter. If discourses provided ready-made ways of thinking and speaking about complex topics, most adults were more comfortable sticking with discourses that focused on student limitations because these discourses offered a more controlled and contained explanatory



framework. Alternative discourses that positioned adults as agents of class- and race-based judgment and bias required those same adults to abandon long-held ways of thinking and to engage in forms of self-scrutiny that were both unfamiliar and deeply uncomfortable. Staff members were unable to begin a new conversation because their investments in competing discourses kept them locked in contrasting ways of thinking that precluded talk across differences.

As they contemplated their failure to engage colleagues in a more difficult and complicated kind of conversation, members of the Charleston group came to focus on the role of talk itself in the school's problems and on what talk showed about relationships among adults. Together they constructed a meta-discourse of "talk about talk" which gave them another way to explain the condition of toxicity and the school's inability to move forward in its reform efforts. In this meta-discourse, obstacles to talk were rooted not just in contrasting ways of framing the problem of school failure, as discussed earlier, but in a fundamental lack of trust among staff members themselves—specifically around issues of race—which prevented meaningful talk of any kind.

According to Tina, staff members divided themselves into race-based groups and then refused to discuss the reasons for their race-based divisions:

There are racial issues that we have here that we never discuss. And I don't know how our black members of our staff feel about the white members of the staff because we can't even talk to each other. So, you know, there's I'm sure all kinds of issues within each of these little groups and feelings about the other people in the room that I don't understand, but I know that our little divisions keep us from being able to talk to each other about anything that's really important because we're constantly squabbling. It's like a really dysfunctional family (interview, 12-1-06).

For Tina, meta-discourse about talk brought the conversation back yet again to talk about race. In describing how black staff members and white staff members couldn't talk to one another, Tina acknowledged the significance of topics such as segregated seating patterns that other teachers had denied or cast aside as unimportant. At the same time, she pointed to the role of adult beliefs about *other adults* in the construction and maintenance of toxic school culture. Apart from differing belief systems about the roles of adults and students in the school's problems, Tina noted that *feelings* "about the other people in the room" contributed to "little groups" and "little divisions." Tina's comments illustrate that in a racially-mixed school where so many staff members claimed to be colorblind, people were profoundly race-conscious. Ironically, race consciousness made it harder, not easier, to engage in discussion of the school's problems.

Tina wasn't the only one who noticed acute race consciousness across the staff. Andy Ellis, the teacher who wrestled with accusations of racism in an earlier example, could also step outside his own situation and engage in the meta-discourse of talk about talk. Like Tina, Andy noted that race was the topic that continually shut down many staff members, but he also noted that adults' race-based beliefs about *themselves* further derailed the possibility of meaningful conversation. Here he recounts what usually happened when staff members or professional development providers tried to begin a conversation about race:

You can just see people get their backs up about it. And they really don't want to talk about it. They think that because we're such a diverse district, and because, especially, and I really think, especially, um, white teachers, because they're really dealing with a majority of African American students, that they have no racial hang-ups, and that there's nothing really to worry about. I think they're kind of, they think they're *immune* to it .... You can see, they just turn the

speakers off right away, and they get upset, and they walk out or whatever, you saw it happen with Singleton<sup>66</sup> on the first day of school .... I mean, there's just certain people that don't want to look at any trends racially, they don't want to look at the achievement gap, they don't want to look at how different kids are treated. They don't want to hear about the values of one group of kids compared to another group of kids and try to, you know, make a connection. They just don't want to hear that (interview, 12-19-06).

In describing teachers' physical responses when the topic of race was introduced ("getting their backs up about it," "turning the speakers off," "walking out"), Andy called attention to the visceral and emotional quality of teachers' resistance. He also called attention to the power of colorblind discourse as he noted teachers' refusal "to look at any trends racially." Andy acknowledged that teachers' habitual adherence to colorblindness shaped not just how they described their work with students in the classroom, but also how they engaged—or failed to engage—in data-based discussions at staff meetings. Most importantly, in suggesting that teachers' beliefs about *themselves* stood in the way of racial self-reflection ("they think they have no racial hang-ups," "they think they're immune to it"), he highlighted the deep vulnerability that lay beneath teachers' defensive posture.

I witnessed this vulnerability around race issues firsthand in the course of conducting interviews with staff members throughout the school. Though I never asked staff members directly about race,<sup>67</sup> over time I learned that the staff members who had

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<sup>66</sup> Glenn Singleton, a consultant from the Pacific Educational Group in California and the author of *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Strategy for Achieving Equity in Schools*, was brought to Centerville to be the district-wide keynote speaker for all staff members on the first day of school in 2006-07 (fieldnotes, 8-30-06). A representative from his organization returned once to work with district administrators in an all-day workshop (fieldnotes, 12-22-06), after which the district ceased its work with him. I will discuss Singleton's visit in greater detail in Chapter 4.

<sup>67</sup> This was a methodological decision on my part. Knowing how fraught the topic of race was in the school, my approach was to *listen* for references to race and then follow up on those references once they were made. I knew that asking directly about race in an interview had a host of risks attached: direct questions could cause informants to perceive me as unfairly "leading" them to the subject of race; they

the most to say about race were the hardest to pin down for a formal interview. In fact, on the one occasion when a staff member reneged on a promised interview, it was because she feared that remarks she might make about the problem of racism in the school would be so identifiable, they could potentially jeopardize her job (fieldnotes, 4-4-07). And yet this same staff member confided in me at other times about her own racially-charged experiences in the building (fieldnotes, 10-9-06, 3-9-07, 3-14-07). Similarly, those staff members who asked me to turn off the tape recorder at some point during an interview did so only when the conversation touched on racist acts committed by other unnamed staff members (fieldnotes, 5-2-07, 6-12-07). The one individual who cried during an interview did so while discussing personal experiences of racist treatment by a colleague (fieldnotes, 5-2-07). At the same time racial tension simmered under the surface in the school, the tension and risk attached to addressing race issues directly led many staff members to tiptoe around the subject of race and in some cases, to silence race talk altogether.

The emotional dimensions of talk about race—and the emotional risk attached to the adoption of race-conscious discourses in particular—cannot be underestimated. Tina’s colleague Kate alluded to the underlying role of emotion in school culture work when she described the importance of having “a safe environment” for the discussion of difficult issues. Like Tina, she placed race at the heart of what is “difficult to talk about”:

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could cause informants to construct the answers they thought I wanted to hear; or they could shut down the conversation. I believed that by preparing myself to follow up on the subject of race, if and when it was introduced, I would be most likely to find out not just who thought race was important, but *how* race functioned in the minds of different people. Because my interviews were also balanced by three years of intensive fieldwork, I knew that anything said or not said in an interview would ultimately be contextualized in the course of thousands of hours of participant-observation.

We really can't look into these issues until we're comfortable as a staff, to talk about issues that are difficult to talk about. And we can't really look at important issues until ... we make it a safe environment to discuss these issues. Because when you get an achievement gap, you're talking about race, racial issues, you're talking about things that make people very defensive, and touchy (interview, 1-24-07).

When one considers just how divided the staff was at Centerville High School, one wonders where to begin in "making it a safe environment." Among a staff of people who fundamentally did not trust one another, a staff-wide conversation about race was never going to be safe. Members of the Charleston group remained convinced, however, that conversation was the answer to the school's problems. "I think that dialogue can and will foster reflection, and I think that reflection is what fosters change," Reggie Bridges argued. "If you don't have the dialogue, or the conversation, then you don't have the opportunity to have the 'aha' moment .... Conversations can begin to plant seeds of reflection ... That's the catalyst. That's the beginning, I think" (interview, 11-29-06). Here Reggie alludes to the potential of conversation to expose people to new discursive resources that might catalyze new insights and subsequent change.

But Reggie himself learned how difficult and emotionally challenging those conversations could be. Exchanges between staff members who held different points of view about the students and the school often culminated in emotionally-charged dead ends. Reggie revealed how his own emotional response to colleagues' deficit statements about students led him to say things that simply shut down the conversation:

There are some that think that ... these kids don't want to learn. And my question to that is, my comment, my first comment is, maybe they just don't want to learn from you. And my second comment is, what are you doing about it? That typically leads to a quick conclusion to that conversation with that staff member.

“These kids don’t want to learn.” Why are you here, then? That’s been another comment. But I’m working with it. Trying to get to a place where I don’t react to those comments, where I can be thoughtful, because they anger me. I’m like, how dare you? (interview, 11-29-06).

Reggie’s feelings of anger and indignation in response to his colleagues’ categorical claims about students led him to lash out (“maybe they just don’t want to learn from you” ... “what are you doing about it?” ... “why are you here, then?”). Faced with that attack, his colleagues subsequently withdrew from the conversation. Reflecting on these exchanges, Reggie acknowledged that he had begun working to manage his anger in order to respond more rationally. But his discourse also indicated that he took the remarks personally. When he said, “I’m like, how dare you,” he framed his colleagues’ comments about students as a personal insult.

The personal nature of this exchange is important because it illustrates one final point about the discourses that circulated in the building and divided people. When people talked about the school’s problems, they were never *just* talking about students, or teachers, or issues of race, class, and poverty. On a more fundamental level, people were talking about each other. It wasn’t necessary to name names in order to engage in these forms of talk; in fact, staff members practically *never* called out their adversaries by name. Instead, they talked about others in terms of their problematic behaviors and belief systems. “There are certain members on staff that I, I marvel at how they’re able to come into this building on a daily basis with the beliefs that they hold,” Reggie Bridges told me. “I couldn’t do it, personally” (interview, 11-29-06). But even when their statements were more subtle, implicit in staff members’ claims was the notion that rational people saw things the staff member’s way and that others who saw things differently were

wrong. Staff members' language use gave away not just their belief systems and ideologies, but their perspectives on their social position relative to the positions of others throughout the school. Through discourse, one could note how staff members viewed themselves in comparison to their colleagues. That is, discourses provided staff members not only with language resources to construct understandings of the school's problems; they provided resources for constructing and positioning *each other*.

This constructing and positioning occurred most prominently and revealingly when teachers told stories about their experiences—and conflicts—with colleagues. In the following example, a conversation about school culture between a teacher and me abruptly shifted into conversation about interactions among the staff, which then slipped into conversation about race.

**Ethnographic Interlude: “Black people, I think *they’re* racist.”**

“Culture here, I don’t really know what it is,” Neal Morton tells me. It’s his planning period, so we’re talking in his empty classroom.

“I guess it’s the overall feeling of what’s going on here on a daily basis. The culture here is dying. It’s like working at a place that’s going out of business.”

We discuss the decline of the sports program, the loss of electives, the snowball effect of losing programs and losing kids. “If you look at the big picture,” he says, “we’re going backwards.”

He pauses, then leans forward.

“Here’s another thing. I’ve tried at staff meetings to have little showers, to get some school spirit going. And then I find out that people are pissed at me! Were you

there for the Frank Simpson thing?”

I shake my head, remembering the staff meeting I missed when I was helping a friend during her father’s funeral. Neal had organized a baby shower that day for Mr. Simpson, one of the administrators.

“We did a skit. The whole thing was about imagining what little Gavin might turn out to be in twenty years. I dressed up like a school spirit fan. I painted half of my face blue and half white. Mr. Vincent came out dressed as a pimp with a gold tooth. Mr. Merrick came out as a female impersonator with a dress on. We had Mr. Cahoon and Mr. Hitchens lined up to do it, but they backed out at the last minute. Then we had Shaun Coleman put on an orange prison uniform, and I joked, ‘Maybe Gavin will go into law enforcement!’” He laughs.

“Well, some of the black people were not amused that the only black guy in the skit was wearing a prison uniform. They were very offended. You know, I’ve been here fifteen years, but I forget about race. I put a lot of work into it, Jennifer! I wrote a script. Reggie Bridges even read it. Hey, I’m done putting that kind of effort in.”

He raises his arms and uses the first two fingers on each hand to make quotation marks in the air. “They said I ‘crossed ethnic lines.’ No one came up to me directly. I just heard, ‘So-and-so and so-and-so did not think it was funny.’ Maybe there’s a race problem here, I don’t know. We had that speaker at the beginning of the year. He said we’re all racists.” He throws his hands up. “Okay, I guess I’m a racist. So what is culture? I don’t know. I’m babbling. There’s a lot of frustration here among teachers.”

“Can you say more about race?” I ask, pausing in my note-writing to shake out my hand. “How is race coming up in the building? What role do you think race plays?”



“Well, Sylvia Thacker brought it up yesterday at the school culture meeting. No one brought it up about the skit, but apparently three black people did not think it was funny. She brought it up late in the meeting last night. ‘Another thing we need to talk about is race.’

“I personally think—I guess race has never affected me. I grew up in a white area. Then I came here and said, ‘Oh, I’m dealing with black people! But I’m a people person. Race has never affected me. Black people, I think *they’re* racist. They have a huge grudge. They see race all the time.

“I live in Gladwin. Antoine Duncan said, ‘I can’t go to that town.’<sup>68</sup> As a white person, it’s not a big deal to me. People ask, what’s the ratio of white teachers to black teachers? I have to actually look around at a staff meeting.”

He shrugs. “I don’t see race here as a big issue with the staff. The bigger issue I have is individual responsibility. I teach it in my classroom. You come to class prepared.”

“So you don’t see race as an issue, and yet it’s bubbling up,” I say.

“Look, I think there are some people who have race issues. I’ve been to several parent-teacher conferences where the first thing out of a black parent’s mouth is, ‘I think there is a racial issue here.’ I nip that in the bud. ‘Do you think your son is a racist?’” He role plays feigning surprise. “The parents say, ‘No, not him!’ That’s my way of saying, ‘Well, certainly you don’t think *I’m* a racist?’ Then when that’s swept off the table, we can discuss things like how your son’s not doing his work.

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<sup>68</sup> Antoine Duncan is an African-American staff member who works in Centerville. Gladwin is a majority-white town located in a region north of Centerville with a history of Ku Klux Klan activity.

“I don’t think I’m a racist, but that guy said we all were. Probably I’m a sexist, too.

“I’ve never heard so many people say, ‘This school sucks. I’m going to get my kid out of here.’ Well, he just came here from Brockway. There’s not a conspiracy between Decker, Wilmont, and Brockway to pick on your kid.<sup>69</sup> The police don’t stop you for no reason. At least not white people.”

—Fieldnotes, 12-6-06

In the language he used to tell this story, Neal demonstrated the ways in which race served as both a polarizing and a silencing force in Centerville. Neal’s colorblind stance (“Race has never affected me,” “I don’t see race as a big issue with the staff”) left him unprepared to anticipate the racial implications of a skit featuring a black staff member in a prison uniform. His investment in the belief that race was “not a big issue” caused him to feel blindsided when several black staff members made it known that race in fact *was* an issue. As a result, a celebratory event designed to bring the staff together ended up creating a deeper wedge between white and black staff members.

The emotional dimensions of this conflict are apparent in Neal’s discourse. He lashed out in anger at the black teachers who brought the complaint and positioned them as the source of the problem (“*They’re* racist. They have a huge grudge. They see race all the time”). In this framework, Neal was the victim of their hostility. But beneath his anger was significant hurt, which can be seen in his disbelieving tone (“Then I find out

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<sup>69</sup> Decker, Wilmont, and Brockway are three districts neighboring Centerville. All have significant populations of low-income and African American students, and all are school districts of choice. Centerville students who struggled academically often transferred back and forth among these districts, sometimes returning to Centerville or dropping out when they fared no better elsewhere.

that people are pissed at me!” “I put a lot of work into it, Jennifer!”) and his self-protective stance (“I’m done putting that kind of effort in”).

Neal’s only way of engaging with the substance of the black teachers’ accusation was to sarcastically position himself as the wrongdoer in this scenario (“Okay, I guess I’m a racist”). His sarcasm, however, was a form of defensiveness which precluded genuine engagement with the issue. In addition, his insistence on positioning the black teachers as the offenders prevented him from considering larger systemic ways in which racism operated in the school. Racial issues were individual (“I think there are some people who have race issues”), not institutional. Furthermore, the individuals who had the issues were black. Neal was so focused on the black teachers, it never occurred to him that white teachers in the school might have been offended as well.

Because no one “came up to [him] directly,” Neal was left to hear through the grapevine that his skit had been offensive. While he privately lashed out at the “three black teachers who didn’t think it was funny,” Neal was no more likely to go and talk to them than they were to come up to him. The anger that festered on both sides froze people in opposing camps. As in Rachel Moses’ classroom, the topic of race was like a line in the sand. If students were not *allowed* to cross that line, adults were simply not *willing* to do so. Neal experienced criticism of the skit as a personal attack, and there was no way to diminish its sting because there was no mechanism for discussion or debriefing.

It is important to note that Neal’s responses to accusations of racism—whether the accusations came from colleagues or parents—were neither idiosyncratic nor isolated. Rather, the patterns of interaction he described closely resembled interactions reported by

other white staff members confronted with accusations of racism. When colleagues accused him of being racist, Neal inoculated himself from the charge by joking about his racism in a way that implied the charge was ludicrous, just as Allison Gratsch did. When parents suggested that there was something racial going on between Neal and black students, Neal scuttled the conversation by “sweeping it off the table” in much the same way Andy Ellis did. Whether intentional or not, white teachers engaged in patterned discursive practices that served to deflect racial charges and that habitually positioned them as victims of black hostility. When Neal argued that his black colleagues were the ones who were racist and who had “a huge grudge,” the spirit of his comments was strikingly similar to those of Helen Granville, another white teacher who described the frustration she felt toward black staff members when she arrived in the district:

To a certain extent there was a *big* color thing here .... it was difficult for me in the beginning. As much as there’s always been a majority of white teachers here, there was some significant power amongst the minority black women ... they were very hostile to the thought that an experienced teacher, an experienced white teacher, might come into their staff ... It was very hard to get through the first year here .... A couple of the women here have been just really incredibly difficult for me (interview, 5-3-07).

Here Helen positioned herself as the victim of “difficult” experiences, while black teachers were positioned as territorial and “hostile.” Helen’s experience may well have been difficult, just as Neal’s certainly was after the baby shower, but in her telling of the story, her racially-entrenched position becomes clear.

The gaps in Neal’s (and other teachers’) understanding of black people’s experiences in the world relative to their own blinded them to the qualitative differences between white and black lives and to the reasons for the black teachers’ anger. It had not

occurred to Neal that a black colleague might risk physical injury or attack if he traveled to Gladwin, or that black motorists might be justified in their wariness of police officers. Similarly, it had not occurred to Helen that black teachers might have reasons for feeling defensive toward a white newcomer on their staff. Their experiences living in white-dominated communities, coupled with their insulation in white social networks on a racially-polarized staff, made it very difficult for them to engage in interactions that might broaden their worldviews. In Neal's case, the anger with which black staff members responded to the skit left him that much less likely to want to engage in further conversations.

And yet there was a moment of hesitation and uncertainty in Neal's narrative. When Neal conceded, "Maybe there's a race problem here, I don't know. We had that speaker at the beginning of the year. He said we're all racists," he exposed the vulnerability that lay beneath his sarcastic and defensive posture. In this moment, Neal admitted what he didn't know, and he opened himself up to another way of reading the racial situation in the school. If everyone was racist, as Glenn Singleton said, then the issue wasn't just certain individuals who made racially-insensitive mistakes or who nursed grudges. If Neal and others were to grapple with the possibility that there *was* a race problem in Centerville, they might open up a space to move beyond recitation of personal slights and begin examining the patterned practices that gave rise to inequality. There was a discourse clash going on at this moment between colorblindness and race consciousness, between race avoidance and race engagement. Neal and others stood to gain from the clash—if they could find ways to move out of their polarized positions and

into the kind of reflective dialogue that Reggie and members of the Charleston group called for.

## **Conclusion**

In order for staff members to do something about toxic school culture in Centerville, they needed a way to understand and address the dynamic of antagonism that prevented them from working together effectively. What might have seemed like a matter of petty dislike between staff members who failed to agree on common rules was actually a matter of much deeper ideological division. Staff members had profoundly different ideas about who Centerville students were, how best to work with them, and what needed to happen in order for the school to improve. These differences were rooted in the ways staff members viewed low-income and minority students as raced and classed beings.

Those staff members who focused on students' limitations and deficits revealed through discourse that their beliefs were shaped by race- and class-based assumptions about students' values. As they talked about the challenges they faced teaching in Centerville, these adults made overt references to the values of students who lived in poverty, while they described the values of black students in more subtle and indirect ways. In both cases, however, low-income and minority student values were seen as wanting. These adults believed that *students* needed to change in order for conditions in the building to improve: students needed to pull up their pants, get to school on time, and take their education more seriously.

Other staff members—including members of the Charleston group—believed that the issue was not student values, but adult attitudes. These people believed that *adults* were unprepared to work with low-income and minority students because they had not developed the ability to examine their own race- and class-based assumptions and biases. While these staff members talked easily about the class differences that separated adults and students, they were less comfortable addressing the role of race differences. They believed, however, that conversations about class would lead them to race, and that conversations were the vehicle that could move the staff and the school forward. Conversations could introduce people to new information, open up new ways of thinking, and help people to bridge their differences. These staff members quickly learned, however, that their colleagues' refusal to examine the role of race and class in building interactions made meaningful and productive conversations impossible.

Adults' avoidance of those who thought differently led them to make categorical claims and assumptions about their colleagues that mirrored the claims and assumptions many of them made about students. These assumptions created a climate of distrust, animosity, and emotionally-charged conflict that not only undermined staff members' ability to work together, but rendered them unable to socially co-exist. Adults' profound lack of knowledge of the lives and experiences of colleagues—particularly those from different race and class backgrounds—led them to draw simplistic conclusions about those colleagues' beliefs and motivations. The personal vulnerability that many adults felt over race-based conflicts in particular was masked by an angry and defensive stance. Staff members' inability to talk about the issues that divided them—particularly issues of

race—deepened existing social divisions and left certain staff members both wounded and permanently estranged.

Examining the varying forms of discourse among staff members at Centerville High School provides a way to *see* the ideologies that divided people. In the ways they talked, adults gave away the beliefs that shaped their approaches to their work and their interactions with others. When considered against their discourses, adults' everyday practices and behaviors can be read as manifestations of deeply-ingrained belief systems rather than idiosyncratic responses to ever-changing situations. Adults responded in patterned ways to the complex conditions they faced; discourses reveal the ideologies that drove their responses and that helped them make sense of challenging teaching conditions.

Different ways of thinking—as captured, preserved, and perpetuated in different discourses—had the *potential* to motivate individuals to reconsider their opinions and form new insights. In order for this reconsideration to happen, however, individuals had to trust their colleagues enough to listen to an opposing point of view. In most cases, this trust was fundamentally lacking. However, when individuals expressed moments of hesitation and uncertainty, when they asked genuine questions about the lives and experiences of others, and when they willingly listened to new ways of framing old problems, they opened themselves up to the possibility of forward movement, growth, and change. This was evident when Kate Seabrook began asking questions about race in a racially-mixed group in Charleston. It was evident when Andy Ellis wondered if cultural differences between teachers and students *were* an issue in classroom



interactions. It was evident when Neal Morton considered—if just for a fleeting moment—that maybe there *were* racial problems at the high school.

Stepping back from the conflict between those who saw students as the problem and those who faulted adults, members of the Charleston group came to understand that the staff's collective failure to communicate lay at the heart of their toxic culture. In the resistance they encountered when they attempted to engage colleagues in staff-wide conversation, they began to see that ongoing anxiety and uncertainty over race and class kept staff members divided. The Charleston group's willingness to consider the nature of the interactions that occurred among staff members from different "camps" positioned them to develop a new perspective on the school's problems and to form collective insights into the kinds of change that were needed. Change was not impossible, but change required staff members to talk *about* their differences rather than continually talk *around* them or *past* them.

In order to confront the roots of toxic school culture, staff members in Centerville needed to recognize the power of language within daily interactions to construct identities, to create worldviews, and to divide people along ideological lines. Much of the language that circulated in Centerville constructed students as not invested in their learning—*because* they were low-income and minority people. A large number of staff members probably had no idea what they implied when they made claims about Centerville students, but others could recognize deterministic and even racist assumptions. Because staff members' beliefs about students, the school, and each other *spoke through* their language choices, staff members created anew their alliances and their divisions each time they talked about the conditions that shaped their work. If staff

members could recognize the power and the effects of their language choices, they might also recognize opportunities to make different choices and to more clearly see the assumptions and beliefs that divided them. Toxic school culture was created through language, but language also offered staff members the resources to create something different.

### CHAPTER THREE A CULTURE OF IMMOBILIZATION

“We spend a lot of time as a staff talking about nothing. Meaning, you’ve sat at staff meetings. We’ll sit and discuss things for 45 minutes that have no—that, they’re not relevant to educating kids. Let’s talk about hats for a half hour. Let’s talk about backpacks in classrooms. Coats. When the real issue is, what the hell is going on here at this school, that we have so many kids failing algebra? Is it because they’re wearing a hat? I don’t think so . . . . Maybe we spend that much time on that kind of stuff because we don’t want to talk about the real issue, and that’s that we don’t know how to reach these kids.”

—Jimmy Wolfe

As members of the Charleston group sought to engage their colleagues in conversations about school culture, the staff faced mounting pressure to improve academic achievement. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, the school was subject to financial penalties as well as the threat of being restructured for failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress. Centerville students earned low scores on standardized tests, but they also failed their classes and dropped out of school in large numbers. These statistical measures of low achievement were numerical indicators of a deeper problem, which was the chronic state of academic disengagement that pervaded the school and contributed to its toxic culture. Some teachers believed that students failed because they didn’t want to learn; others argued that adults didn’t give students a reason to try. These fundamental differences of opinion—and the state of toxicity they created—made it impossible for teachers to work together to improve academic achievement *or* school culture.

Despite teachers' daily struggle to engage students academically, it was the immediate problem of discipline that most frequently preoccupied the staff. Teachers often referred to their struggles with discipline during staff meetings, complaining bitterly about students who disrupted class and about parents who offered the school no assistance in dealing with their children's behavior problems. From time to time administrators would interrupt classes by coming on the public address system to warn students of the consequences for violating some new policy. In the spring of my third year in the building, administrators called an emergency after-school meeting to address discipline issues: so many students had begun refusing to report to class on time that security guards were unable to clear the halls when the bell rang.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> The ideological conflicts that arose at this meeting directly foreshadow the conflicts I will explore in this chapter. In a discussion of how staff members might better motivate students to *want* to go to class, two distinctly different positions emerged within the assembled group, revealing two fundamentally different ways of viewing Centerville students. The majority of teachers at the meeting argued that students simply did not care about learning. Reggie Bridges adamantly refused to accept this characterization, and yet as the conversation wore on, he was unable to alter the reigning discourse. Reggie led off the discussion.

Reggie: You have a right to teach your class without being disrupted by what's going on in the halls. But these are reactionary measures. Is there anything we can do to motivate kids? We can police them all day long. All they're going to do is fear being suspended. Is there anything we can do that's more proactive?

Eleanor Shillington: How do you modify their behavior so they believe that doing the work is important to their learning?

Matthew Meissner: Kids have to care what their grade is.

Eleanor: They just don't care.

Matthew: I teach a class of sophomores. Recently 17 out of 21 didn't take the exam!

Reggie: Okay, so I have a question for you. Why did 17 out of 21 not care?

Matthew: They didn't want to put the work in.

Reggie: So they care, but only to a certain point?

Ellen Garrity: They don't *see* a point. They want to get out of here as fast as possible. To them a report card is a paycheck. They want to achieve something that is mathematically impossible. They all want to be NBA stars. They believe that education doesn't pay off.

Reggie: Am I hearing you right, that we're dealing with a population that intrinsically does not value education?

Eleanor: They want to learn, they just don't want to work to learn.

Matthew: They want to learn, but they want to get a D- in order to get the credit. They want to be there, but they're lazy. They don't care about their grade. Too many take the easy way out. We're training them not to be lazy. They *come* to us lazy. I'm sure we could make our classes more interesting. But given the population we deal with, it's not something we can accomplish easily.

Reggie: I may be in the minority, but I think that every kid in this building wants to learn. They may not want to learn in your class, but they want to have long, healthy, productive lives.

Discipline problems both arose from and further aggravated the problem of toxicity. At lunch and in frequent asides to me, staff members openly criticized colleagues whose methods of classroom management they disapproved of. Those who advocated firm class control looked down on teachers whom they believed were too loose, accusing them of ignoring the rules in their effort to win over resistant students. “There’s the sense that when you work with hostile, angry kids, you have to first form a bond with them before you can teach them,” Helen Granville told me. “But if you just sit around and chew the fat with them, they still aren’t learning. You might be forming a bond, but it’s not a bond with respect and a sense of obligation” (interview, 5-3-07). On the other hand, those who struggled with class control rarely asked for help and instead blamed their discipline problems on students, driving a deeper wedge between staff members who were already alienated from each other. “I just feel there’s so much animosity here,” Grace Thomas said. “Because one person don’t have these problems in their classroom, don’t be envy of that person. If you’re having a problem with Johnny Sue, and I’m not having a problem with Johnny Sue, then we need to get together and work on what we can do. To get Johnny Sue to be okay in your classroom. And it’s not happening” (interview, 6-12-07).

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Wade Anderson: Reggie, I need to cut you off. Many teachers have engaging classrooms, but in every class, there are still kids who are not in there. This meeting is about discipline, hall sweeps, and attendance.

Reggie: This meeting about discipline, hall sweeps, and attendance is linked to issues of curriculum and engagement in the classroom. We can’t have a conversation about one without a conversation about the other. If we take them in isolation, we don’t address the problem. Instead we put a band-aid on the wound without treating it.

Eleanor: But how do we get from March to June? The problem is getting worse. And as soon as warm weather hits—

Neal Morton: We’ll need to have hall sweeps every hour!

Reggie: Hall sweeps every hour. Okay. Can I get some teachers who are willing to coordinate the effort? (fieldnotes, 3-8-07).

In the same way that staff members disagreed about the nature of the school's problems, as described in Chapter Two, they also disagreed on the reasons for their ongoing struggles with discipline and academic disengagement. Most staff members insisted that discipline problems were caused by inconsistent enforcement of the rules. However, in the face of recurring debates about what the rules should be and how to get teachers to enforce them, a smaller number of staff members maintained that engaging students in meaningful learning was the way not only to improve discipline, but to transform the school. Rather than conversations about increased policing of student behavior, these staff members wanted to see their colleagues engaged in conversations about teaching. "Being able to have a conversation with a coworker about what you're doing, why you're doing it, and how you can do it better, that will change the way this building looks," Reggie Bridges argued. "That will change kids in the hall, that will change the number of referrals that go home to the parents about discipline problems. That will reshape this building as a learning institution." Based on his belief about the importance of teacher reflection, Reggie rejected the relentless focus on discipline. "If we focus on policy and if we focus on rules, we won't get second order change. We can't legislate this change. All we can do is change the hearts, and if you do that, the minds will follow" (interview, 11-29-06).

Because both camps were convinced that their approach was the one that would turn the school around, the staff became locked in an ideological tug-of-war that continually immobilized them in their efforts to improve the school. Just as antagonistic interactions around race and class rendered staff members unable to *socially* coexist, competing ideas about Centerville students—the causes of their disruptive behavior, the

nature of their academic potential, and what they most needed from their teachers—rendered staff members unable to agree *professionally* on a course of action or to communicate about the nature of their differences. “The most important thing is that we all speak the same language. That the kids understand that we support each other,” support staff member Lynn Nation told me. “Nobody’s really speaking the same language around here” (interview, 2-13-07). Staff members’ inability to communicate about the underlying reasons for their differences resulted in the same conflicts arising over and over again, with debates over policies on student IDs, attendance, tardiness, and the appropriateness of bringing hats, coats, and backpacks into the classroom taking up time at staff meetings that otherwise could have been devoted to issues of academic achievement.

Spontaneous exchanges at staff meetings revealed drastically different degrees of agency in terms of how much teachers felt their academic work with students was hindered by forces outside their control. The same class-based discourses that led many staff members to believe that students did not value education also led them to believe that they had little power to change the pattern of chronic low achievement in Centerville. In private interviews, teachers repeatedly revealed the sense of helplessness they felt, invoking “culture” to explain the obstacles presented by students’ attitudes toward learning. “The culture that affects us the most is the socioeconomic culture,” Louise Tolbert said. “It’s something we fight constantly to overcome ... [the idea] that education is simply not important because that’s what they’ve been taught for fifteen years now. And I’m supposed to change that in 55 minutes a day? I’m not sure I can” (interview, 2-1-07). Those who were optimistic about the possibilities for change grew

frustrated with those who were preoccupied by what they perceived to be overwhelming obstacles.

Racial differences on the teaching staff also contributed to tension among adults in the debate over Centerville students and what they needed. African American teachers who were sticklers about discipline felt that their message about the importance of following school rules was neither understood nor reinforced by white colleagues. As a result, they felt both professionally and personally isolated. Here too, teachers invoked “culture” to explain their views. “We have a large African American population. And I am the only African American academic teacher in the entire high school. What does that say?” Camille Plumley asked. “When I speak from experience and culture, and I give a message, and that message isn’t repeated anywhere else, pretty much I don’t have anyone to authenticate what I’ve just said. I don’t have a backup. Because nobody sees what I see.” For teachers like Ms. Plumley, inconsistencies in matters of discipline had potentially life-altering consequences for Centerville students that white staff members just didn’t understand. “We know that in the real world, they will arrest you because you are who you are. Because of the way you look. And if you don’t learn some rules from the people who have been the route you’ve been, who know the consequences, then you’re going to get locked up or killed. There aren’t any other options!” (interview, 4-4-07).

Other African American teachers felt isolated from their white colleagues because of what they perceived to be a pattern of discriminatory treatment of black students. These teachers argued that racism, not student deficiencies, was what caused disciplinary problems and kept academic achievement low. They observed black students being “set



up” for suspension by certain white teachers and being excluded from higher-level academic classes by others. And yet when they tried to bring up these issues in discussion, white colleagues denied that racism was a factor in their treatment of students. “There’s some hard issues here. And they just put it under the carpet,” Robin Riley told me. “And I don’t want to talk about race, but race is a part. When you have black males that fail frequently, why? Why does that happen? Blacks can’t learn? Why is it that they can learn in *your* class? All the time? Because you push. You don’t *see* that as a problem. You don’t discriminate. But over here, it’s a problem. Why is that?” (interview, 5-2-07). Although central office administrators tried to move the staff toward conversations about race and racism by hiring consultant Glenn Singleton<sup>71</sup> to give the keynote speech at the start of the 2006-07 school year, conversations at staff meetings continually defaulted to debates about discipline policies.<sup>72</sup>

Over time I came to understand that ritualistic spats over discipline were caused by the same race- and class-based tensions that divided the staff and gave rise to toxic school culture in the first place. On some level, most staff members agreed that racial

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<sup>71</sup> The founder of Pacific Education Group, Singleton works with school districts across the country to narrow the academic achievement gap and facilitate what he calls “courageous conversations” about race. Though Singleton lists many success stories in his book *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*, the conversation became explosive when he was hired to consult with an Ann Arbor high school during the 2005-06 school year. Existing tensions between black and white staff members were exacerbated when Singleton attempted to engage them in a discussion of institutional racism: black teachers walked out of the meeting while white teachers responded indignantly to the implication that they were all racists. A similar standoff occurred between Singleton and several white staff members in Centerville during a breakout session after his keynote speech. “I’m really struggling here,” Erika Lindberg said. “I treat all students equally. So how am I supposed to grapple with the racism that’s supposedly inside of me? I have the same expectations of everyone.” “But people are not equal,” Singleton responded. “It’s not a level playing field. How can you treat them the same when they’re not?” Erika shrugged and did not answer him (fieldnotes, 8-30-06).

<sup>72</sup> Teachers were not the only ones who steered conversations away from bigger issues like the achievement gap and institutional racism in Centerville. During the first staff meeting of the 2006-07 school year—held on the same day as Singleton’s keynote address—discipline policies followed staff resignations as the second item on Dr. Warner’s agenda. Reminding teachers about the importance of keeping students in class and not letting them out to wander in the halls, Dr. Warner repudiated Singleton’s message about the importance of respecting the dignity of African American students. “Despite what our speaker said, if their pants are hanging off their buttocks, we’re going to say, you’re not welcome here” (fieldnotes 8-30-06).

and economic differences between themselves and their students made it harder for teachers to connect with students in the classroom. Individuals admitted this privately, but they avoided taking up issues of race and class in public discussion. Alone in their classrooms, hallway posts, or administrative offices, however, the daily struggle wore staff members down. The longer they tried and failed to engage students, the more likely they were to participate in negative talk that contributed to the condition of toxicity. “I think a good portion of that really does grow out of the frustration some of these folks feel at not being able to reach the students,” Shaun Coleman explained. “It takes, what, all of a year, or two or three for that frustration to set in, and then the lines start to harden and ossify. All of a sudden it’s the kids against me, and they don’t want to do my work, and their parents don’t care .... There’s stuff out there that can help, but we never talk about it. And that’s really the problem” (interview, 11-3-06).

Not talking about the deeper issues underlying staff members’ struggle left many adults on their own to wrestle with uncertainty and ambivalence about their work with students in Centerville. I realized the extent to which teachers were internally conflicted about their ability to do their jobs in the context of interviews where they spoke at length about the difficulties they faced. Frustration and helplessness pervaded their accounts. “I wouldn’t say that the teachers don’t care,” Jimmy Wolfe explained. “I think they just don’t know what to do” (interview, 4-25-07). But because emotionally-charged conflicts over race and class were so often festering between staff members, there was no safe space for individuals to reveal their questions, worries, and dilemmas as they sought ways to work effectively with low-income and minority students in Centerville. At the same time, however, their daily struggles were being witnessed by staff members

throughout the school. Because classroom conflicts often spilled out into the halls, support staff members like Kendra Wheatley were particularly conscious of the struggles faced by certain teachers. “I’ve been in the hallways before, and a teacher will go to kick a student out of the class, and the student [will] just refuse to leave, and the teacher’s like, ‘Take him out, I don’t know what else to do with him. Just get him out of here. I don’t know what else to do.’ I think that a lot of them are just at a breaking point” (interview, 3-13-07).

Conversations about the students and the school’s problems repeatedly degenerated into ideological stalemates with staff members locked in opposing camps, unable to bridge their differences. The tug-of-war between cracking down on discipline and working for greater student engagement not only derailed professional discussions; it prevented the possibility of a deeper conversation as staff members privately wondered how they were supposed to succeed with a population of students that had been academically unsuccessful for so many years. Because staff members held different beliefs about the students, they formed fundamentally different understandings of why the school was failing and, more importantly, what adults could do about it. The more staff members became entrenched in conflict, the less they were able to see beyond their own positions and work together to address the causes of their collective failure.

### **The role of dilemmas in immobilization**

School reform consultants who were brought in to guide the federally-mandated school improvement process maintained that if teachers raised expectations, students would perform better academically and student behavior would improve. High Schools

That Work, the company that managed Centerville's professional development program from 2004-2007, even provided the school with a banner to broadcast this message. The slogan on the banner, which hung in the cafeteria throughout my three years of fieldwork, read "Building a Culture of High Expectations." Seeing that banner reminded me on a daily basis of the Charleston group's commitment to reform and of their attempts to change the conversation about education in Centerville. I knew that their efforts were ongoing because I so often observed them gathered together in empty classrooms and hallways, talking intensely with each other and with like-minded colleagues. Not wanting to intrude, I rarely walked in on these impromptu meetings. As the 2005-2006 school year progressed, however, their conversations appeared to grow increasingly heated.

For a long time, I imagined that these private conversations were about other people—specifically staff members whom they perceived to be obstructionist. Because the Charleston group had met with such resistance when they tried to bring the topic of school culture to the staff as a whole in the fall of 2005, it seemed logical to deduce that they were engaged in ongoing strategy sessions during which they continued to plot next steps in their campaign for reform. But in the spring, as group members became increasingly candid with me, I began to realize that what they were debating was not problems posed by other staff members, but philosophical differences within their own group. Through offhand comments individual group members made to me, I discovered that despite talk by HSTW consultants about raising expectations, the Charleston group's work—and that of the larger school culture team, of which they were a part—had become

stalled by the same disagreements over discipline policies that had immobilized the staff as a whole.

“I’m disappointed we haven’t accomplished more this year,” Reggie Bridges told me one morning in May when I found him alone in his room grading papers. “We focus too much on things like IDs. I said at the culture team meeting yesterday, I refuse to participate in another conversation about IDs or tardies. We focus on IDs at the expense of really looking at what’s going on in our classrooms.”

He put down his pen and started in on what I would come to recognize as a familiar refrain. “You want to complain about kids coming in late? Let’s talk about instruction and what you’re doing to engage them when they walk in the door. If I’m fifteen, and I don’t think what you’re doing in your class has anything to do with my life, I’m not going to make an effort to be there. I’m going to do what I think is best for me.” He paused. “As a teacher, I may not agree with that, but I understand it.”

When I mentioned that I’d always had questions about the school’s ongoing focus on IDs, given the number of students who continued to be sent out of class and suspended for not having them, Reggie said it was the school culture team’s decision to uphold that policy. Leaning in to me, he added, “You see, it’s easier to focus on inconsistencies among the staff in terms of who isn’t enforcing IDs than on what we’re doing instructionally. IDs have been a distraction” (fieldnotes, 5-18-06).

The next morning outside the Writing Center I heard about the same meeting from Sandra Altman, another member of the Charleston group. I’d walked up on the end of a conversation between her and fellow group member Tina Olsen in the hallway. When Tina went back into the Writing Center to attend to her class, Sandra turned to

me. “They’re talking about IDs again and whether we should eliminate that policy,” she explained, shifting the pile of papers in her arms and motioning for me to follow her down the hall to her room. “The problem is, it’s a divisive issue. It’s like misplaced aggression.”

Echoing the point Reggie had made, she said, “People are drawn to it, but that means they don’t have to look at other things. For too many people it’s about behavior and control. It’s about power. I’m going to *make* you who I want you to be. I’m going to *make* you do what I want you to do. If I *make* you do these things, then I don’t have to examine what I’m doing. For a long time we were sending kids home who didn’t have their IDs. And then people would say they had a problem with attendance. They want to raise achievement, but at the end of the semester, kids are failing because of attendance. Laughing a little, she added, “We have to ask ourselves, is this *logical*?”

Saundra told me that Tina Olsen had just proposed that individual teachers should begin rebelling against the policy. To my astonishment, Saundra hesitated, then said quietly, “I cautioned her against it. It’s an issue of control. Once you give that up, what’s to say they won’t start questioning other aspects of your class? I told her, don’t do it, not at this point” (fieldnotes, 5-19-06).

At first glance it may seem inconceivable that Saundra could both point out the irrationality of an ID policy that served to routinely exclude noncompliant students from class *and* insist on the need to maintain the policy. I was certainly surprised at the time by this contradiction. Discourse theory later helped me to understand that such contradictions are actually not so unusual. Saundra’s ability to hold two opposing positions at the same time—believing on the one hand that the ID policy worsened

student attendance problems, while believing on the other hand that the policy needed to be maintained in order to preserve order in the classroom—is an example of what discourse theorists refer to as an ideological dilemma (Edley, 2001).

Ideological dilemmas can be understood as competing ways of thinking and talking about an object, situation, event, or concept. Like discourses, ideological dilemmas arise from common-sense understandings that are tied to the beliefs, values, and practices of a given culture. But unlike discourses, which provide ready-made ways of speaking and thinking about complex topics, ideological dilemmas reflect the notion that common-sense understandings are rarely coherent or integrated. Instead they are characterized by inconsistency, fragmentation, and contradiction. Rather than provide people with clear indications as to how they should think and act, common sense understandings actually contain many contrary and competing arguments. Ideological dilemmas, then, refer to the fractures and contradictions within common-sense understanding (Edley, 2001, p. 203).

Discourse analysis allowed me to see that the stories, accounts, and explanations provided by Centerville staff members when they described their work with students were full of ideological dilemmas. Dilemmas showed up in individual staff members' sense-making processes, as seen in the way Sandra could reject the logic of IDs while still maintaining that without them, order would be lost. But dilemmas also surfaced in group discussions, further complicating interactions that were being shaped by the presence of competing discourses. The concept of dilemmas provides a way to understand the underlying helplessness with which staff members responded to the ongoing state of academic disengagement in the school. The concept of dilemmas also

helps to explain why teacher-leaders like Reggie Bridges failed repeatedly in their attempts to lead the staff away from petty disagreements over discipline policies and toward more substantive conversations about teaching. Many teachers simply could not believe that a deeper focus on teaching would change things in Centerville because their thinking about Centerville students was so profoundly shaped by deficit discourses and ideological dilemmas.

Staff members almost all agreed that they cared about students and were there to make a difference in students' lives. But at the same time, many individuals believed that living in conditions of poverty compromised students' aspirations, warped their understanding of the importance of education, and limited what they could accomplish academically. This "dilemmatic" understanding of the nature of their work in Centerville helps to explain how so many staff members could believe they had students' best interests in mind while subscribing to beliefs that limited students' educational experiences and opportunities.

The competing discourses about students which circulated in the school and in the larger community contributed to new teachers' dilemmas in particular. New teachers heard on one hand that Centerville students were not committed to education, and on the other that they did care very much about learning and were full of often-overlooked potential. This dilemma about the nature of Centerville students' attitudes and motivations, which was stoked by competing class-based discourses, was evident in the words of student teacher Amber Sandstrom:

The reason I love working here is just the students in general, like I try to compare it to a suburban, upper-class school, and I think that teaching in a school



like that would be so boring. Because the students here just have such great character. They're just full of funny things to say, and even when they're off task or whatever ... they just catch my attention and they're just creative and fun and funny. And I guess what might be frustrating for some teachers is that the students here aren't as *serious* about school, in a sense. But they do care. People have the idea that these students don't care about school, but they do care and they do like to learn (interview, 4-18-07).

Amber's comments acknowledged the widespread belief among teachers that Centerville students didn't take their education seriously; at the same time, however, she highlighted students' commitment to learning and their capacity for creativity. Her words gestured to the presence of an ideological dilemma—"students here aren't as serious about school, but they do care"—but her praise for students, coupled with the many instances in which I observed her tutoring, encouraging, and bantering with them, suggested that the dilemma had not caused her to develop a negative outlook.

For Linda Spencer, another student teacher who was prepared in the same teacher education program, the struggle with dilemmas over students' commitment to learning was more fraught:

My field instructor said that I should work hard to solve that tardy problem first hour. And I was like, what can I do? ... I think it's a problem that comes from the kids, the parents, the whatever, the mentality, and it's just not something that might be feasible to fix .... If the parents don't think it's important to get there on time, why should the students? And it's sad to say, but sometimes the apple doesn't fall far from the tree ... I do feel like the parents have, um, an ability to help with this, but also, maybe not. Maybe they're working two jobs, and can't be at home to make sure a kid gets, gets their butt out of bed at 6:30 (laughs). Like, the parent can't do that. So I don't know if it's necessarily all their fault (interview, 4-19-07).

Linda's assumption that students' early morning tardiness was a manifestation of some kind of "mentality" that existed in low-income homes revealed the degree to which she

was in the grip of the class-based deficit discourses that circulated in Centerville. At the same time, when she wondered if tardiness was a condition that could not be helped due to parents' complicated work schedules, she showed how her thinking was caught up in a dilemma about whether or not Centerville students and their families were truly committed to education. The presence of this dilemma, and the helplessness that developed in Linda as a result, made it almost impossible for her to decide on a course of action to correct the tardy problem, or to consider whether there was anything she was doing that might be contributing to students' problems with tardiness.

In this way, ideological dilemmas kept staff members perpetually conflicted about what they could accomplish in the classroom. The ambivalence and helplessness that arose from these dilemmas further limited staff members' ability to buy into professional development messages about the importance of raising expectations and focusing on academic achievement. I began to understand the ways in which ideological dilemmas immobilized the Centerville staff and undermined its reform work at the professional development workshop that kicked off the 2005-06 school year.

**Ethnographic Interlude: "There are things we can't control."**

"I don't have any magic," Hilda Collins begins, standing before the entire Centerville staff assembled in the media center in the morning on the Friday before school starts. "I have things to remind you of. You're trained, skilled, and talented. You can solve the problems you're facing."

A retired-administrator-turned-consultant for High Schools That Work, Hilda has been selected by the Centerville administrative team to lead today's workshop on

“Creating a Culture of High Expectations.” Her plucky and encouraging comments to teachers seem intended to convey that she has seen it all before, but that solutions to intractable problems are indeed possible.

Hilda explains that the purpose of the workshop is to help teachers identify the root causes of their problems with classroom management and student performance, and then, using strategies she provides, make a concrete plan for addressing those problems. First, however, she wants teachers to form small discussion groups and list the top three problems they face in Centerville.

I recognize her attempts to cultivate buy-in from the staff by opening up a space for them to talk candidly about the conditions that shape their work. The two teachers at my table, each of whom has been working in Centerville for about five years, waste no time launching into conversation. They both focus immediately on student behavior.

“They spend too much time socializing,” Sheila Pitcher says. A no-nonsense type, she looks us straight in the eye as she talks. “They’re always wanting to leave class. And their parents back them up. I had one girl tell me her mother said to walk out if I wouldn’t let her go to the bathroom.” She speaks matter-of-factly, as if these problems are annoyances that she resents but has come to expect in Centerville.

Sheila’s colleague, Henry Schultz, listens and nods. As someone who came to teaching later in life, he takes a more meditative—and uncertain—approach to the school’s problems. “I know they tell us we’re supposed to be engaging students so they don’t want to leave, but it’s hard with the variety of interests and backgrounds they bring.”

“They walk in with an agenda of their own,” Sheila says. “They’re adolescents. School is about their social life.”

“Attendance is a real problem,” Henry agrees. “I know it goes back to how to engage them, but the question is how do you do it.”

Sheila cuts in, waving her hand dismissively. “No, we need to change the attendance policy so that parents can’t come in at the end and clean up the mess their kids make.”

Up at the front of the room, Hilda calls time and asks each group to share one item they discussed. Not surprisingly, the emerging list of problems represents contrasting perspectives. Some groups focus on the actions of adults by mentioning things like disruptions caused by announcements coming over the public address system in the middle of class, the master schedule not being set on the first day of school,<sup>73</sup> and

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<sup>73</sup> Due to a conflict between the superintendent and the high school guidance counselors, the master schedule for 2005-06 was indeed not finalized until 3 p.m. on the Friday before school started. As a result, when students arrived at 7:30 on Monday morning, freshmen were instructed to sit in the cafeteria and upperclassmen were sent to the gym to wait while staff members frantically worked to get individual student schedules printed and distributed. In greeting individual teachers, I soon learned that none of them had any idea what they would be teaching or how long classes would last that day. When I found Helen Granville in the gym and asked how she was doing, she replied, “Mostly I’m trying not to feel anything.” Despite the confusion, for the most part, people were upbeat, if also sardonic and somewhat anxious. Ultimately the wait lasted two hours.

Just before the bell finally rang to start classes at 9:30, Neal Morton approached me. “So this kid came up to me and said, ‘Mr. Morton, what is Intro to Technology?’ And I said, ‘I don’t know, why?’ He said, ‘Well, you’re teaching it!’” Raising his eyebrows in disbelief, he pointed to a schedule in his hand, and there it was: Intro to Technology. “If I had ever *heard* of this class, if anyone had told me I was *teaching* it, if I had *any* idea of the goals and objectives ...” He trailed off for a moment, then asked, “Does it even have a textbook?” (fieldnotes, 8-29-05).

Teachers did not understand why the schedule was not ready on the first day of school, but they said that it happened year after year. “How can students come to school on the very first day and not have a schedule? Not know where they’re going?” asked Shelley Pattinson. “How can teachers not know what we’re teaching until the day of? I mean that just doesn’t seem right. It’s not fair to the students, it’s not fair to the teachers ... Why is it that we’re the only school that doesn’t have schedules? It just doesn’t make any sense to me .... And that contributes to the school culture, I mean kids coming in, knowing that they’re not going to be held responsible on the first day, I mean that just sets the whole school year” (interview, 5-24-07).

At the end of 2006-07 school year when it looked like once again the master schedule would not be set when school let out for the summer, one of the counselors explained to me that the source of the problem was time and proper payment for time. In order to get the schedule finalized, the counselors

the inability of teachers to form relationships with students in which they feel valued and respected. A larger number of comments focus on the students: they are limited by learned helplessness; they are unclear about what academic success looks like because their parents weren't successful in school; they lack confidence in themselves and the system.

With each problem the groups identify, Hilda tries to steer the conversation back to the role of the adults in creating the culture of the school. "Could it be something we're doing?" she asks, walking from table to table while addressing the entire group. "Do we communicate? Are we on the same page?" Despite these rhetorical challenges, teachers keep turning the conversation back to their struggles with students.

At one point in the discussion, a small debate breaks out. Reporting for her group, Tina Olsen brings up the problem of student attendance. "Some students aren't coming to class, even when they are here in the building. And when they do come to class, they're checked out mentally and emotionally."

Across the room, Brenda Kastner speaks up in response. "But that has to do with our expectations," she says. "When they get to me at the end of the day, they've been checked out for five hours."

"They're emotionally checked out because of things we can't control," Matthew Meissner protests. "A lot of things are happening at home. Some kids don't have enough food. Kids are hungry, they're sleeping in cars, they're neglected."

"But that can't be an excuse," Brenda insists.

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needed to continue working on into mid-June, beyond the last date of their school year contract. The superintendent, however, refused to pay them for those days. The counselors felt they had no choice but to go home for the summer with the schedule left incomplete (fieldnotes, 6-12-07). This recurring situation with the master schedule points to the ways in which battles over the union contract, in addition to competing discourses, contributed to conflict, animosity, and toxicity in Centerville.

“Sixty-three percent of our kids are on free and reduced lunch,” support staff member Andrea Lyons adds. “That’s the norm here. And it’s probably more because in high school not everyone fills out the paperwork.”

“So how many people would it take to get everyone in the halls to class?” Hilda asks, heading back to her PowerPoint projector.

She pulls up a slide listing the many factors that decrease students’ motivation to learn by the time they reach high school: the experience of failure, the influence of peers, and the loss of hope and vision. Then she turns around and faces the staff.

“It’s the conscious and unconscious *choices* that teachers and administrators make that most directly impact how much students learn and how they feel about their learning.” She waits for a moment to let those words sink in, nodding slightly. “We have to change what goes on inside the classroom.”

—Fieldnotes, 8-26-05

Though Hilda argued that raising expectations was a choice, and though most members of the Charleston group agreed, the exchange between Brenda and Matthew indicates that for many on the Centerville staff, matters were not that simple. When Hilda invited teachers to name the problems they faced in their work, she unwittingly tapped into a set of dilemmas related to poverty that both preoccupied teachers and limited their sense of agency. Teachers like Brenda believed that adult expectations determined the degree to which students were or weren’t “checked out” in class; consequently she blamed fellow teachers for letting students move through the entire

school day in a state of disengagement.<sup>74</sup> Matthew, on the other hand, believed that the conditions of students' lives—hunger, homelessness, neglect—presented a set of overwhelming obstacles; he wanted Brenda and others to understand that his effectiveness was necessarily limited in light of these obstacles. Their exchange shows that while staff members were acutely conscious of poverty as a condition that shaped their work and students' learning, the dilemma lay in how to *respond* to that condition. Should teachers accept that sometimes the circumstances of students' lives were so challenging that learning was inevitably compromised, or should they insist on their ability to engage students as learners despite difficult conditions?

The exchange between Sheila and Henry further illustrates the degree to which underlying dilemmas contributed to Centerville teachers' low sense of agency. Although Sheila and Henry agreed that attendance was one of the school's big problems, their discourse demonstrates that they thought about the problem differently. While Sheila

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<sup>74</sup> In her reference to those staff members who allowed students to remain "checked out all day," Brenda revealed another reason for the underlying antagonism between staff members that perpetuated toxic school culture. Teachers resented each other for not holding students to the same standards and expectations.

Teachers also resented each other for not holding *themselves* to the same standards. "There's not much pressure on teachers to do anything around here. If you choose not to," Andy Ellis explained. "And kids know when they're being fooled, especially the older ones, when their teacher's not prepared, and the teacher's not teaching them anything, and there's no cohesiveness to their teaching, nothing's, you know, it's just poor teaching. We have some of that here .... You've got people making sixty, seventy, seventy-five thousand dollars here, and they're not doing anything. Not taking briefcases home. How do you walk through that parking lot without a briefcase? When I see my colleague get into his or her car with no briefcase, there's something *wrong*, you know? There really is!" (interview, 12-19-06).

Wendy Swensen agreed. "I personally believe there's kind of just unwritten rules of low expectations. And kind of, um, institutionalized racism or discrimination. I mean the fact that no one gets evaluated, from the principals down, so there's just kind of no expectation that you're reflecting on your practice or that you're improving your practice year after year. It's just kind of left to whether you do it on your own or not .... I think as a teacher, you start to internalize that. They're not valuing what's happening in my classroom. And so that doesn't make you want to, like, go home at night and, you know, recreate all your lesson plans, either. It's kind of a vicious circle" (interview, 3-29-07).

Acknowledging the complexity of the problem, Andy identified another element in addition to lack of administrative evaluation that contributed to poor teaching in the building. "The combination of unmotivated students and tired teachers is a really bad combination ... And I'm not sure which came first. And I'm not sure which influenced the other. But there is a problem there .... That's why we get what we get around here at times" (interview, 12-19-06). Here Andy pointed to another dilemma. Did the problem of low academic achievement lie with student motivation or with teacher motivation? And where would one begin in unraveling the entangled dynamic between the two?

positioned students as the problem (“They walk in with an agenda of their own ... School is about their social life”), Henry acknowledged the part played by adults (“I know they tell us we’re supposed to be engaging students .... but the question is how do you do it”). Despite their different ways of thinking, however, they both responded to the attendance problem with an attitude of helplessness. By fixating on actions of parents and students that undermined learning, as Sheila did, and by struggling openly with feelings of uncertainty about *how* to engage students, as Henry did, both teachers show how little power they felt they had in the face of student disengagement. At the same time, Sheila and Henry’s exchange invoked the ongoing debate among Centerville teachers between toughening up school policies and engaging students more deeply in learning.

As an outside consultant, Hilda walked in on the middle of this debate. Her purpose, however, was not to ferret out points of conflict on the staff. Instead she wanted to give teachers a shared set of approaches for addressing and solving their problems. In order to make the workshop “practical” and “relevant,” two qualities that teachers complained were often missing from professional development, Hilda focused the bulk of her attention on a list of ten strategies that she said “seemed to work” in improving student behavior and academic performance.<sup>75</sup> Though her decision to focus on strategies was appreciated by Centerville teachers (“This is good stuff!” Louise Tolbert commented just before the mid-morning break), focusing solely on strategies meant that

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<sup>75</sup> These strategies were presented to teachers in both PowerPoint slides and in a booklet entitled “Site Development Guide #13” published by the Southern Regional Education Board, which was High Schools That Work’s sponsoring organization. The strategies included, among other things, developing clear classroom management plans, teaching from bell to bell, establishing high expectations, communicating expectations to students and parents, giving students frequent and relevant feedback, and dealing with severe behavior. As a former teacher, I viewed these strategies as good teaching practices, but they did nothing to address the specific challenges and conditions teachers faced in Centerville. For example, many Centerville teachers would have probably claimed that they were already trying to deal with “severe behavior,” but that their efforts were just not working.



dilemmas about how teachers should respond to poverty were left unaddressed and unresolved. No matter how good Hilda's strategies might have been, as long as ongoing debates and underlying dilemmas festered among and within teachers, the staff could not break out of its state of immobilization and move forward in its reform agenda.

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By fall of the following school year, little had changed in Centerville. Staff members still dealt with disruptive behavior and ongoing academic failure among students, while dilemmas over what the staff should do in the face of these problems persisted. Despite Hilda's appeal to teachers' professionalism and competence, despite her insistence that teachers had the power to raise their expectations and that in doing so, they would change the school, feelings of helplessness continued to burden many on the staff. Although some individuals revealed their helplessness publicly, I learned over the course of many interviews that it was far more common for staff members to keep their struggles to themselves.

Dynamics at staff meetings throughout 2006-07 demonstrated that teachers remained immobilized, both individually and collectively. Discourses about poverty still surfaced in their comments about students and went unaddressed, as individuals who spoke up during meetings drew little response from their peers. Instead staff members waited until *after* the meeting to say how they really felt about the topics under discussion, continuing the pattern of refusing to talk about the tensions that underscored their work together.

Sitting in on these staff meetings, which I did every week during my third year in Centerville, I became increasingly conscious of the exhaustion that characterized

teachers' daily struggle as well as the degree to which they truly did not know what to do in order to alter the school's pattern of failure. That feeling of not knowing what to do was palpable in the fall of 2006; it was especially evident in the following example. Whether or not individual teachers had tried to raise expectations in the ways Hilda had suggested, the comments made at this staff meeting show that staff members felt no better equipped to deal with discipline problems and low achievement than they had a year earlier.

### **Ethnographic Interlude: "I don't know what to do."**

At a staff meeting in late October, Assistant Principal Frank Simpson arrives late in the media center. I quickly realize from his comments that it's because he was breaking up a fight downstairs. He notes that there have been three fights in three days, including one that occurred just before the meeting began. "The problem is continuing to escalate," he warns. He urges teachers to be more diligent in monitoring the hallways, but Roz Nelson asks why they can't hire more security guards. Due to budget reductions, they are down one from last year.

On the academic side, things are no better. Dr. Warner stands up next and announces that 334 students have failed at least one class during the first marking period. Over 200 students have failed two, three, or four classes. "More than half the school is failing!" he exclaims, wondering aloud how students get to high school if they can't read or add.

Staff members absorb this news quietly. The situation is familiar; they have heard statistics like these before.

Then Joyce Jones speaks up. “Well, I’m at my wits’ end,” she says. She begins listing her frustrations: It’s overwhelming to deal with ninth graders’ behavior issues all day. Calling parents doesn’t help because they don’t know what to do, either. One mother said she was going to send her own child to juvenile detention. “I’ve written more referrals this year than I’ve ever written before,” she concludes. “I don’t know what to do! We’re seven weeks into the school year, and these kids are lost.”

Talk then turns to other issues: the lack of math textbooks, the need for adjustments to the bell schedule, the schedule for upcoming standardized testing. Just before the meeting ends, however, Shaun Coleman breaks in. “I understand the frustration people are feeling,” he begins. Then he implores his colleagues to join with him in a discussion group focused on Ruby Payne’s book.

“There’s so much in it about the baggage our students come with and how they view education. They’re different from middle-class kids. That book is a real resource, and it came to every one of us free at the end of last year. I pulled it off my shelf just a few days ago. The chapters are easy to read.” He looks around the room expectantly, but no one responds to his offer, and the discussion group never forms.

After the meeting Kevin Shulty comes over and pulls out a chair at my table while the room starts to clear out. “You know what I thought when they were talking about failure?” he asks. “School culture. We don’t give them a reason to want to learn. We like to blame the victim. You’re in the hole and you say, ‘Give me a ladder.’ We say, ‘No, get yourself out!’” We laugh with some bitterness at his metaphor (fieldnotes, 10-24-06).

## **Place-specific expectations**

In order to understand why the movement to raise expectations in Centerville ultimately had so little impact, it's necessary to examine the very different ways in which staff members made sense of what it was possible to accomplish academically in the Centerville context. The frequency with which staff members referred to the circumstances of students' lives and students' self-perception to explain why expectations in Centerville were *low* helps to shed more light on the underlying causes of teacher helplessness. As teachers formed understandings of the Centerville community and how it was perceived by the general public, they developed theories about how Centerville students thought about themselves and about how self-perception affected their investment in education. They then used these theories to explain why there were limits to what students tended to accomplish in their classrooms. Teachers tied their expectations of students to what they believed *students* thought, felt, and expected. As a result, rather than high expectations, a great many teachers developed what I call *place-specific* expectations, or expectations that were constrained by beliefs about the limited nature of what students could achieve in the Centerville context.

Teachers constructed place-specific expectations every time they attributed students' work ethic, self-concept, or investment in education to dispositions students developed as a result of living in the community of Centerville. And they did this often, explaining that students formed their attitudes about school not just in relation to the values in their homes, but in response to what they heard from outsiders about the Centerville district. "If you go outside of Centerville, you know, it has a terrible reputation," James Merrick explained. "And a lot of times the kids buy into that.

Thinking that, well, I go to Centerville so I'm not getting a good education, or I'm a stupid kid, or I got to act like an idiot or something .... And so it does, it affects the way the kids feel ... and I think it affects the effort that they put into it" (interview, 11-29-06). Marty Cahoon added that the district's reputation contributed to students not really caring about what they accomplished. "Some of the kids, they succumb in a sense to those negative points of view, simply because they hear them so often. Or they hear enough of them that they figure, 'Oh, I'm not going to be able to do anything, or we're not going to go anywhere, or this school's not looked at as being good, so why worry about it'" (interview, 12-14-06).

Not only did teachers believe that the *effort* students put into their academic work was shaped by their perceptions of the school district; teachers also believed that students' *behavior* was shaped by these perceptions. "These kids have been told forever, since I was in high school, that this is the dredges of Lincoln County, that we're the worst school in Lincoln County," Eleanor Shillington told me. "So if you've got that reputation, you might as well live up to it" (interview, 12-4-06). Allison Gratsch explained student behavior even more directly in terms of the identities students formed in response to community reputation. "The kids like to hide behind the fact, 'Well, we're Centerville, we don't have to meet anybody's expectations. We're just bad. The world hates us.' And they love to use that as an excuse for behavior, or for not meeting expectations" (interview, 2-15-07).

Teachers developed additional theories about the role that poverty played in the beliefs students formed about their school and themselves. Rachel Moses explained how student beliefs about poverty came up in a vocabulary discussion. "I said, how would

you describe your school? Like the characteristics of your school. And the first thing was, it was weak, it was lame, it was poor .... Most of them said it was poor. Some of the kids stick up for their school in spite of it ... Some of them are just, they resent it” (interview, 6-6-07). Other teachers theorized a connection between poverty in the community, poverty in the school, and students’ poor academic performance. “They see the school as being poor, they see themselves as being poor. I mean, the reflection of the school is taken upon themselves. You know, the school isn’t doing well, therefore they aren’t good,” Harry Greiner said. “They don’t lift themselves up to higher standards because, you know, we’re always at the bottom with these MEAP test scores and things like that, so I kind of think they do internalize that” (interview, 11-8-06).

In each of these examples, teachers perceived *students* to be the ones whose attitudes, beliefs, and expectations kept achievement low. This perception served to reduce the sense of agency teachers felt to intervene in the school’s pattern of failure or to assist in the process of “lifting students up.”<sup>76</sup> If students were the ones who chose to “act like idiots,” “succumb to negative points of view,” and “hide behind their reputation,” then teachers could logically believe there was little they could do about the academic failure that resulted from those choices. What teachers did not consider was the extent to which their views—revealed in their language use as well as in the choices they made in the classroom—*positioned* students as chronically unsuccessful, and as a result, contributed to the academic identities students developed.

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<sup>76</sup> Harry’s notion that Centerville students should be “lifting *themselves* up” has remarkable parallels to Kevin Shulty’s claim that adults blamed the victim in discussions of low academic achievement in Centerville. Tacitly criticizing students for not “lifting themselves up to higher standards,” as Harry did, is not unlike what Kevin characterized as telling students to get themselves out of the hole while refusing to give them a ladder. Harry and Kevin’s different stances toward the students may help to explain why I never once observed these two teachers speak or interact with one another throughout my three years of fieldwork, even when they served on the same school improvement team.

Discourse theory helps to explain the process by which adult language use positioned both students *and* adults as destined to fail in Centerville. Discourse analysts maintain that discourse draws people into particular positions or identities; thus discourse constructs people as certain kinds of individuals or subjects. In addition, people don't encounter discourses pre-figured or pre-formed. Instead, discourses form people into particular kinds of subjects; therefore, who we are always stands in relation to available discourses. Because discourse use locates us as subjects, our identities are formed through specific ways of talking. In other words, what we think about ourselves and others will always be in terms of the language provided for us (Edley, 2001, p. 209-210), even as we reappropriate that language in various ways.

In the preceding examples, teachers positioned Centerville students as passive and hopeless, or, alternately, resentful and rebellious. Through the language teachers used to describe students, it becomes clear that most teachers saw themselves as detached and removed from the identities students were forming. That is, teachers' accounts of the processes by which students developed attitudes and identities located that process outside of school walls. From this viewpoint, students came into the school having already decided how they would behave and how hard they would work. Implicit in these teachers' accounts is the notion that teachers themselves were uninvolved in the process by which students formed their academic identities.

Not all staff members thought this way. A smaller number of adults noted that messages students received *inside* the school played just as big a role in the identities they developed as those circulating *outside* the district. Staff members identified numerous ways in which their colleagues criticized and disparaged students, both in

direct attacks and in private conversations. In the most egregious examples, teachers' language use overtly positioned students as hopeless cases. "When you keep telling a kid they're dumb, you keep telling a kid they're worthless, they're going to believe they're dumb and worthless," Doug Henderson said (interview, 2-1-07). But teachers also revealed their beliefs about students indirectly, often through comments they made about discipline in the classroom. In the following example, support staff member Dorothy Loveland shared a story told to her by students about the language used by a new teacher who took over a class several weeks after the school year began.<sup>77</sup> Though the new teacher had never met the students, her language positioned them from the outset as troublemakers who were opposed to learning:

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<sup>77</sup> New teachers took over existing classes well after the school year had started in at least seven different cases during 2006-07 including art, biology, French, language arts, remedial math, and JROTC. In most cases, the previous teacher resigned at the end of the school year and a new teacher was hired in September, but then quit after several weeks. The most egregious case involved students in biology: they went through four teachers in the first two months of school before administrators found a teacher who chose to stay. Even classes formed during the middle of the year such as remedial math went through more than one teacher. In some cases the revolving door effect was created internally as district leaders hired long-term subs to cover classes instead of hiring permanent replacements.

Staff members speculated that the use of long-term subs was a cost-saving strategy, but the presence of so many temporary teachers added to instability in the building and further eroded relationships. "We lost teachers who had some kind of connection to the school," Louise Tolbert said, referring to a retirement buyout that occurred in the spring of 2004. "And look what they've replaced them with. Long-term subs, people that they're not offering a contract to. These people have no connection to this district .... I'm not saying that they're bad people, I'm saying they have no reason to give their heart and soul to a place. When they know they're not going to be here for any length of time. I wouldn't. So, you know, we've replaced people who were here, and thoroughly enjoyed these kids, with people who don't know them" (interview, 2-1-07). Louise's wariness toward new staff members and her concerns about their attitudes toward Centerville students was well-warranted: one long-term sub who was let go after the first two months described her students as "bad asses" who were desperate for attention they didn't get at home. "They're basically being raised by wolves," she told me (fieldnotes, 9-27-06). The following week as she described her struggles to establish order in the classroom, she wondered openly if the job was worth her life and her health. "It's like going to Calcutta," she said. "But I don't know if I can be another Mother Teresa" (fieldnotes, 10-4-06).

Other staff members saw ways in which turnover added to feelings of divisiveness among teachers as new people and ideas bumped up against old ones. "I think some of the teachers that have been here a while, have tried to do certain things, and keep running up against the brick wall. You know, there's only so many times that you want to poke yourself in the eye," Harry Greiner explained. "New staff may come in and try doing some of those very same things, and then get upset when the other teachers don't jump on board, not realizing that they've already tried and didn't get anywhere. And then they say, well, those teachers are just burned out. Well I don't know if they're burned out. They just get tired of getting poked in the eye with a stick" (interview, 11-8-06).



They say she came in talking rough and angry right away .... The way she talked to them, they said it was so rough and, like, you know, 'I'm not taking no mess off of you, don't even,' this type of thing. 'I'm not taking no crap off of you,' this is the first day .... And I'm saying, the first day, your first day in a classroom, I don't care what you teaching. You don't *know* these students! So that mean you formed a prejudice against them by something you heard (interview, 11-28-06).

In attributing the new teacher's "prejudice against [students]" to "something [she] heard," Dorothy implicitly acknowledged the power of discourses to travel, to construct identities, and to lock students into positions that were created for them by others. This is not to say that students did not also choose to behave in ways that reinforced troublemaking and oppositional identities; they frequently did. Students in this particular new teacher's classroom had reportedly thrown things at the previous long-term sub and damaged property in the room. But in this case, the new teacher's language use positioned students from the start in ways that may have discouraged them from thinking that any other identity was possible.

Interviews with a variety of support staff members—including custodians, security guards, secretaries, and paraprofessionals—revealed that these people were acutely aware of the destructive effects of the language that many Centerville teachers used with students. Their accounts of comments and exchanges they overheard or witnessed further illustrate the role that language played in negative constructions of student identity. For example, support staff member Roseanne LaChance noted that everyday talk between teachers—the kind that went on at the copy machine or in the hallway as teachers compared class lists and discussed students they had in common—

constructed certain students as troublemakers, and in doing so, limited those students' chances of getting an equal opportunity to learn:

If a kid did something wrong, I don't feel that they should spread it to every teacher in the building. Because what happens, if this kid get in trouble for what other reason with that teacher, everywhere he go, he's gone. He's put down, he treated wrong. No matter what. And I don't think that's right ... When you come in, you should treat kids equally. Until *you* know that he's doing something wrong. Not because what everybody else said what he's doing. Or she. And we have a *lot* of that (interview, 5-23-07).

Like Dorothy, Roseanne acknowledged the way in which discourse traveled in Centerville, creating assumptions and biases among teachers that led them to "put down" students and "treat them wrong" solely on the basis of bad behavior in a previous teacher's classroom. Traveling discourse was more than a matter of idle gossip tainting students' chances with other teachers; discourse created *identities* for students that became locked in place, damaging their chances of educational achievement.

Some support staff members accounted for the negative ways in which teachers positioned Centerville students by explaining that a lot of teachers did not live in Centerville. Because of teachers' geographic and social distance from the Centerville community, Darryl Trueman argued, their understanding of Centerville students was limited to the negative things they experienced and observed:

Some of these people don't even live in Centerville. So it's not much that they can tell you. But from a negative perspective, they *can* tell you that. They can tell you that these kids talk back. They can tell you that these kids are bad. They can tell you that they're failing in class. But they can't tell that, aw, man, you know, Jonathan, he may be getting an F in my class, but I talked to him outside of school, he seemed like a nice young man (interview, 11-30-06).

Darryl's point was that teachers who didn't live in Centerville may simply not have *known* much about their students. But when their distance from students is considered in relation to the negative discourses that were circulating both inside and outside the school, it's not surprising that some teachers would focus on behaviors that fit with what discourses led them to expect. That is, the language available to teachers through mainstream discourses hindered them from forming deeper understandings of Centerville students' complex lives, motivations, and behavioral choices. Consequently teachers both reacted to and perpetuated discourses that kept students positioned as ill-mannered and unsuccessful.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Some teachers noted that *students themselves* also reacted to and perpetuated those discourses in the ways they talked about their school district and their future life chances. Though some students resisted the ways in which mainstream discourses positioned them, others demonstrated that the language available to describe their school and community limited their ability to imagine different identities for themselves.

These two tendencies were apparent when student teacher Linda Spencer recounted a series of comments she overheard a group of students make about the school district and the likely fate of its graduates: "The students, they'll make fun of the school and be like, 'Uh-huh-huh, well you know, so-and-so went to Centerville, so you know, that's why they're a bus driver and not a doctor,' or something like that. And that was actually a comment I heard yesterday ... They were talking about a bus driver and they said, 'Well he went to Centerville, and like, so yeah, of course he's,' I think they were calling him dumb or something. But they were like, 'Of course he's dumb, he went to Centerville.' And I think that they didn't want to be lumped in that. They didn't want somebody to say, 'Oh, you went to Centerville, you must be dumb' ...

"The ones who were making the comment were the ones who seem to be striving to get out, at least beyond high school, to go to college, they have that sort of forward-thinking track, and this whole like, I don't want to end up like that ... I guess I just think that the ones maybe who don't see themselves getting out of here any time soon aren't the ones doing the bashing of the school, because they're just kind of taking it like, 'Well this is me'" (interview, 4-19-07).

Teacher Doug Henderson argued that the material conditions of students' lives further limited their ability to imagine better futures for themselves. "I don't believe that our students believe they can be successful," he said. He explained how he'd gotten a deeper understanding of students' thinking when he visited their MySpace accounts. "Students would be talking about school. And listing the teachers they had ... Many of them ... wrote in their accounts, they try so hard in school, but it doesn't seem to matter because they're going no place. They can't go to college. It seemed pointless for them to apply themselves. Because they didn't have the money, they didn't have the resources to go. They're going to be on their own when they get out of school in many cases, and they just felt that they're going to high school to get through, but that's the end of it. They're done. They didn't feel they had the option to be successful later on, in terms of higher academics. Which I found interesting. And that's nothing you hear from the kids, but to go on and see how they're communicating with their friends, that to me said a lot."

Like Linda, however, Doug went on to note that money was not the only issue. The roots of the problem lay in students' self-concept. "You do hear that sometimes talking to kids," he added. "Why haven't you filled out your FAFSA forms? Or why haven't you applied? 'Well, I don't really think I could

Teachers who were new to Centerville were set up by these discourses to expect negative things from Centerville students. The discourses that circulated about the high school—which reached new teachers through comments made by neighbors, family friends, and spouses’ colleagues—led them to *expect* trouble and, in some cases, to feel fear. “My husband’s friend graduated from here and would just tell us these horrible, horrible, horrible stories,” said Allison Gratsch. “And I just kept telling him ... that was then, this is now. Because when I walked in the door, I didn’t want to have, um, the kids, you know ... a preconceived notion about them.” Though Allison wanted to convey that she had *not* formed preconceived notions, the more she talked, the more clear it became that she had. “If I think that they’re dangerous, or if I’m afraid of these kids because of everything, all the negatives that I’ve heard, I’m not going to have a good year ... with these students” (interview, 2-15-07). Other new teachers related comments made to them that were more vague and yet similarly foreboding. “When I was offered the position, we kind of asked around, people that we had begun to meet, my husband asked people at work. And what the perception was. And they said it’s a rough district,” Emma Middleton told me. “People we asked just said that, they just heard it had problems. That’s how they put it” (interview, 3-29-07).

Although this “setting up” of new teachers started with outside discourses, it was reinforced by things that more experienced staff members said to new staff members when they first came to the building. “I didn’t know anything about Centerville High School,” said teacher Tammy Pike. “I knew nothing about ... what the kids are like, where the area, I knew where the area was, but I didn’t know the implications of the

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get in.’ They don’t believe that they have the tools necessary to go to the college of their choice. So rather than face rejection, they just don’t do it” (interview, 2-1-07).

area.” Tammy’s lack of knowledge about Centerville was quickly filled in by messages she received from the secretaries. “What was funny is I came in, and uh, Mrs. Marshall in the office said to me, ‘Oh you came in to see the place? Are you going to leave now and not do the job?’ And I looked at her and I was like, what do you mean?” (interview, 12-7-06).<sup>79</sup> Ellen Garrity was implicitly warned about Centerville students during her job interview. “I was really intrigued by the questions the interview committee asked me

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<sup>79</sup> It’s not hard to understand how comments like Mrs. Marshall’s would alarm and worry new teachers like Tammy Pike. But even as Mrs. Marshall made implicitly derogatory comments about the school, it became clear during our interview that she was not unaware of the effects of derogatory language on students. While telling a story about a Marine recruiter who visited the high school, Mrs. Marshall described her outrage at his remarks to and about Centerville students. At the same time Mrs. Marshall criticized the Marine recruiter, however, she defended her own right to say whatever she wanted about Centerville students. Her comments reveal both contradictory thinking and an uneven understanding of the *implications* of language use:

“We had a Marine recruiter. And he came in here, and he said that Centerville had the lowest ACT scores ... the lowest MEAP scores ... and then that test that they take, the ASVAB for the military, they had the lowest scores. And these kids are just so stupid, he was just going on and on and on. And there was a kid that he was talking to, and he said, ‘So are you going to be stupid the rest of your life? You’re not going to go anywhere,’ and just talking really bad ... It really bothered me because we work with these kids and we’re allowed to talk about them, but no one else is allowed to talk about them. And if he talks about them to their face, what does he say out in public about the kids in this school. Because they’re not all stupid. They just don’t put out the effort. Or try. So he talked to Reggie. Reggie immediately got that boy fired. He was not allowed back in this building anymore. Because the way he trashed the kids. It was horrible. It was really, really bad. And so I always say, we’re allowed to make fun of them, and talk about them, but no one else is.”

When I asked Mrs. Marshall why that was, she likened talk about students to talk about family members. “[It’s] like your own kids ... like you talk about your own family ... We’re not being really cruel, but we sit there and talk about them. Because some of these kids, I mean, they’re just open for discussion. There’s no doubt about it ... Just by the way they act, and how stupid they are sometimes ... but we don’t treat them any different when they walk in” (interview, 4-23-07).

Though Mrs. Marshall could see the damage done by outsiders’ remarks to and about Centerville students, she could not see the implications of what she herself said about them—or the way in which she and the Marine recruiter both drew on the same deficit discourses when they talked about students’ so-called stupidity. And yet *dilemmas* about stupidity are also visible in Mrs. Marshall’s comments. As the Marine recruiter noted, Centerville students routinely received the lowest scores in the area on standardized tests. Though Mrs. Marshall argued that not all students were academically stupid (“They’re not all stupid. They just don’t put out the effort”), she went on to describe them as stupid in terms of *behavior* (“Just by the way they act, and how stupid they are sometimes”). These contradictory claims about stupidity show the difficulty that staff members had in separating their views of student behavior from their views of students’ academic and intellectual potential, especially when standardized test scores were so frequently invoked. Were Centerville students stupid or weren’t they? Some staff members seemed fundamentally unsure of the answer.

In addition, because of her daily contact with students, Mrs. Marshall felt entitled to “make fun of them,” even as she attacked the Marine recruiter for doing so. But she downplayed the effects of her talk, defending it as “not really cruel” and insisting that such talk had no influence on the way she treated students. Mrs. Marshall thought she and her fellow staff members could divorce their thinking about students from daily treatment of them. In reality, things were not so simple.

when they hired me. When not one of them was based on [my subject area] and almost all of them were based on classroom discipline,” she remarked. “One of them was, can you teach children you don’t love, and can children learn from a teacher they don’t like? That was one of the questions. I mean that’s an interview question .... So I got a pretty big picture that something had not gone well in this room” (interview, 12-11-06). Just as teachers’ discourses often positioned students as lacking investment in their own learning, staff discourses positioned new teachers as naïve and foolish for choosing to work in a school where relationships with students were by definition adversarial.

Veteran teachers went so far as to warn their student teachers not to pursue positions in Centerville. “When I was at the middle school, people told me not to teach here,” Wade Anderson said. “They said, ‘You don’t want to teach here. You can do better. Do you want to teach for thirty years in a place that’s going to make you crazy?’” (fieldnotes, 2-23-07). Teachers who did choose to stay sometimes internalized the contempt that both insiders and outsiders showed for the district. The first time I ever talked with her, Helen Granville told me that teaching in Centerville was seen as “a step down” from working in other districts, but she was willing to work there because it was within driving distance of home (fieldnotes, 8-24-04). Two years later, however, she had grown more bitter. “This place is really low. It’s the lowest place I’ve worked,” she said. “I’m only here because I need two more years until I can retire. I can’t go anywhere else” (fieldnotes, 9-27-06).

Helen’s comments positioned Centerville High School as a school that was inferior to schools in other places. At the same time, Helen positioned herself as superior to Centerville colleagues who didn’t know how “low” they were because they had never

worked anywhere else. Not surprisingly, the lack of regard that teachers like Helen had for Centerville only added to the dynamic of antagonism among staff members. Helen repeatedly attributed the conflicts she experienced with other teachers to what she called their lack of professionalism. The teachers she found to be unprofessional, however, came from working-class backgrounds or were black. “Many of them are first-generation college graduates,” she said. “They’re just one step above the neighborhood they came from. And they bring those values” (fieldnotes, 9-27-06).<sup>80</sup> Matthew Meissner took the same view. “We get the bottom of the barrel here. We get people who can’t get a job anywhere else” (fieldnotes, 9-8-06).<sup>81</sup> In this way, the discourses that circulated within Centerville about the school and its staff members accentuated social as well as ideological divisions among adults. Teachers positioned not just their students, but many of their *colleagues*, as lacking in skill, ability, and commitment.

It’s not surprising that some Centerville teachers developed negative views of their own district, given the divisions among staff members as well as the frequency with which all teachers had to defend their decision to teach there. “We get that, you know, from people in other districts. ‘You work in Centerville?’” Jimmy Wolfe laughed. “I’m sure you had that probably taped a million times. People say that kind of thing.

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<sup>80</sup> Roberta Worthy saw things from the opposite race and class position, describing herself as being “from the hood” and saying that beginning teachers who were not from such backgrounds were often unable to cope (fieldnotes, 10-18-06).

<sup>81</sup> Helen and Matthew’s comments need to be considered in the context of the sudden departure of a talented young teacher for the nearby Eastham school district just days before the 2006-07 school year started. This teacher’s last-minute departure, combined with the resignations of several others, had an effect on many staff members. In particular, those who had worked hard on school reform for two years and who had counted on young teachers as allies were left with feelings of abandonment and loneliness. “I sat there looking around in the staff meeting last week and I thought, all our bright young teachers are gone,” Sandra Altman told me as the 2006-07 school year was starting. “What I saw instead were old faces, that same old negativity” (fieldnotes, 9-5-06). Later in the school year, Tina Olsen still felt that loneliness. “I guess I’ll just be really honest. We had a bunch of new teachers here a couple years ago,” she explained, “and they’re all gone now ... I really felt a connection with them ... and I felt like there was, you know, some potential to kind of change some things. I guess I’ve been struggling this year” (interview, 12-1-06).

‘Centerville? Oh, I feel bad for you, man, that’s bad over there.’ I say, have you ever been there? It’s not that bad. It’s not bad, it’s no worse than where you’re at” (interview, 4-25-07).<sup>82</sup> Eleanor Shillington portrayed Centerville students as otherwise normal kids who happened to have below-average academic skills. “I mean, and you go talk to anybody, anyplace else in the county, (mimics) ‘Oh, you teach at Centerville?’ Yeah I do. And they’re kids. And yeah we may have to work a little harder to pull them up a little farther, but they’re still just kids. But that’s a perception ... this is the worst school. As far as they’re concerned” (interview, 12-4-06).

By insisting that Centerville was “no worse” than other places and that Centerville students were “just kids,” Jimmy and Eleanor both implied that there were no qualitative differences between working in Centerville and working in other area school districts. Based on my own experience teaching in Eastham, a suburban district near Centerville, I knew that this claim, though well-intentioned, was fundamentally untrue.<sup>83</sup> But I also

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<sup>82</sup> Andy Ellis noted that teachers’ need to defend Centerville as “not that bad” was both unique to teaching there and a huge distraction. “That’s one of the things that I think affects our culture ... the constant reference to what people think, and to what people are saying about us, and all the stories about, it’s not as bad here as people think. And the kids are much better here than people think .... Just the constantly defending, and always trying to compare ourselves as teachers and administrators to teachers and administrators in other districts. ‘A teacher from Henderson or a teacher from Prospect couldn’t teach here.’ Because we do take a hit, when our scores come out and, and there’s the graph, you know, there’s Prospect and Anchorage and Middletown and Ann Arbor up here, and there’s Centerville and Wilmont down here. Some people say, oh, that’s a reflection of our teaching. I think *we* know the truth ... sometimes it is and sometimes it isn’t. But we’re always having to defend ... We feel bad about being down here, so we’re always making excuses or trying to compare situations with other schools, where, that’s just a waste of time. That’s not helping what’s going on here” (interview, 12-19-06).

<sup>83</sup> I observed countless material, philosophical, and pedagogical differences between the schooling that occurred in Centerville and the schooling that occurred in Eastham, an in-depth discussion of which is beyond the scope of this dissertation. But even the ways in which the two districts were represented in the media, and the subsequent effects of those representations on people’s thinking, provide some indication of the districts’ differences. Centerville was regularly represented by in local newspaper articles as a district in turmoil and decline (a cover story about Centerville in one Sunday edition of the *Ann Arbor News* was titled “Plagued by problems, Centerville regroups”); Eastham was represented, by contrast, as a growing district where resources were plentiful (a new high school opened there in 2003) and test scores were consistently high.



understood that most all teachers in Centerville felt some need to defend their own and students' dignity with these sorts of rebuttals.<sup>84</sup> At the same time, I noted the ways in

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These differences had a powerful effect on how people inside Centerville, including students, saw themselves and their school. One day I was chatting with a student named Rayneisha in the media center, and the subject of Eastham came up. I explained that I had previously been a teacher there.

"They got good scores?" asked Dorothy Loveland, who was standing nearby.

Invoking my own brand of class-conscious discourse, I said they did have good scores, but that because of wealth, they had an unfair advantage over Centerville, since wealthy districts almost always had higher scores than low-income districts.

"Isn't that school real big?" Rayneisha asked. "Don't they got a lot of classes?"

I said they did.

"We got nothing to choose from here," she said, referring to Centerville's lack of electives. "I'm not saying you don't learn anything. It's educational. But you could learn more if there was more to choose from. And we been losing a lot of students. How you going to get people to come here if you don't got a lot of classes? It seems like everything's falling apart here, and nobody wants to do anything about it."

She paused and looked at me. "So what do you think of this school?"

I felt the intensity of her question, and I wondered where to begin. "I think people are really trying here, but it seems like the district's negative reputation has a big effect on how they feel."

"It do! It do!" she agreed. "I volunteer at Mott Children's Hospital. Girls there ask me, what school do you go to? I say Centerville. 'Ew, Centerville!'" She mimicked their reaction, wrinkling her face in disgust. "But if I said Northcrest or Weston [two prominent high schools in Ann Arbor], they would say, 'Ooh! The best!'" She posed like she was looking up at someone on a pedestal.

"I know," I said.

"I thought of leaving this school," she added. "But I been going here since elementary school. But we're losing people! Half my class goes to Brockway now." (Brockway was a school of choice district contiguous to Centerville with similar race and class demographics.)

"What does your mom say?"

"She says as long as I get my education, she don't care where I go." Then Rayneisha turned the questioning back on me. "So would you send your child here? Be honest now. Be honest."

I told her it was a good question. I explained that I had a son in kindergarten in Ann Arbor, and because Centerville was a school of choice district, I could have brought him there. But I chose not to.

"At least you were honest," she said, nodding. "I'm glad you were honest. You want him to go to a place where he can get his education. Not here where all these problems are" (fieldnotes, 2-21-07).

<sup>84</sup> I felt this same need to defend the district when neighbors and colleagues recognized Centerville as my research site and made comments associating it with various forms of social deprivation. During my third year of fieldwork, a friend in my neighborhood talked about Centerville in terms of police beat reports in the newspaper that revealed its high-crime areas. Another time, a coffee shop acquaintance informed me that all the schools in the district had chain link fences around them, which was not true. One professor who read a chapter of this dissertation before interviewing me for a faculty position commented that my research site must have been "intense" and "depressing." In a gentle attempt to push back on his perceptions, I said the site was fraught, but never depressing (fieldnotes, 12-5-08).

Centerville graduates who came back to work at the high school were particularly sensitive to the sensational quality of people's assumptions about what went on in the district. Support staff member Kendra Wheatley described her own need to both manage the comments people made to her about Centerville and strip away fiction from fact. "A lot times the things they say that happened, never even happened. Like, I've had one girl that I worked with at another place, she says, 'Oh my gosh, did you ever get raped on the school bus?' Like, no! You know, so a lot of the stuff people know about Centerville isn't even true. They just assume it from what little bit they might have read in the newspaper, or what this person said to that person. But a lot of it's not even true, half the time" (interview, 3-13-07).

However, sometimes outsiders' assumptions *were* true, at least when it came to academic rigor in the district. "When I left Centerville, I felt cheated," teacher Doug Henderson said. "I wasn't challenged

which most teachers acknowledged that there *were* differences between what went on socially and educationally in Centerville and what went on elsewhere. Articulating the *nature* of those differences, however, was both complicated and difficult. As teachers defended their decision to teach in Centerville and described their process of becoming acclimated to the district, they revealed the degree to which a strong awareness of Centerville students' class and race status had shaped their expectations. And yet the pattern of not talking directly about issues of class and race led teachers to leave the class- and race-based *assumptions* which informed their expectations both unexamined and unexplored. Consequently many teachers explained their classroom struggles by drawing on deficit discourses about low-income families and, to a lesser extent, stereotypes about a particular kind of urban African American identity. They then used these discourses and stereotypes to explain how what they and their students could hope to accomplish in Centerville was different from what could be accomplished in other districts—and fundamentally limited. In this way, teachers' expectations of students were both directly and indirectly shaped by what outsiders as well as insiders said about the students and the conditions in Centerville.

Like Jimmy Wolfe and Eleanor Shillington, teacher Pat Waddell reacted defensively when one of her own former teachers expressed surprise upon learning that

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academically, and I had classes where there were literally kids getting high in class, and teachers turning their heads to it. The expectation was non-existent .... I didn't have the work ethic or study habits to be successful." As a result, Centerville graduates found that they had to both build up the skills they were lacking and defend their intellectual ability. This posed dilemmas for graduates who returned to the district to teach, in terms of how to prepare the next generation of Centerville graduates. "I try and share a lot of stories with them," Doug explained. "How you walk out of here, and I hate to say it, that you're discriminated against as soon as you leave this building. You walk out, and you work with people who go to [Northcrest and Weston in Ann Arbor], and they automatically assume that you're of lower intelligence, that you can't function. And so I ... try and get them to see that we need to overcome those things, and that we can. And I don't know if I do a good job at that ... I often question, is that good to do, or is it harmful? And I don't know if it is or not" (interview, 2-1-07).

she taught in Centerville. But unlike Jimmy and Eleanor, in the course of trying to defend herself and explain what her job was like, Pat both rejected her former teacher's assumptions about Centerville *and* acknowledged that students' home lives had a negative impact on their learning:

He said, so where are you, you know, where are you teaching, and I said Centerville. (Mimics) 'You *are*? Isn't that wild over—' I mean, just the comments out of his mouth then. I'm like, it's not what people think! And it's, you know, the kids here have problems that kids in [her hometown] don't think twice about ... About, you know, okay, mom isn't doing what she needs to. Who's going to pick the little brother up after school. Who's going to be there to make dinner. Are we going to have food in our house for dinner ... that affects some of the kids (interview, 2-23-07).

Pat's comments about the things that *did* distinguish Centerville from other places—in particular, problems Centerville students faced that students elsewhere “didn't have to think twice about”—alluded to the role that poverty played in students' lives (“are we going to have food in our house for dinner”), but at the same time, her comments positioned Centerville parents as irresponsible (“mom isn't doing what she needs to”) and implied that irresponsibility was common in Centerville's low-income families.

Centerville staff members regularly and unselfconsciously attributed the challenges they faced in the classroom to the parenting styles in low-income homes, arguing that the lifestyles and habits of families in Centerville made teachers' work more difficult. Problems with students coming tardy to class were routinely linked to attitudes students supposedly picked up at home. “Our community [members] aren't faced with places they have to be at times because they don't have jobs,” said Stan Varney. “And so parents don't see the importance of, oh I have to get up because I have to be at my job at

a certain time. So it's revolving and going down to the children" (interview, 1-31-07). Similarly, staff members blamed students' lack of good study skills and work habits on the values they absorbed at home. "The importance of an education, the importance of doing homework, the importance of showing up every day with good attendance, those are the things that are built into the kids before they even get here, and those are things that we have problems with," teacher Danny McGhee explained. "I don't know what the causes are. Other than that's the way they were brought up, and that's what they know" (interview, 6-4-07).

Teachers also tended to believe that students' class status limited what they could imagine for their futures, which in turn suppressed students' goals and ambitions and made it harder for teachers to motivate students as learners. This view was held by veteran teachers and beginners alike. Marty Cahoon explained:

A lot of them, I don't think are looking at professional jobs as being what they're going to end up in. I think it's more working class, uh, service-oriented jobs that are not going to require as much formal education .... I don't think they set their sights as high as they potentially could. And I think a lot of it is, it's a carryover from home .... You're fighting against other forces that you don't have any control over. You know, outside. And a lot of times, those forces kind of overpower, you know, they see mom and dad work at this type of job, that's kind of what they shoot for (interview, 12-14-06).

While it may have been true that some Centerville parents did not imagine their children going to college, teachers' passive acceptance of this outcome served to reinforce the likelihood that students who were born into low-income families would remain low-income. Teachers like Rachel Moses saw this form of social reproduction as natural

result of growing up in a low-income home surrounded by people who had not accomplished much in terms of education:

I would say their socioeconomic status or what they come from, you know, what they expect of themselves for later in life, is hugely influential, and that how much time they put in, and how much ... motivation to finish their work or succeed or do well, that comes from the people they're surrounded by. The people they're surrounded by dropped out of high school and have a halfway decent job, or at least they pay their bills. What motivation is that for them to finish? (interview, 6-6-07).

In assuming that students “didn’t set their sights high” and lacked “motivation to finish their work or succeed or do well,” Centerville teachers had no reason to consider whether the things they themselves were saying and doing contributed to students’ lack of success.

While staff members spoke in more coded and indirect ways about the role that race played in shaping conditions at the school, race-inflected stereotypes played a similar role as class-based deficit discourses in shaping adults’ expectations of Centerville students. Though new teachers might reject some of the stereotypes they encountered in the discourses that circulated about Centerville, other stereotypes—especially ones with racial overtones—did take root in their thinking. Teacher James Merrick explained that when he was offered a job in Centerville, a family member warned him that the school was run by gangs. “Of course I didn’t believe it,” he said, noting that the building lacked the broken windows and tagged walls that would have indicated a gang presence. Though James was quick to point out that the condition of the *building* wasn’t so bad, when his relative made additional claims about Centerville’s *students*, arguing that “they’re nothing but a bunch of thugs there,” he was more willing

to accept what she said. “We have a lot of kids that think that way, if you look at the way the kids walk in the hall, the way they present themselves, they think they’re little thugs because of the reputation that Centerville has” (interview, 11-29-06).

James was not alone in his willingness to characterize some Centerville students as thugs. At the start of my third year of fieldwork, teacher Neal Morton told me that things were going more smoothly than in previous years because there were fewer thugs walking around (fieldnotes, 9-21-06). While I observed both James and Neal engage in many affectionate exchanges with students, their use of a term like thug reveals how easy it was for teachers to assume the worst about students’ attitudes, motivations, and future prospects based on their style of dress and manner of walking in the halls—and to convey those assumptions through their language choices without ever mentioning students’ race or income level directly.<sup>85</sup>

It is important to note, however, that new teachers were forced to engage with race- and class-based stereotypes—whether they agreed with them or not—in the process of responding to outsiders’ assertions about Centerville. “Someone asked me, ‘Why would you want to work at Centerville? It has a terrible reputation.’ To be totally honest, they said it’s like inner-city Detroit,” admitted teacher Bill Akers. “I said well, there’s no bars on the windows. There’s no metal detectors on the entrances ... And I

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<sup>85</sup> I read the term “thug” as a racialized term because of the way it was popularized in the work of African American rap artist Tupac Shakur through his 1994 album *Thug Life*. Dyson (2001) recalls what Tupac said when he explained the meaning of the term “thug life”: “It’s not thugging like I’m robbing people, ’cause that’s not what I’m doing ... I mean like I’m not scared to say how I feel. Part of being [a thug] is to stand up for your responsibilities and say this is what I do even though I know people are going to hate me and say, ‘It’s so politically un-correct,’ and ‘How could you make black people look like that? Do you know how buffoonish you all look with money and girls and all of that?’ That’s what I want to do. I want to be real with myself.” Dyson quotes another rapper, Big Syke, on the meaning of “thug” and “outlaw,” another term Tupac embraced: “I call thugs the nobodies ... because we really don’t have nobody to help us but us. And then outlaw is being black and minority. Period” (p. 113).

don't see guns other than the one sheriff" (interview, 5-14-07).<sup>86</sup> By invoking images such as bars on the windows, metal detectors at the doors, and gun-toting students, Bill revealed the ways in which urban stereotypes drawn from movies like *Dangerous Minds* had shaped his expectations of teaching in Centerville. The comparison of Centerville to inner-city Detroit, which Bill marked self-consciously with the phrase "to be totally honest," further reveals the influence of race on his perceptions.<sup>87</sup> Given that Centerville was an extremely small district located in a residential area near an auto assembly plant, it resembled the massive Detroit public school system only in that it served a sizable

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<sup>86</sup> Here Bill is referring to Deputy Randy Milford, the police liaison officer from the sheriff's department who was contracted to work with the Centerville district. Randy's characterization of Centerville students suggests that he too struggled to disentangle his own descriptions of the students and the place from the many stereotypes that surrounded it. "The majority of kids always want to do the right thing," he noted. At the same time, however, Randy acknowledged that Centerville's negative reputation was based in part on the actions of Centerville students. "Do I get contacted by numerous police agencies and police officers from the sheriff's department as well, just thinking that somebody from Centerville must have been involved with certain crimes that happened in the community? Yes, I do. I do get contacted quite a bit. But unfortunately a lot of the times when they come to me ... they're pretty correct on our involvement with some of the things going on outside the building" (interview, 1-23-07).

<sup>87</sup> The racial inflections in Bill's thinking were apparent not just in his comparison of Centerville to inner-city Detroit, but in his understanding of the behavior of black students. After a fight occurred in his classroom between two black students, he was surprised that the students downplayed their fight to administrators as just "horsing around." Rather than see their comment as a way to minimize the seriousness of their behavior and reduce their chances of getting in trouble, Bill read it as an example of a racial group's "culture" and said it gave him the experience of culture shock. "That's really my culture shock, is that, no, that's fighting ... I was uneducated in certain of the finer points of what is considered okay. And that, and of course, in the school's eyes, it's not okay to do any of that. But the kids will, you know, that's their culture .... I'm amazed that certain things go on in school that, to the kids, is normal, that is to me, you know, dangerous, you know, *Danger Will Robinson! Danger!* Uh, if you remember that one."

Bill also indicated that some of his classroom discipline challenges arose due to the "gang mentality" of black female students. "There are two groups of blacks that I've been able to identify here. There are the ones that have said, 'You know what? I don't like where I'm at. And I'm going to move ahead.' They are labeled as white by other blacks .... You've also got the people who are, I won't say into gangs, but have gang mentality. That's usually the young women. Usually if you have a problem with one, it's not just one, it's three or four at the same time. They all kind of cram, right, and they all try to talk over each other, trying to demand your attention ... As a result, I don't get my work done when they decide to do this. Because I'm trying to fend off three or four people, so I can't necessarily see or help the people over there, because I'm dealing with a crisis here" (interview, 5-14-07).

number of black students, and yet people both inside and outside Centerville referred to it as an “urban” school system.<sup>88</sup>

Other teachers referred explicitly to the role that race played in shaping perceptions of Centerville in the local area, explaining the insidious effect of those perceptions on how they themselves talked about the district. For Amber Sandstrom, a student teacher determined to push back against race- and class-based forms of deficit thinking, common ways of talking about Centerville exerted an influence on her own language use, even as she tried to resist that influence:

This is going to sound really bad, but I think that a lot of people associate Black students with being rough, like they know that this is predominantly African-American student population, and they associate them with fights and being rough .... It is difficult sometimes for me, I do catch myself correcting myself a lot of the time, with like following the norms, or is it the *language* of how people talk about the school. I shouldn't say all the time, I mean I'm always saying good things about Centerville, but sometimes you do fall into it because it's a reputation that's set in stone at this point, like it hasn't budged for most people (interview, 4-18-07).

Though Amber recognized the racialized nature of a term like “rough” when it was used to describe predominantly African American Centerville students, she also acknowledged the impact of discursive “norms” on her own ways of talking—norms which at times led

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<sup>88</sup> Centerville's official website described the district's location in “a residential suburban community” (accessed 4-6-08), while the district's 2006-07 annual report identified Centerville as “a small urban district.” With a large proportion of low-income housing, a manufacturing job base, and the anchor of a major automobile assembly plant, Centerville was not exactly suburban, but it was not located in a major urban center, either. Unlike surrounding districts within Lincoln County, however, whose White populations were as high as 97%, Centerville's racial makeup was 61% Black and 36% White, while 71% of its students received free and reduced lunch. The contrast in usage between “urban” and “suburban” suggests internal ambivalence about *whether and how* to represent race and class demographics in the language used to define the district. By comparison, the Detroit Public School district was located in a major city *and* served a student population that was 89% black (<http://www.detroit.k12.mi.us/data/dpsfacts/>, accessed 11-14-08). Without referring to these demographic characteristics directly, teacher Wade Anderson noted the power of language in general to construct understandings of Centerville High School in people's minds. “This is an inner-city school because the kids say it is,” he told me (fieldnotes, 10-18-06).



her to “fall into” patterned forms of language use without thinking. In explaining her response to the discursive norms she recognized, Amber described a pattern of language-based acquiescence and resistance, with moments of being lulled into the language used by others followed by moments of awakening and renewed commitment to making different language choices.

Amber illustrated that pattern of acquiescence and resistance during our interview as she struggled repeatedly with using and then resisting the term “rough.” At first, she used the term in the course of explaining what had been said to her about Centerville by others:

Whenever I tell people that I’m teaching at Centerville they kind of sigh or they’re like, ‘Uuh, I feel bad for you,’ or things like that. I guess it has a reputation of being rough, or, um, that they have discipline problems and things like that.

But even as she called the Centerville community rough, she simultaneously recognized and pushed back on the term:

It’s probably a community that’s more on the rough side. Uh, no I guess I shouldn’t say rough. I mean I don’t see any examples of it being rough. I just see, um, less parent or guardian involvement or interaction than in other communities or other districts? (interview, 4-18-07).

The power of such a term to shape people’s thinking is seen in Amber’s determination to *resist* using “rough” as a descriptor while still struggling to explain *why* such a term existed (“I just see less parent or guardian involvement than in other districts”). While Amber understood on some level the influence of people’s language choices on the

perceptions and understandings she developed, her attempt to account for the presence of a term like “rough” speaks to the difficulty all teachers had in making sense of the material conditions of students’ lives as they played a part in teaching and learning.<sup>89</sup>

More experienced teachers who, like Amber, tried to push back against race- and class-based stereotypes and the deficit discourses that arose from them, noted how hard it was to resist the allure of those discourses in making sense of student behavior in the classroom. When I asked Wendy Swensen about the role that students and their families played in shaping the culture of the building, she immediately brought up the influence of stereotypes about low-income families on teachers’ thinking, and she discussed her own struggle to resist those stereotypes:

That’s one that your brain kind of fights with, because I think that naturally ... that’s always in the back of your mind. Whenever you see a kid come in that doesn’t have a pencil. Or see a kid come in that is immediately putting his head down on the desk. But at the same time, if you just kind of let that be the reason, like ... how do I say it clearly. If you let that be the scapegoat, then you have no reason to ever do anything about it. It’s kind of like releases you from any responsibility. So I think you want to *acknowledge* it, but I don’t think you want to necessarily think that that solves it. Or that that brings closure to it. In any way (interview, 3-29-07).

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<sup>89</sup> Deputy Randy Milford further complicated the work of distinguishing stereotype from reality when he too used the term “rough” and explained its origins in local history. “The perception here is a rougher perception. And a more negative than positive, that’s certain .... This area will always be referred to as a little bit rough, and a little bit tougher, and we can stem back even into the mid-eighties to early nineties, prior to me joining the police department, and being told some of the things going on were extremely reckless, with, with guns and drugs ... when gangs were a little bit more visible. I mean there’s gangs in this building. We have gangs in this building. It’s less visible, less identifiable, but we do have some of the red clothing that would be consistent with the Blood culture, with um, their tilting methods of their hats. And their number methods, wearing on their shirts or jerseys. Or predominantly wearing one thing to the left or not .... I try to be careful, but you know we, we do have the problems that are circulating again, that possibly [the early nineties] brought us .... It would be naïve for us to think that things that happen out in the neighborhood, or the streets, or the community, don’t get brought into a school building” (interview, 1-23-07).

In acknowledging the assumptions and associations that her brain “kind of fights with,” Wendy made an explicit connection between race- and class-based perceptions of student identity and teacher interpretations of resistance and low achievement in their classrooms. Students in Centerville did routinely come to class without materials and engage in behaviors that prevented them from learning. Wendy’s comments allude to how easy it was for teachers who were already highly conscious of students as differently raced and classed to *use those differences* as a way to explain the widespread failure and resistance they encountered. Wendy wanted teachers to acknowledge students’ difficult life experiences and situations without invoking those things as excuses which relieved them from responsibility to help students succeed.

But for teachers who had no firsthand experience with poverty or with people from non-white racial groups, deficit discourses were alluring as they sought to understand why students wouldn’t work and why student achievement in Centerville was so low. As previous examples have shown, teachers arrived in Centerville with heightened awareness and, in some cases, deep misgivings about the student population as “other.” Consequently, many teachers took it for granted that students in other districts would behave better and achieve more. Because these teachers understood the differences between what went on in Centerville and what went on elsewhere to be intrinsic to who Centerville students were, they saw no connections between adults’ expectations and Centerville students’ subsequent performance. Such differences were instead *naturalized* as manifestations of Centerville students’ membership in low-income families and peer groups.

These naturalized differences were apparent in the context of a reference James Merrick made to the talented young teacher who left Centerville to take a job in nearby Eastham. In a description of what she would likely find when she got to this suburban district, James demonstrated both the ease with which he and other teachers associated better student behavior with higher class status *and* the dilemmas that underscored such associations:

More privileged district, probably, um, I won't say the kids are better, but the expectation would be that those kids are a little bit better behaved because like you said,<sup>90</sup> they're coming from a more privileged background, and so, you would

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<sup>90</sup> It is possible that the way I framed my interview questions set teachers up to focus on differences between Centerville and other places, or differences between Centerville teachers and students. For example, James Merrick made this comment when I asked him to talk about "new people coming in to schools where there are differences between the students and the teachers, in terms of the life experiences they've had, and even their race and class identities." The reason I chose to ask such a question, however, was *because* of my firsthand knowledge of new teachers' struggles in Centerville. For example, just before James compared student behavior in Centerville to what he imagined went on in Eastham, we had been discussing the sudden resignation just a couple of weeks earlier of new teacher Eugene Rowe. Probably because we had been talking broadly about school culture, James commented that "culture" had something to do with Eugene's resignation. James linked culture, however, to the particular forms of student behavior that teachers encountered in Centerville. "I think that culture definitely had something to do with his eventual, uh, leaving the school," James told me. "Even though he said it was other things he dealt with, he was never comfortable in the classroom. But when you walk in the classroom and you ask the kids to quiet down and they don't respond immediately, it'll have an effect on you. It does me" (interview, 11-29-06).

I agreed with James' assessment of Eugene's struggle because in an interview two weeks earlier, Eugene had talked at length about student behavior in Centerville. In doing so, his assumptions about the lives of people from lower social classes—and the connections between social class, behavior, and the quality of family relationships—were clearly apparent. "I mean just the way they talk even when they're not trying to be disrespectful is bad enough, you know? ... They're totally unaware of other people's feelings .... They don't ask politely, they just demand. Even if it's just the time. (mimics) 'What time is it.' You know, can't you ask politely, you know, can't you treat somebody like they have feelings, and are valuable? But I guess that's just the way the kids are treated. And so that's what they reflect."

Not only did Eugene link negative student behavior with membership in a lower social class; he was convinced that parents living in the lower class simply did not love their children. "The environment that I come out of, there aren't that many needy people. I mean there's need out there all over, but it's just magnified here so much, kind of the storybook classic, what you read in the news type thing, everyday these kids are dealing with this .... They need the security of knowing that they're going to have a home and food and clothing. But way beyond that, the security of knowing they're loved. Which so many of them don't have. They don't have any economic security, they don't have any love" (interview, 11-2-06).

Because Eugene believed that Centerville students were fundamentally unloved by their parents, because he explicitly linked statements about Centerville students' deficiencies with a class status which he felt was so foreign from his own, and because I had been prepared for such deficit assumptions by my reading of arguments about the need for culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Villegas and Lucas, 2002), I came to listen for interpretations based on social difference in all of my

expect them to act a little bit better. Maybe not, but you would expect them to (interview, 11-29-06).

Merrick's dilemmatic thinking is deeply evident here. Though he hesitated to make a categorical claim ("I won't say the kids are better"), he still acknowledged that differences underscored his thinking ("The expectation would be that those kids are a little bit better behaved"). And yet he also noted the ambivalence he felt about claims related to difference ("You would expect them to act a little bit better. Maybe not, but you would expect them to"). This string of claims, associations, and uncertainties hints at just how difficult it was for Centerville teachers to make sense of the behavior they encountered among Centerville students. It also shows how heavily teachers relied on assumptions about what it was like elsewhere in order to explain the conditions where they were.

These assumptions led teachers not only to acknowledge that there were indeed differences between the quality of education students received in Centerville and the quality of education received by students in upper-income districts, but to rationalize those differences as a product of student attitudes and behavior. New teacher Tammy Pike talked matter-of-factly about instructional minutes she lost every day as a result of the student behavior she dealt with in Centerville. But she also indicated that Centerville students had a different attitude toward learning than students elsewhere, specifically, a desire for instant gratification that precluded deeper forms of thinking:

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interviews. Perhaps in listening this way, I unwittingly prompted simplistic class group comparisons. But in the case of my interview with Eugene Rowe, all I had to do to elicit such comparisons was ask him to describe the culture of the building.

I would say I have probably a half hour of *actual* teaching time every day. And our contact minutes are not spent the same as, say Prospect Area Schools' contact time. You know, they have less discipline issues. And I'm not saying that that's not something that can be worked around? But it does make it different to get that instant gratification thing from school. Because we don't have enough time to emphasize, emphasize, emphasize. And I feel like I've had to kind of revamp my education, um, my lesson plans, to provide an education that maybe gives these kids an aha! instant gratification. Instead of thinking about it for a long time (interview, 12-7-06).

In believing that she needed to “revamp” her lesson plans to provide instant gratification instead of deeper thinking, Tammy unwittingly reinscribed lower educational standards and a poorer quality of instruction that the general public (and some students and teachers) had come to expect in Centerville. It did not occur to Tammy that the choices she was making served to lessen what was expected of Centerville students and, in turn, what they accomplished academically. Instead she truly believed that her choices were logical and necessary, given the population of students she taught.

Student teacher Linda Spencer drew similar conclusions about the need to lower expectations as she made sense of the way students responded to the assignments she gave. Like many beginning teachers, Linda struggled to motivate students to do their work. But instead of seeing her struggle as a product of her lack of experience in developing meaningful lesson plans, she positioned Centerville students categorically as “unmotivated”:

I don't think I've ever thought more about unmotivated students in my entire life, and how to get them motivated, and I've never had to try so many different things before ... I mean, there are days where I have broken down and said to the kids, fine. What do *you* want to do? And just having them tell me what is the lesser of the two evils that I'm giving them as a choice, and it's something that maybe I can sit there and think, well, all right, this is how I reach this kind of audience,

and if I get a job somewhere that has this, a sort of, you know, a diverse clientele, and one that's maybe not too thrilled to be reading a book.

Here Linda revealed the ways in which she was building theories about the pedagogical approaches needed to reach "this kind of audience." In her mind "a diverse clientele" was by definition "not too thrilled to be reading a book," and getting students to work involved a series of trade-offs and compromises over "the lesser of two evils."<sup>91</sup>

Like Tammy, Linda did not consider the effect of her own assumptions and choices on students' attitudes and motivation toward learning. As she explained the kinds of assignments she learned to give in Centerville, however, it became clear that her expectations of what students were capable of and willing to do led her to make compromises in the quality of her instruction that kept standards low. Recalling her inability to get students to complete the assigned reading, Linda explained how she decided to employ strategies she had been specifically discouraged from using in her college methods course:

They weren't reading for homework, and they told me that it was not real homework ... And I said fine. Do you want something in writing? And probably three-quarters of the class said yes ... so I said fine. And the next day I came in and I said here, your homework is to read these two chapters and here are some questions .... Then had some sort of sense of responsibility for homework. And I

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<sup>91</sup> Wendy Swensen described these trade-offs and compromises as a form of "educational blackmail" in which students manipulated teachers into lowering academic standards in exchange for compliant behavior. "There's a lot of wheeling and dealing," she explained. "A lot of what I would call educational blackmail. If I bring my pencil today, will you let me sit by my friend ... They feel like because they've put out that little bit of effort, they deserve something back from you ... I think there's at least some level of, if you're good in class, if you're not a discipline problem ... I won't write you up, if you're not disruptive, if you're just sleeping."

I asked Wendy to give an example of what a student would expect to get in exchange for good behavior. "Participation points," she replied. "If I just sit and pretend like I'm reading for the next twelve minutes, do I get ten points? Just for pretending to look at this book? Or is it actually because I can answer a question about something that I read. What gets me the points? The appearance? Of being a student? Or really being a student" (interview, 3-29-07).

was like, all right, so maybe this is something I should be doing every day, instead of once in a while .... And that's something that I wouldn't have thought to do because that's not something that I ever needed to do in high school. And not, I feel like something that was not encouraged in our college classes. Like don't give kids like busywork questions. Just don't. And it's like, well, if it gets them to do the work, then why not? (interview, 4-19-07).

Though Linda acknowledged that assigning study questions was little more than “busywork,” she justified the use of such questions as a form of accountability that students wanted. Here again, though, Linda tied her own choices to characteristics of Centerville students that she appeared to believe were unchangeable. Her explanation of the decision to use study questions suggests that she felt she had no choice but to do whatever it took to “get them to do the work.”

When I asked Linda what kinds of work her methods instructors had encouraged her to assign instead of study questions, she noted that she could have asked her students to do more substantive kinds of writing. But in explaining why she had come to believe that in-depth writing wasn't an option in Centerville, she focused on the material disadvantages in students' homes—specifically, the number of students whose families did not own computers—as the reason why she couldn't ask them to write essays:

And, you know, Centerville, I can't say, go home and type this essay, because many of them don't have anything to type it on. And so if I asked my kids today to go home and write an essay about what they read, they'd flip out. That's just, it's too much, they're not prepared for it at this point. So, I guess I just had to sort of, baby steps, like break it down more than I thought I would have to (interview, 4-19-07).

Linda's comments about Centerville students demonstrate that material lack was not the only factor in her lowered expectations. Perceptions of student attitudes played an equal



role in her instructional decisions. Because she had come to *expect* that students would “flip out” if she asked them to do more demanding forms of work, she chose not to assign this work. Instead she “broke things down” into “baby steps.” What Linda may not have realized was that in choosing *not* to give students harder work, she kept them locked in an instructional pattern that ensured they would remain unskilled and unprepared.

Compassion for students’ difficult life circumstances also led teachers to lower expectations, at times inadvertently and unconsciously. Knowing that many Centerville students had been academically unsuccessful for years, adults went to great lengths to celebrate students’ small accomplishments. This, too, was a place-specific practice that teachers recognized as different from what went on elsewhere. Teacher Bill Akers explained the degree to which inflated forms of praise were expected in Centerville when he talked about things you “had to do” in order to encourage students, even if that encouragement felt a little bit like lying:

You’ve got to give these kids much more patting on the back, much more positive reinforcement. And I could be wrong, that could be true anywhere, but I get the impression, from what I’ve heard is that if they get, you know, three out of five right, ‘You guys, that’s a good job!’ Well look, that’s 60%, that’s not a good job. But you’ve got to say it’s a good job. And if it’s a four out of five, ‘Oh wow, that’s awesome!’ You know. And 100%, you know, almost should be dancing in the streets. So that they get the impression that they’re doing something good (interview, 5-14-07).

James Merrick confirmed that the practice of hyping minor forms of achievement was widespread. “I see it happen all the time with the teachers here ... They try to give the kids that positive feedback. When they do something successful, as small a success as it is, maybe inflate it and make it a big deal, to let them know, hey, you did something good

... like I said, I've seen teachers do it throughout the building" (interview, 11-29-06).

Despite the good intentions that motivated such forms of encouragement, encouraging messages ultimately communicated to students that the *appearance* of "doing something good" mattered more than the actual quality of the accomplishment.

For teachers who were unsure of what they could achieve with students in Centerville, the caring stance that guided the approach many took to instruction was a bright spot amidst all the other things that were wrong in the school. "I see teachers trying very hard," said Henry Schultz. "You know, they just care about kids" (interview, 12-8-06). And yet as teachers began grappling with the need to raise expectations, the subject of caring itself became marked by dilemmas.<sup>92</sup> Some teachers noted that problems arose from caring too much. "We got a lot of teachers here that have a lot of compassion for these kids," Jimmy Wolfe told me. "They will take these kids home in their car, take them to eat, take them to their house .... At the same time maybe, I don't know, enabling them ... I know we have some teachers that really do care, more about that kind of thing, with their heart, as opposed to maybe the academics and what's real. What's life really like. Come over here and cry on my shoulder" (interview, 4-25-07). Kate Seabrook elaborated on the problem of enablement. "We kind of take the easy way out. Because, well maybe they can't do it, or we don't want them to fail. And part of it, I

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<sup>92</sup> This dilemma over caring—that it could be motivated by "a kind heart" but at the same time could unintentionally damage students—gave staff members another reason to divide themselves into opposing camps. It also added to the problem of staff immobilization. When staff members disagreed about the appropriateness and the implications of excessive caring, they had another reason to judge and avoid each other, further decreasing their willingness to work together for school change. Some staff members physically turned away from colleagues who they believed crossed the line in caring for students. "I used to always, you know, they always want us to stand at our doors in the morning time. I've gotten so that I don't do that any more," one teacher told me, and then asked me to turn off the tape recorder while she explained how she literally closed her door in the face of the hugs and touching that constituted "caring" for one of her colleagues. "I see so much, and I just try to put on blinders," she explained. "Because it's so much stuff like that that goes on here at Centerville High School that people don't even know about. And, and teachers, if you're going to be professionals, you cannot do that" (interview, 6-12-07).

think, comes from a kind heart, where you say I care about these kids, I don't want them to fail. But the thing is, if they leave with no skills, they will fail" (interview, 1-24-07).<sup>93</sup>

Because these problems and dilemmas were never openly discussed, Centerville teachers were on their own to figure out how to proceed in the classroom despite students' difficult lives. As a result, empathy for students led some teachers not only to lower their academic standards, but to question whether the academic work they were doing with students was even relevant. Describing the range of students enrolled in a class that was difficult to teach, Joyce Jones recounted the ways in which her growing awareness of their challenging circumstances led her to doubt students' capacity to be academically engaged:

Out of that class, I have Kaleem, who is in big serious trouble with the law. I have Neiko Bonderman, who was afraid to sit in class one day because he had a bench warrant out for him and he was afraid they were going to come arrest him.

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<sup>93</sup> Despite the lengths that some teachers went to demonstrate that they cared, large numbers of Centerville students failed their classes anyway. Matthew Meissner argued that excessive caring was to blame. Describing the frequency with which teachers gave students second chances—for example, to turn in late work, to rewrite papers, to retake tests—Matthew pointed to caring as a factor that *enabled* failure. "Because we care, we enable them to fail," he said (fieldnotes, 10-16-06). And yet recognizing the problems inherent in excessive caring, Matthew was still faced with the need to address chronic failure in his own classroom (fieldnotes, 1-22-07). As was the case with so many other intractable problems in Centerville, recognizing the factors that contributed to these problems did not lead to increased knowledge of how to solve them.

Other staff members recognized that they themselves were part of the problem. Teacher Roz Nelson admitted that she was one of the teachers who cared too much—in fact, she called herself an enabler. But at the same time, Roz felt she was caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, she saw her practice of "enabling" students as a conscious attempt to push back on the competitiveness and ruthless individualism that she associated with white culture; on the other hand, she realized that she could "enable" students and they would still fail: "I don't *know* what's wrong with our Caucasian culture," she laughed. "We do individualism. We want to, you know, strive for individual academia instead of, okay, let's all work collaboratively. And uplift people, okay, so what are your strengths here, what are your weaknesses, let's work on it together and fix it, you know. And not let you fail .... But again, too, I'm an enabler, so I don't know if I'm really doing anybody any favors, Jennifer ... Here's the thing, with the enabling. It's that tightrope ... You know, you can enable so long, and eventually sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't ... If you enable too much, they get away with too much, and then they just don't achieve anything, but on the other hand, if you're too hard on some of these kids, they just drop out and fall through the cracks" (interview, 4-20-07).

I have a girl who told me her mother was, and this is her word, a whore. She said, 'I'm fifteen, my mother's 30, she has four kids, she's a prostitute. I think she's a prostitute in Ohio.' I'm like (lowers voice), do I really want to know all this? Neiko Bonderman was, I'm standing here taking attendance, he comes up, just starts talking. And I said, what's going on, Neiko? He goes, 'Well, I was talking to my probation officer, and he's going to try to find me a new place to live.' And I said oh, things not working out with your mom and dad? And he goes, 'Well, I haven't seen my mom in five years since my sister was born, and my dad's in prison for 18 years, and so I'm sure I'm not seeing him any time soon.' And I'm like (makes surprised facial expression), you know, I didn't do that, but I thought, and I'm asking you to be interested in [academic subject area]? I'm thinking to myself, how interested are you in that when you got that going on at home? ... But I was so mad at him all the time. You know, just saying ... the kid doesn't care about his education. And then when he said that, it's like, whoa, culture gap. You know. Big gap here. All I could do, and I just put my hand on him saying, I'm so sorry. What can I do? (interview, 5-9-07).

With her use of the term “culture gap,” Joyce signaled her awareness of race and class as structural categories that contributed to vastly different life experiences for her and her students. At the same time, she recognized that those differences produced gaps in her understanding of student attitudes. Though Joyce noted that she had made assumptions about Neiko (“the kid doesn't care about his education”), and then later regretted them when she realized the difficulty of his situation (“I just put my hand on him saying, I'm so sorry”), learning about Neiko's situation did not lead Joyce to any greater understanding of what she should *do* to support him academically in the classroom. In fact, the reverse was true: Joyce's overwhelming awareness of Neiko and other students' personal challenges actually led her to *diminish* her emphasis on academics. Though Joyce argued that it was important to “expect something from them,” what she actually expected had less to do with consistent academic engagement than with good behavior. “You know I always, I don't know that I academically expect as much as I want to. But I

expect certain behavior. Just proper, reasonable behavior. And if I don't get it, I just, I can't deal with it" (interview, 5-9-07).

Anyone who has taught a class knows that "reasonable" student behavior is essential in order for meaningful learning to take place. But inordinate emphasis on behavior has historically been a marker of learning opportunities provided to students in lower academic tracks (Oakes, 1985; Page, 1991) and to working class students in particular (Anyon, 1981). While Joyce acknowledged, at least indirectly, some ambivalence about the choices she was making ("I don't know that I academically expect as much as I want to"), for other teachers, an emphasis on behavior and following the rules was an entirely logical focus for low-income and minority students. Teacher Camille Plumley explained that requiring students to bring a textbook each day—even if they never used it—was important preparation for "the rules of life":

It's not about the book work .... It's the rules. The rules of life. One year I had kids bring a book to class every day. I never used it. That isn't the point. The point was, can you do what your boss tells you to do on a daily basis? Can you bring that hard hat to work every day? Whether you use the hard hat or not. Because the one day you need the hard hat, and you can't use it, you can't work .... They brought the book every day. 'When are we going to use this book?' Oh, one day. I never used it because that wasn't the point .... It was the responsibility. It was that thing that would help them .... Those skills will transfer into real life. Can you follow the instructions that someone else gives you? Can you do what needs to be done in *this space*? Not outside there. And when you're being employed by someone, can you follow their rules (thumps table), no matter how stupid you think those rules are? As long as it's fair, can you follow those rules? (interview, 4-4-07).

Camille's decision to equate a textbook with a hard hat and to make following the rules *the* top priority in her teaching was a form of positioning that prepared students for working class futures. At the same time, Camille was an experienced and beloved

teacher who saw herself as deeply connected to Centerville students and their families in ways that other staff members were not. If Camille positioned students as more in need of behavioral control than intellectual stimulation, it was because she believed she had special insights into their lives due to her identity as an African American teacher. Her sense of connectedness with students can be seen in the ways she positioned herself as someone with unique knowledge of students' home cultures:

I try to remind the kids of, you know, how *we're* being raised. What is expected in *our* culture, what is expected in *our* households, no matter what takes place with other people .... When they're upset, and talking about, 'what so-and-so let me do this, and you won't let me do this, and so-and-so-and-so,' then I remind them that when you go to church, who's there? Who'll be in your church? Me, somebody like me, someone who's saying the same message to you. When you go grocery shopping, when you find somebody that's just like me in your grocery store, giving you the evil eye to be sure you done something wrong, or not trusting you because they can see you, hear you, long before you get to them, and then they give you that look, I say, will you find any of your teachers there? ... Do you find them in your neighborhood? Do you find them *anywhere* where you will be outside of this building? They say no (interview, 4-4-07).

Though Camille did not refer explicitly to students' race and class identities, underlying beliefs and assumptions about students' needs as raced and classed people clearly shaped her views. The same was true for teachers like Joyce Jones, Linda Spencer, and Tammy Pike. In each of these cases, a common set of assumptions about low-income and minority students shaped teachers' instructional choices, even though these teachers never spoke to one another. The discourses that circulated in Centerville ensured they didn't need to. Lowering expectations and emphasizing behavior over academics were seen as common-sense choices that were necessary and logical in the Centerville context.

But students were listening to what was being said about them in Centerville. They were watching as teachers grew frustrated in the face of disruptive behavior and complaints about assignments. And as students began to recognize how they were being positioned in Centerville, they responded accordingly. According to teacher Doug Henderson, it was the entangled dynamic of student resistance and teacher capitulation that did the most to perpetuate low academic achievement. Students *and* teachers positioned themselves in response to patterned interactions that went on inside and outside the building:

They see the number of kids who are in the hallway when the bell rings, making no effort to get to class ... they see that their friends in other schools are doing more complicated assignments, more involved assignments. So they automatically assume, and in many cases, rightfully so, that the curriculum's not as demanding. They see teachers that give assignments that they can do in five minutes and they give them three days to do it. And they view that as being a joke ... I think they understand that they're not being challenged. Most of them will admit that they have become lazy. And as they become lazier and lazier and lazier, they can oftentimes get the teachers to lower their standards and expectations (interview, 2-1-07).

By framing students' "laziness" not as an intrinsic trait, but instead as a stance students took in response to low expectations, Doug offered a different way of understanding the phenomenon of low achievement in Centerville. Neither a function of students' class-specific attitudes and values nor a result of their limited capacity to learn, low achievement was a complex place-specific phenomenon created through adult-student interactions.

Louise Tolbert agreed that students were all too aware of the instructional choices teachers were making and the way those choices translated into chronic low expectations:

The expectations are so low in this building it's unbelievable ... It depends on whose class you go into, whether you're expected to work or whether you're not expected to work ... I'm not saying I do everything right. I'm not saying that at all. But we don't have any free days. We don't take five days to work on an advertisement assignment that you can do in one day ... There's too much of that going on in this building ... And the kids know it. They know that they're not being held to any kind of high standards" (interview, 2-1-07).

Whether low expectations arose from teachers' lack of professionalism, their lack of accountability, or their lack of understanding the potential of the population they taught, the effect was the same—students internalized the message that no one believed they would accomplish much, and teachers internalized the message that no outcome other than failure was possible.<sup>94</sup>

Student teacher Amber Sandstrom tied student identity back to the reputation of Centerville as she explained the excuses students made for not doing their homework. At the same time, however, Amber recognized that teachers' responses to student excuses also played a part in student performance:

Someone said, 'Ms. S, this is Centerville. You really expect us to turn in our homework?' ... They make little comments like that here and there, so that makes me know that the students know that that's their reputation, and it's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy, like they're saying, 'Do you expect us to turn in our homework?' Like they know that no one else expects them to, so then that's kind

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<sup>94</sup> In the face of ongoing failure, teachers also simply grew tired. Doug Henderson explained the role that exhaustion played in the process by which academic standards slipped in Centerville, again emphasizing the complex interactional dynamic that perpetuated the problem. "It's very difficult, as a teacher, to maintain high expectations if kids aren't meeting it. You become more complacent, you start to give up to some extent, and you lower them. You don't mean to, it just happens. It's a cycle. If you constantly fight with kids ... [if] you challenge a kid to do something, and they don't meet the challenge or the expectation, then you become tired. And so you give up to some extent. And you might give up for a month or a week or two weeks or whatever, and then you get reinvigorated, and you start trying it again and you get a new lease on life and you maintain it for a couple weeks and then the kids start to taper off, and you get tired of fighting the battle again so you give up. And it's an ongoing cycle" (interview, 2-1-07).



of why they don't. It's like they know that the expectations are low, and that's *because* of that reputation (interview, 4-18-07).

What students believed about themselves *did* shape the ways they performed academically, as many teachers argued earlier in this chapter. But students formed beliefs about themselves not just in relation to where they came from, but in response to things teachers said, assignments teachers gave, and knowledge of what went on in other schools. And teachers formed beliefs about students not just in relation to the discourses that circulated in the school and community, but in response to behaviors and attitudes they encountered in the classroom. As a result, students and teachers became caught in a set of place-specific, mutually-reinforcing assumptions and frustrations.

The pattern of low expectations, low achievement, and low self-concept led some teachers to view failure in Centerville as inevitable. Failure was, after all, an all-too-familiar condition. "I think that some people really, truly believe that there's a lost cause here at the high school," Jimmy Wolfe told me. "There's no way, this is inevitable, these kids can't read and write, I can't do nothing about it attitude ... I don't have all the answers, but there has to be a way to reach kids ... other than handing out a worksheet with 25 problems on it, or here's a book, do these pages" (interview, 4-25-07).<sup>95</sup>

I sympathized with Jimmy. Like him, I thought there had to be a better way to reach Centerville kids than to load them up with study questions and worksheets. On

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<sup>95</sup> The degree to which discourses *reinforced* the idea that failure was inevitable, and the ways in which everyday comments about the nature of teaching and learning in Centerville contributed to this reinforcement, was evident in Wade Anderson's account of the understandings he formed after his first few years in the district. "All we've ever done is fail," he said. "That's it. We have failed, and failed, and failed .... A phrase I was told when I first started here. 'Life in the 'Ville.' I didn't get it. I get it now. It's Life in the 'Ville ... Life in the hood. You know, this is the way it is, and it's the way it's always been, and this is the way it's going to be. I was told that by somebody who has taught in this district for thirty-three years. And I get it now. Didn't get it my first year, didn't get it my second year. I get it now .... Nothing ever gets better. Nothing improves. I think that's the best way to sum it up. In fact if there's any change, it just gets worse" (interview, 12-6-06).

more than one occasion I observed with dismay that Centerville students were doing assignments—often in the form of worksheets—that were almost identical to work I saw being done in my son’s elementary school. But I also saw Centerville students struggle with these assignments and express frustration over their struggle, sometimes getting drawn into hostile confrontations with their teachers in the process.<sup>96</sup> Faced with these explosive and potentially humiliating moments, what were teachers—or students—

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<sup>96</sup> I witnessed one such moment of struggle and confrontation during a spring afternoon when I was spending time with my security guard friend, Al Ligget. It was sixth hour, and Al and I were walking the halls, chatting about how well one of the new teachers was doing and waiting for the final bell to ring.

As we turned the corner, a veteran teacher stepped out in the hall. “Al!” she said curtly. “Didn’t you hear me call you? I called half an hour ago to get somebody to come down here and take out a disruptive student.” She handed him a referral. The comment section was completely filled with blue ink.

Al peered into the classroom. A tall African American male stood in the front, gesturing indignantly. “I just asked a question!” he shouted, looking to Al for support. When Al did not respond, he turned to the other students. “Shenika, didn’t I just ask a question? Al, look at those heads nodding!”

“Come on, my brother,” Al said, nudging him toward the door.

The student continued to protest. “Didn’t you see all those people saying yes?”

“I didn’t see a thing,” Al replied.

He and the student started walking, so I fell into step beside them.

“I had to take a test,” the student went on. “I just asked her to explain it to me, but she wouldn’t listen! She was helping everyone in the room except me!”

We passed the break room where custodians and security guards hung out. Al stopped for a moment to talk to a fellow security guard. I turned to the student.

“What did you have to do on the test?” I asked, reaching for the paper he was still carrying.

He handed it to me silently. It was a photocopied worksheet with the word “Test” handwritten at the top and his name there, too, printed neatly in pencil in the top right corner: DeMarcus Jackson.

The “test” was a list of fill-in-the-blank sentences. Below each blank was a set of homonyms such as *pear*, *pair*, and *pare*. Students were to choose the right word to complete the sentence. I had recently seen a similar exercise on a bulletin board in my son’s elementary school.

“What did you need help with?” I asked.

“I didn’t understand it!” he said, exasperated. “I needed her to explain it to me!”

Al rejoined us, and DeMarcus resumed his story. “I asked her to help me, and she was standing *right there* by my desk!” He stopped walking and waved his hands wildly at Al. “She was standing *right there!* And she just looked at me and walked on to Jamal’s desk. She said, ‘Get out, you’re disrupting my classroom.’”

An African American woman from the middle school was walking toward the office as we prepared to go inside. “Hello, DeMarcus,” she said.

“Oh, hello Ms. Andrews,” DeMarcus replied. He sounded tired.

Al sat down behind the counter and began writing on the referral form. DeMarcus leaned on the counter and chatted aimlessly with the student assistant.

I lingered for a moment, but I didn’t want to gawk and spy. I walked back to the teacher mailboxes, grabbed my lunch bag, then headed out to the parking lot to write up the scene in my car.

A couple of weeks later I saw DeMarcus in the halls during sixth hour and asked Al if he got kicked out of the same teacher’s class again.

“She won’t let him in,” Al explained. “He tries to regulate.”

I asked him what that meant.

“He tries to run things,” Al said (fieldnotes, 3-8-07).

supposed to do? Students at risk of public embarrassment typically became belligerent, teachers typically threw those students out of the classroom, and administrators typically intervened with the punishment of out-of-school suspension. But core problems, including low skills and low expectations, remained unchanged.

## **Conclusion**

Centerville teachers did not arrive at their jobs wanting students to fail, and yet failure was epidemic in Centerville. But teachers did arrive with certain assumptions about what it meant to teach in Centerville. As residents of a region in which the high school's reputation for failure was widely known—reinforced as it was by low test scores, sensational newspaper reports, local history, and cultural stereotypes<sup>97</sup>—teachers were predisposed even before they arrived at their jobs to expect that Centerville students were different from students in more affluent area high schools. And Centerville students *were* different: Centerville enrolled more low-income and minority students than any high school in Lincoln County.<sup>98</sup> When teachers struggled to motivate those students to succeed, it was only natural that they would focus on differences in the attempt to make sense of their struggle.

Centerville teachers came to the district already immersed in discourses that equated students' low-income and minority status with lack: lack of skills, lack of parental support, and lack of investment in education. Faced with the daily challenge to

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<sup>97</sup> Cultural stereotypes about the community were perpetuated not just through stories about the schools, but also through nicknames that called attention to the community's Southern heritage, specifically, the influence of large numbers of migrants who came north to work in area auto plants after World War II. When an Ann Arbor restaurant planned a special theme dinner in June, 2008 to showcase the area's Appalachian heritage and promoters dubbed it the "Wilatucky Supper," many residents of Wilmont and Centerville wrote letters to the editor of the *Ann Arbor News* objecting to the term and its derogatory meaning.

<sup>98</sup> See Appendix G for demographic information about area school districts.

motivate students who had a history of school failure, teachers turned to discourses to help them understand why their work was so hard and success was so fleeting. Though discourses about the Centerville community and Centerville students were initially provided to teachers by outsiders, people inside the high school reinforced and recirculated those discourses, strengthening their explanatory power. While discourses helped teachers to cope with challenging educational conditions in Centerville, they also contributed to divisions among staff members and perpetuated a culture of toxicity.

Discourses taught teachers to blame their colleagues and their students for the problems they faced in the classroom. Though teachers knew on some level that difficulties in the classroom were rooted in complexities arising from the effort to teach across cultural differences—specifically, the need to make sense of attitudes, beliefs, and abilities they attributed to students’ membership in low-income and minority groups—teachers were uncomfortable examining the tensions attached to these differences. Because discomfort made teachers less willing to talk about the underlying causes of their struggles, teachers wrestled in isolation with deeply uncomfortable questions: What does it mean to teach students who are racially and economically different from me? What do I do when I feel uncomfortable navigating these differences in the classroom? Can all students really learn?<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Jimmy Wolfe asked me this last question one afternoon near the end of 2006-07. “Do you really believe that thing they always say, that all kids can learn?” he asked. I considered his question, thinking about the teacher just the day before who had told me some Centerville students would simply never get past a third grade reading level. “When I really think about it, in my heart, yeah, I do believe it,” I replied. “I do, too,” Jimmy said. “In the past I didn’t believe it. Not until I started taking grad classes. But we have some attitudes around here. Do you think if we changed what we do, stopped giving so many worksheets, that our kids would do better?” I nodded emphatically. “Are other people saying what I’m saying?” he asked. I explained that yes, people were saying a lot of the same things. I thought for a moment, then added, “But not everybody sees things the same way” (fieldnotes, 6-5-07).

Left to their own devices, many teachers in Centerville developed theories about the things that happened in the school and in their classrooms, theories which were based on essentialist assumptions about the habits and abilities of low-income and minority people. They developed “place-specific” expectations that justified inequitable approaches to education and sustained patterns of low achievement. Place-specific expectations led teachers to assume that Centerville students would achieve less than students in other school districts, and teachers communicated their assumptions through language that positioned students as failures. Students picked up on this language and, in many cases, responded with oppositional behavior that reinforced teachers’ assumptions and stereotypes. The differences that teachers expected to see when they came to Centerville were kept in place and reinscribed through adult-student interactions. The degree to which teachers cared about kids or wanted to make a difference in kids’ lives was irrelevant when the staff couldn’t work together to figure out why so many students acted out and gave up, and why more than half failed to graduate from high school.

The tension and discomfort arising from persistent dilemmas about the nature of work in Centerville led teachers to focus their collective attention on surface manifestations of the school’s problems—such as students’ disruptive behavior and colleagues’ inconsistent enforcement of school rules—rather than deeper questions about adult expectations of students as thinkers and learners. Feelings of helplessness in the face of enduring problems led teachers to take their discomfort and uncertainty underground. This served to shut down a larger conversation that might otherwise have led teachers to interrogate the beliefs that were shaping their perceptions and interactions. Teachers were both collectively and individually immobilized by their inability to

articulate and address the dilemmas that hindered their work with low-income and minority students.

The roots of teachers' dilemmas lay in their feelings of ambivalence and inner conflict over the role of race and class in education. While teachers seldom talked explicitly about race and class in Centerville, they talked *implicitly* about these subjects whenever they made categorical statements about Centerville students' attitudes, values, and abilities. Discourse analysis reveals the extent to which theories about race and class shaped teachers' assumptions and perceptions, but teachers lacked the tools and the space to interrogate those theories. In order for the staff to get a conversation started about something other than the school's discipline problems, and in order for individuals to get beyond helplessness and crisis-oriented problem-solving, staff members needed to investigate the origins of their place-specific assumptions about Centerville High School and its students.

Discourses led teachers to expect difference when they came to Centerville to work, but discourses also oversimplified complex interactional phenomena. Teachers as well as students frequently embraced reductive discourses because no one challenged them to do otherwise. If teachers were given the space and the support to articulate the assumptions they brought with them to Centerville, along with the ways in which they were struggling—particularly with dilemmas about race and class—they might begin to shift their collective conversation. Recognizing the *presence* of discourses would set teachers up to talk back to discourses. Resisting the *influence* of discourses would lead teachers as well as students to more productive forms of interaction. Discourses limited

not just what teachers and students could achieve, but what they could imagine for themselves and what they could do to transform their school.

## CHAPTER FOUR RACIALIZED SCHOOL CULTURE

“I think we’re in a toxic environment here, I really do ... I think once you can find a way to relate to the kids, then at least you can come in your class every day and feel okay about it. But no one’s willing to talk about how to do that because we won’t even acknowledge there’s this great divide between us and our students. It’s really hard. So as a new teacher, you know, in a staff that’s not willing to really communicate about what the issues are, it’s a really hard place to be.”

—Tina Olsen

### **Talking and not talking about race**

If staff members had trouble talking in general about the nature of their problems in Centerville, race was the subject where talk was most difficult. Though the Centerville staff regularly and deliberately avoided discussions of race in large group meetings, individuals referred to race in a whole host of ways during interviews and private conversations where I was present. That is not to say that the majority of people in Centerville were grappling *explicitly* with the impact of race on their interactions and experiences, although some certainly were. On the contrary, most staff members demonstrated the degree to which race was on their minds *implicitly*, most often by denying that race was an issue in the school. At the same time, these same individuals saw no irony in telling me that working in Centerville was their first experience with “diversity,” that self-segregation was common among students and staff members, and



that racism was a topic that students might complain about but that they as adults had not witnessed.<sup>100</sup>

A smaller number of staff members had a great deal to say to me privately about the impact of race and racism on the school. These individuals described racist hiring practices, systematic exclusion of black students from upper-level academic classes, inequitable approaches to grading and discipline,<sup>101</sup> and deliberate attempts by white staff members to cover up racist incidents. Not only did these staff members tell stories about how their colleagues denied opportunities to black students; they also described cases in which they themselves were personally attacked after raising issues related to race. Here the residual effects of racially-charged conflicts in Centerville became clear. Though staff members said that they made a concerted effort to interact cordially with people they felt had mistreated students or personally wronged them, they also noted that cordial interactions were underscored by a permanent erosion of trust. After emotionally-charged racial conflicts, racial tension *always* lingered; consequently, staff members were even less likely to discuss the racial issues that had strained their professional relationships in the first place. The stark contrast between what was said privately about race in Centerville and what was *not* said publicly reveals both how present the topic of

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<sup>100</sup> I have written elsewhere with my TFT colleagues about the concept of “raced consciousness,” which we defined as “a way of seeing the world through race even when one is not consciously aware of race” (Gere, Buehler, Dallavis, and Haviland, forthcoming). Like the preservice teachers in our study, Centerville staff members were also seeing the world through race. Unlike our preservice teachers, however, most of them were quite conscious of that racial lens. But because Centerville staff members were so uncomfortable with race, they denied that race mattered, even as they used discourse moves to *mark* their racial awareness. I will provide examples of this in the discussion to come.

<sup>101</sup> When Reggie Bridges began keeping track of the racial patterns in student suspension rates, he learned that while black males made up 29% of the school population, they made up 70% of the suspensions (fieldnotes, 3-21-06).

race was in staff members' minds and how unwilling staff members were to have a serious and sustained conversation about it.<sup>102</sup>

Though members of the Charleston group had tried and failed to begin a conversation about race with the high school staff in the fall of 2005, administrators attempted to make talk about race an explicit part of the district's school reform efforts by hiring Glenn Singleton to work with the staff on equity issues at the start of the 2006-

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<sup>102</sup> I am sure that people were talking about race in Centerville even more often than my fieldnotes and interviews reflect. Race was such a charged subject in the school that some people were probably careful *not* to bring it up in my presence. In addition, due to racialized patterns of social interaction in the building, my access to many black staff members in Centerville was limited. Black staff members routinely went out for lunch or ate in their classrooms, consciously avoiding the all-white group that ate together in the teachers' lounge. Though I formed early and easy friendships with some black staff members, it took persistent effort to cultivate relationships with others.

While my whiteness probably made some black staff members less willing to talk with me, whiteness also limited my awareness of the racial patterns in my fieldwork (cf. Marx, 2006; McIntyre, 1997). In fact, two years passed before I stopped to consider the implications of those patterns. The more I sought to understand the racial landscape in Centerville, the more self-conscious I became about the efforts I had made to cultivate relationships with young white teachers when I arrived in Centerville. Though I was also friendly with the young black teachers, I put far less effort into those relationships (fieldnotes, 10-4-06).

My self-consciousness grew more acute when I began asking individual staff members for interviews. Several days after one black staff member declined to participate in an interview, Kevin Shulty, another black staff member whom I had recently befriended, let me know that people had begun asking him who I was and why I was there. "If one asks it, ten are thinking it," he told me. "I told them, it's all right, she's good people, her heart is in the right place. But you have to understand, this place is very divided, and you're caught in the middle of it. You're walking in a mine field" (fieldnotes, 10-20-06). In contrast, no white staff members raised these concerns with me.

Because of these comments, and also because of my growing interest in the role of race in teacher education, I became increasingly candid in my talk about race with black staff members in particular. This played a crucial role in the relationships I was able to form with several people. For example, my friendship with Kevin was forged during our first conversation when I explained that one of the things I was studying was how to prepare white preservice teachers for work with students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Our conversation took off after he referred to the CULTURES professional development seminar directed by black teacher educator Jacqueline Jordan Irvine in Atlanta (cf. McAllister & Irvine, 2002) and I expressed familiarity with her work (fieldnotes, 10-11-06). Almost every subsequent conversation we had involved race in some way. Similarly, once black staff members perceived during interviews that I was conscious of race and sympathetic to racial critiques of school and society, they seemed more willing to talk openly with me about the role of racism in Centerville and in their lives (fieldnotes, 4-4-07, 5-2-07, 6-12-07).

While I did not interview every black staff member in the building, I found that black staff members on the whole were far more willing to talk openly about race than white staff members. Had I brought more facility with race issues and greater racial self-awareness to my fieldwork, I might have formed more complex relationships with a greater number of black staff members and developed deeper insights into the role of race in Centerville.

07 school year.<sup>103</sup> At a school board meeting in August, Cora Nicholas, the district's curriculum coordinator, brought Singleton's contract before the board for approval, explaining that Singleton had been chosen by the administrative council in May to address the problem of the achievement gap. If the board voted to approve his contract, Singleton would give the keynote speech to all district employees on their first day back to work. Then after lunch that same day he would work with middle and high school staff members directly in an interactive session.

School board members were skeptical about the impact Singleton's visit would have, given the amount of money it would cost to hire him (Singleton's fee was \$7900). "Bringing in a keynote speaker, will it make that much of a difference?" board member Russ Kimbrough asked. Cora repeated that the administrative council had made a decision to focus on equity, adding that the Ann Arbor school district had hired Singleton last year.

"Will most teachers be there?" Russ asked.

"All of them, even the bus drivers," Superintendent Paul Lipinski answered.

"But what will he leave that's tangible?" board member Jacquie Ford asked. Cora noted that each building would receive one copy of his book, *Courageous Conversations About Race*, and that more copies of the book would be bought if staff members expressed interest. Alice Hayward, a retired administrator who returned to work as a

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<sup>103</sup> This was not the first attempt by district administrators to raise the issue of educational equity. Estella Woodson, an administrator who worked with the district for about a year on an interim basis, presented a keynote speech at the start of the 2005-06 school year entitled "Equity in Action." Arguing that educational equity was a core principle of democracy, Estella supported her claims with quotations by a variety of educational researchers including Carol Lee, Beverly Daniel Tatum, and Geneva Gay. In the process of exhorting Centerville staff members to build a more equitable school system, however, Estella went on to criticize them for their attitudes toward students and to question whether staff practices made community members feel truly welcome (fieldnotes, 8-25-05).

curriculum consultant during 2006-07, explained that in order to address the achievement gap, people had to first become reflective about their own practice.

“I hear you,” Jacqui said. “But how are we taking his materials and turning them into something that can be used?”

“I don’t think it would be fruitful for Cora and me to decide that,” Alice replied. “Buildings will come up with their own action plans.”

Board president Cynthia Irons said that Centerville administrators were currently working with a group that was addressing the achievement gap throughout Lincoln County. “It’s a hot topic now,” she said. “Sometimes we serve some kids better than others.”

“But how will we know if we’re getting the best return on our money?” Russ asked.

“We’ll know when student achievement goes up,” Cora replied.

One of the elementary school principals commented from where she was sitting in the audience. “I had a parent who was upset because she felt our teachers didn’t have enough experience with diversity,” she told the board.

“And there are some who don’t,” Cynthia said. “We’ve seen it.”

Superintendent Lipinski brought the focus back to dollars and cents. “All employees will hear this message,” he said. “That’s around 400 employees.”

“Which comes out to \$19.75 per employee,” Cora said, holding up her calculator.

With no further questions, the board voted 5-1 to approve Singleton’s contract.

An hour and a half later during the Citizens’ Comments portion of the meeting, parent and former board member Steve Mortimer stood up to criticize the Singleton vote.

“The achievement gap is actually caused at the student level,” he said. “Is anyone being brought in to talk to the students so they can realize what *they* need to do to close it? As a parent, I get to hear my son talk about how kids behave during the MEAP test. It doesn’t reflect well on the district.”

No one responded to his remarks. At the end of the meeting, Cynthia urged members of the audience to come together as the family they were and work together on behalf of Centerville students (fieldnotes, 8-17-06).

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Two weeks later Cora and Alice stood together on the stage of the middle school auditorium to introduce Singleton, whom Alice described as an expert on educational equity and the impact of race on student achievement. Cora explained that Singleton would provide guidance on how to serve underserved populations. “Today begins the journey to promote equity across the district,” she said.

Though Singleton framed his visit as an invitation for staff members to enter into what he called “courageous conversations” about race, resistance to the conversation both during his keynote address and afterwards was palpable. I witnessed that resistance, along with the tension it created between staff members who viewed race differently, while taking notes on Singleton’s remarks and listening in on the small group conversation that occurred where I was sitting.

### **Ethnographic Interlude: “That’s why I can’t talk to him.”**

“We’ve got teachers in this country who have never picked up a book on how to educate black kids, and yet they complain about these students and their families! These students suffer—and our society suffers—from systemic racism.”

Wearing a crisp suit and tie, Glenn Singleton paces back and forth on the auditorium stage. His bald head shines under the spotlights; the microphone cord trails after him as his voice booms out to the crowd. “Reading was withheld from my ancestors to make sure they never gained political power,” Singleton continues. “We can fly a space shuttle to the moon, and yet we can’t believe that black children read!”

Tina Olsen glances at the legal pad I’m writing on. “Wow, you do take notes,” she says.

“What cracks me up is people who act like nothing’s going on,” he says. “We’ve *all* got it. None of us are exempt. How are you going to be exempt in this society?” He pauses for a moment and looks out at the audience. “Relax,” he urges. “No one’s going to get hurt in this room.”

I’m surprised by this note of reassurance, and I wonder what precipitated such a remark. Singleton doesn’t linger on it; instead he resumes his speech.

“At the start of each semester, I ask my college students, how many of you have ever been taught by a teacher of color? My students want to be colorblind. I tell them, if you didn’t notice I’m black, I don’t believe you. If you did, and you’re reasoning around it, you’re struggling with race. And now I say to all of you, if you did notice, and you’re wondering how that relates to education, then you’re ready for a courageous conversation.”

I take a quick look around the auditorium. Most people have congregated towards the dim area in the back, arranging themselves into racially-segregated clusters separated by empty seats. I try to read individual faces for a sense of their response to Glenn's message, but it's hard to tell what people are thinking.

"Here in Centerville, more than half of your students are black and brown. Your white students are doing better than your black students. Your elementary students are doing better than your high school students. What is the struggle in Centerville? Why is the achievement gap there? I want you to talk to your neighbors about that right now. Why do you have an achievement gap in Centerville?"

Harry Greiner, sitting in front of me, turns around to face the group I'm sitting with. We're all white women. "Is there an achievement gap?" he deadpans. No one laughs, so he turns back around and looks for another set of neighbors.

"That's why I can't talk to him," Tina says under her breath to Sandra Altman. I lean in to hear what she and the other teachers will say.

Tina begins to talk about Travarius White, one of her African American male students who got As on every test but never did his homework. "I think he was embarrassed by those As," she says.

Glenn interrupts the proceedings. He's hopped down from the stage and now stands before the empty front row. "I know you will not have another person come here and talk to you about race and achievement. If you put your assumptions out there and let others engage, you will emerge stronger. You have parents who are *afraid* of what you will do to their children."

My group resumes conversation, talking about how girls typically achieve more than boys; how successful black students have white friends; how students arrive with such low skills, you can almost tell who's going to fail from the beginning of the year.

Glenn cuts in again. "Some of you have yet to start the conversation," he chides. "Don't come in here and act like your worst student! Teachers are the hardest students, and it gets in the way of us improving our work. Do me a favor. Don't be so mean! If you're sitting by yourself, it's pretty clear you're being defiant. That's not going to help you in the classroom. Even if you powerfully disagree, that's intense learning. This is *your* grant. Some of you are going to capitalize on it. Some will feel that no expenditure was made on you."

I'm shocked to hear him call the audience out like that. To me it is a bold move. Resistant and cynical teachers in professional development workshops have been a staple of my teaching experience.

My group talks for a few more minutes, and then Glenn calls time. "So what did you say?" He's back up on stage with his hand cupped to his ear, listening as individual teachers call out topics that emerged in their groups.

For a resistant faculty, they've come up with a pretty long list: Low expectations. Stereotypes. Student-teacher relations. Parent-teacher relations. Peer expectations. African American males and low test scores. Acknowledgement that there is a gap. Belief that there is a gap. Understanding versus respecting a different culture. Assumptions about families. How cumulative files travel with stories. Discipline and classroom management.



Glenn picks up on this last one. “If kids were engaged, they wouldn’t be so unruly! Don’t let me come in your messy classroom and tell me kids won’t learn. You have a laminated lesson plan? No kid in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to want to listen to you!”

He gets a few laughs. The teachers in my row listen attentively, but I’m wondering about the side conversations I hear going on in other parts of the room.

“It’s not about the kids. There is a *teaching* gap. Some of us can take the same group of kids in a subsequent grade and be successful. Their mama didn’t change. Their income didn’t change. They don’t speak English yet.

“What is a world class education?” he asks rhetorically. “Our white kids aren’t performing well either. When they aren’t performing well in a system *designed* to serve them, we have to ask ourselves what’s going on. Don’t blame our black kids! We have to understand the context in which the gap exists. I’m going to keep building the case so in the end we say, the problem is racism.”

Glenn then launches into the meat of his talk: how liberal racism relies on the excuse of poverty to keep expectations for black students as low as possible; how SAT scores show that income levels don’t influence achievement as much as race does; how we need to examine the white culture in which we’re educating children. “It’s a cultural issue!” he says.

“Systemic racism is the most devastating factor contributing to the diminished capacity of all children, especially black and brown children, and it leads to the fracturing of the communities that nurture and support them. If you’re not challenging it, you’re perpetuating it. To perpetuate systemic racism does not require intention or malice.”

I keep writing my notes, pausing to glance up as he begins to refer to research findings and statistics in PowerPoint slides. Tina Olsen leans in to me. “I get the message,” she says. “But what do I *do* about it?”

—Fieldnotes, 8-30-06

Glenn Singleton’s method of starting a conversation about educational equity was to focus on educators’ complicity in the problem of racism. Educational research from a variety of disciplines certainly supports his argument that racism contributes to low achievement among students of color (cf. Ferguson, 2000; Irvine, 1990; Kunjufu, 2002; Larson, 2003; Lewis, 2003; MacLeod, 1995). Not surprisingly, however, Singleton’s approach put the majority of the Centerville audience immediately on the defensive, and many staff members responded with defensiveness and hostility. After Singleton publicly criticized staff members who refused to participate in small group discussion, a conspicuous number of individuals got up to use the bathroom and never came back. Others showed their resistance by joking, as Harry did, about whether the achievement gap in Centerville was even a problem, using humor to undercut the seriousness of Singleton’s argument.<sup>104</sup> These passive-aggressive tactics gave staff members a way to push back against Singleton’s message while avoiding engagement with the substance of

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<sup>104</sup> People in Centerville frequently used humor in order to deflect serious talk about race and racism. Student teacher Amber Sandstrom let me know the extent to which jokes about racism had been reduced to a conversational trope in Centerville when she described her interactions with a student who accused her of being racist. “I think that he knows it’s okay to use the whole, like black joke with me because he sees that that’s not really the case ... so he knows that it’s okay to joke about,” she said. And yet as she went on, Amber revealed deeper uncertainty about the social realities in Centerville that had produced the so-called black joke. “But at the same time, if he’s thinking about that, then, I mean, in some way he must feel like, maybe overall that the white teachers here *do* treat the students like that. But I’m hoping that he jokes with me about it because I’m not one of those teachers who does. But I’m not sure” (interview, 4-18-07).

his claims.<sup>105</sup> Their need to push back was understandable. By presenting racism as a system in which most staff members were complicit, Singleton threatened to disrupt staff members' views of themselves, their school, and the work they were engaged in.

For staff members like Tina who had already begun to engage in difficult discussions about race with close colleagues, Singleton's remarks in the morning were relevant but not particularly helpful. As she put it, Tina got his message; what she needed was advice on what to do about racism. She was not alone. Frustration seemed to increase for some individuals after lunch during Singleton's question and answer session with middle and high school staff. When a white middle school teacher asked Singleton what practical strategies he would recommend so she could better serve her African American students, Singleton avoided giving a direct answer, saying he could not comment because he hadn't seen her teach. "I'm just an old Jewish grandma," the teacher shrugged uncomfortably, and went back to cutting out laminated room signs.

When Eugene Rowe, a white high school teacher who was brand-new both to teaching and to Centerville, insisted that despite Singleton's arguments, Eugene himself was not racist, Singleton pushed back hard. "Tell me, over the past weekend, how much time did you spend reflecting on your race?" Singleton challenged. Eugene conceded that he had spent no time thinking about race, but then insisted, "I'm not against you!" While Singleton and Eugene went back and forth, the three black staff members at my table looked on with amusement. "He don't get it," Camille Plumley laughed. "He's gonna quit!" added Robin Riley in a stage whisper. Sylvia Thacker sighed and said, "I'm just worried about his students" (fieldnotes, 8-30-06). These staff members were right

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<sup>105</sup> For a discussion of other ways in which white teachers use discourse moves to undercut conversations about race, see Haviland (2008) and Henze (1998).

about Eugene quitting: he lasted only until November. Later I wondered if his experience with Singleton had made him *more* resistant to examining issues of race, and thus more likely to misunderstand and mismanage Centerville students. Based on the number of times I saw him talking angrily with black students out in the hall during class time, Singleton's ideas did not appear to have helped.<sup>106</sup>

Meanwhile, facetious remarks like Harry's ("Is there an achievement gap?") both impeded the larger conversation about race and highlighted the deeper ideological differences that separated staff members. More significantly, Tina's response to Harry's attempt at a joke (silence followed by the muttered retort, "That's why I can't talk to him") reveals the *social* consequences of competing ideological belief systems. Though some staff members could look past their political and ideological differences,<sup>107</sup> others

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<sup>106</sup> James Merrick, a colleague who worked closely with Eugene, later commented on Eugene's reasons for leaving Centerville. James' account reveals the ways in which Eugene tried to gloss over the struggles he faced in the classroom and the implicit role that cultural differences with Centerville students played in his departure: "He said it wasn't because of the school. It wasn't because of Centerville. Although we talked on more than one occasion, and he had expectations for kids, and when he didn't get those expectations, it was hard for him to deal with. Even though he left for other reasons, I know that it had an impact on him leaving."

James described an incident that served as a tipping point in Eugene's departure. "His last day here, he had more than one argument with a student. And they weren't students that were troublemakers. They were good kids. I think it just got to him, and he vented it on the kids .... I observed it, I watched him get in one kid's face, and he was red as could be, and he was yelling, he was 12 inches from her face ... And she kept her cool and kept saying please get out of my face, please step back, please give me some room, and was trying to be as polite as she could, and hold her temper, he just kept shouting at her. I knew I needed to do something, and then I went down and talked to the principals and said, you know, he's going to lose it, we can't have a situation like that here in the school.

"I think that culture definitely had something to do with his eventual leaving the school," James concluded. "Even though he said it was other things he dealt with, he was never comfortable in the classroom" (interview, 11-29-06).

<sup>107</sup> The friendship between Wade Anderson and Shaun Coleman, which I alluded to in Chapter One, is a good example of this ability to look past ideological differences. Wade's friendship with Reggie Bridges also transcended politics and ideology. When I spent time in conversation with these staff members, I felt the genuineness of their friendship, but I wondered about the friction that might lie beneath the surface of their banter. I learned over time, however, that Wade managed those ideological differences by calling attention to them. On the day after the emergency discipline meeting in March (discussed at the beginning of Chapter Three), Wade talked about his friendship with Reggie when he visited with me in the empty cafeteria. "See, Reggie and I are friends," he said. "We went out for a bite to eat yesterday. I said, Reggie, which do you think is easier? Making an engaging curriculum or cracking down on what's going on in the halls? I said, we're looking at opposite sides of the same coin. But it's still a quarter. On one side, you

could not. These differences hindered personal as well as professional interactions. Tina and Harry's brief and unproductive exchange illustrates the ways in which staff members avoided explicit discussions of race, constructed social networks around shared belief systems, and left moments of implicit conflict unresolved. Countless other Centerville staff members engaged in interactions that were shaped by these same dynamics.

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In the weeks following Singleton's visit, I waited with interest for people to bring up his presentation and offer their opinions of it. At least in my presence, hardly anyone did. And yet in interviews I conducted anywhere from two to nine months later, numerous staff members mentioned Singleton when the subject of race and racism came up. Most who mentioned him continued to resist and reject his framing of the school's problems as racial.

Some did this by positioning Singleton as an outsider who came in and stirred up trouble. "I don't think we have those problems," teacher Stan Varney argued. "I think sometimes when people from the outside come in and say, 'Okay you have these problems, you just don't know it.' Well if you don't, if it's not a problem, because you don't know it, then maybe it's *not* a problem" (interview, 1-31-07).<sup>108</sup> Matthew Meissner

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have engaging curriculum. On the other, you have control of the environment. Until teachers can get some control over what's going on in their classrooms, you're never going to be able to work on your engaging curriculum" (3-7-07). Wade may have seen these two competing priorities as opposite sides of the same quarter, but I saw them as manifestations of the ideological differences that kept staff members at odds with one another. Wade glossed over these differences with a lighthearted and joking stance, but that didn't help him or his friends to get *past* differences. Instead, his strategy ensured that differences would remain in place.

<sup>108</sup> Stan went on to argue that economic issues, not racial issues, were the real challenge facing Centerville students and teachers. "It's really not a black/white issue, it's [a] poor and poorer issue. And people aren't seeing that it's poor and poorer .... I think it is more an economic situation than a racial situation. But we don't know how to call it anything other than racial" (interview, 1-31-07). Reframing Centerville's problems as economic rather than racial was a discursive move made by many staff members, even people like Louise Tolbert who were invested in examining racism in the school. "I think we get sometimes mixed

agreed, positioning Singleton as someone who had a racial axe to grind. “I think he gave us data that showed us what he wanted us to see. I mean it was data from ten years ago or something like that ... I think he skewed his presentation, and I think generally it’s pretty racially motivated.” Not only did Meissner challenge the validity of Singleton’s data and the credibility of his message; he also categorically rejected race as a subject worth talking about. “I can go and do studies, and probably find as much data to show exactly the opposite of what he said. I think it was racially motivated and I don’t think that is a conversation we should be having in this district” (interview, 12-13-06).

While Matthew discredited Singleton’s remarks by characterizing them as “racially motivated,” other staff members took his message far more personally, expressing anger and bewilderment at the notion that they were racist simply by virtue of being white. “For our welcome back ceremony this year, we had a black man come and tell us that we are all racist,” support staff member Debby Harrington said. “All of us. We’re all racist. And that we need to lower the bar for our black students or they’re never going to achieve. I really took offense to that. I don’t believe we should lower the bar for anybody. I don’t care what color you are ... I don’t know why they paid this man to come and say that” (interview, 11-8-06).

Teacher Pat Waddell was similarly offended by Singleton’s remarks, and yet she heard the *opposite* message when it came to the ways that white staff members should approach their work with black students:

Bringing Glenn Singleton I don’t think did anything .... He said you’re supposed to hold [black students] to a higher standard. I’ve been called into the principal’s

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up with what’s black culture and what’s white culture. And it’s not either one, it’s low socioeconomic” (interview, 2-1-07).

office because of a parent. And one of the things she said is that ... you're holding a higher standard to the black students. But that's what he was saying that we should do, is hold them to a higher standard. And it's like okay, I'm doing that, but when a parent comes in and complains, are you going to be there to back me up and say, this is why I'm doing that. But I think I hold all my students to a same standard (interview, 2-23-07).

The presence of such contradictory understandings of Singleton's ideas suggests that some staff members were so preoccupied by their own beliefs and assumptions about race, they actually could not *hear* what Singleton was saying. Instead they heard what they expected or wanted to hear.

Segregated seating patterns during Singleton's talk increased the likelihood that in small groups, people would share the same racialized ways of interpreting Singleton's argument. In order to bolster her own critique, Pat Waddell identified other white teachers who were "offended" by his message. "I know people that I sat with, white teachers, white female teachers, were very offended by him coming in," she said. "Joyce Jones was *very* offended. She wanted to stand up and tell him she thought *he* was a racist" (interview, 2-23-07). Teacher Grace Thomas described a very different response in the section where she was sitting. "In my little section where I was, people ... mumbled under their breath. They talked ... They made comments, and, and, and what they wanted to do when they go back to their building." I asked if they were mumbling in agreement or disagreement with Singleton. "No, in agreement!" she exclaimed. "They were all in *agreement* .... It was something that needed to be said, and more of!" Grace also noted the number of people in the audience who were offended, but she demonstrated through her comments the gap separating their views from hers. "And I don't see why! Why were you offended? It needed to [be] spoken. I enjoyed it myself

but, why were you offended?” Grace went on to highlight the importance of creating spaces where people might be more willing to express themselves. “I think that those people that were offended needed to be in a smaller setting with Glenn, maybe. To voice your opinion, maybe. I don’t know” (interview, 6-12-07).

Reactions to Singleton were not entirely divided along racial lines. In addition to Tina Olsen, a number of white staff members embraced his remarks.<sup>109</sup> Support staff member Andrea Lyons told me she wrote a note to one of the central office administrators in order to thank her for bringing Singleton in (fieldnotes, 10-9-06). Similarly, teacher Roz Nelson agreed with Singleton’s message but recognized that it overwhelmed some of her colleagues. “He was really good,” she said. “But I think people weren’t ready to hear what he was saying” (interview, 4-20-07). Louise Tolbert was surprised by the resistance Singleton encountered in Centerville, given the racially-mixed population in the district:

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<sup>109</sup> And in contrast, some black staff members resisted his remarks, at least initially. A week after school started, support staff member Dorothy Loveland and I were chatting about Singleton’s visit. Despite our many long and candid conversations in the past, her remarks that day about Singleton took me by surprise. “He came on too strong,” Dorothy said. “He wants us to think about race. I’m racist, you’re racist, we’re all racist. I want to know what we’re supposed to do about it!” I said that Singleton probably emphasized racism because he was used to dealing with teachers who didn’t want to admit there was a problem. “But how does that apply to us?” Dorothy asked, drawing attention to her racial stake in his argument. “Maybe white teachers need to hear it, but what about me?” I countered that Singleton never said there were automatic differences in how white and black teachers dealt with their students. Dorothy disagreed. “But we know there *is* a difference! What am I supposed to say to Louise Tolbert and Pat Waddell to make them better teachers?” (fieldnotes, 9-5-06).

During an interview three months later, however, Dorothy had softened her opinion of Singleton’s message. Comments from colleagues had clearly played a part in her thinking. “Remember that guy who came from California or something around the first day of school? Remember that guy who they brought here?” I said I did, and I remembered that she didn’t like his talk. “I got another perspective,” she said. “Someone looked at it another way. It’s things that need to be addressed.” Again, though, Dorothy emphasized the differences between white and black staff members, arguing that those differences would derail the conversation. “I don’t think the white staff and the black staff should do it together until after they’ve done it separate. You see what I’m saying? Because it’s easier to talk about the problems I have with a white student or a white teacher or, you know what I mean, and then the threat is there, you know what I mean?” Dorothy explained how the conversation might go in a racially mixed group. “Some people might be offended. (mimics) ‘They don’t want us to?’ Unh-uh, no! I want to feel comfortable in expressing my weakness” (interview, 11-28-06). Dorothy’s remarks let me know that black staff members *as well as* white staff members felt vulnerable about discussions of racism, albeit for different reasons.



When he came here, it was amazing to me how many people work in a district that is as diverse as this one is, and immediately put up the walls. ‘There is no racism here, we don’t need to discuss this.’ That really surprised me. I just thought they would be more open to it. That yeah, of course it exists ... There were some things, certainly, that I didn’t agree with that he said. But I don’t think you can solve the problems if you’re not willing to discuss that it exists. There is an achievement gap. You know, how do you say, there’s no problem, but our white kids are always outperforming our black kids. There’s a problem! And we’ve got to face it. So in that respect, I was glad that he came. It opened up some conversations. They are not easy conversations, as you know (interview, 2-1-07).

In order to understand the “walls” invoked by Louise, it’s essential to consider the threat that Singleton’s ideas posed to staff members’ ideas about themselves, their school, and their colleagues. That threat was evident in the way that teachers like Eleanor Shillington appeared to wrestle uncomfortably with his ideas, even as they rejected them. “I didn’t think [we had a race problem] until they brought in that speaker at the beginning of the year. So obviously somebody perceives that there is. Um, that race plays a role. I never felt that way here at Centerville ... But I hear more and more comments of late.” What seemed to trouble Eleanor, like Debby Harrington, was the categorical notion that all whites were racist. “He had some very good points,” Eleanor said. “I’m sure that each and every one of us, no matter what color our skin is, have some prejudices in our body. And if we don’t think we do, there’s something wrong there. But I guess I came away thinking that he felt that all whites were racist. To some degree. That was, to me, a little too aggressive for a public speaker” (interview, 12-4-06). For many white staff members in Centerville, acknowledging that racism existed was one thing; admitting that they themselves were racist was quite another. “I don’t consider myself, I mean, the speaker that was in, that Glenn Singleton, would say differently. But I don’t, you know, I

don't think like that," Pat Waddell said. "I don't *have* that problem" (interview, 2-23-07).

Despite the negative reaction overall to Singleton's visit, some staff members did go on to read his book. Those who did admitted that the book was challenging their ideas about race in Centerville. "This book that I'm reading now," teacher Stan Varney began, "and this guest speaker was in here and talked to us [about] that challenge, I can't even remember the name of the book, make courageous conversations .... I don't think we have [those problems], which, it's hard to say, after starting to read that." As Stan talked about the issues the book raised for him, his thoughts kept returning to questions that the book left unanswered. In particular, Stan wondered how to talk about his own beliefs about hard work and success in ways that were sensitive to the lives and experiences of black students:

Okay, if I tell all these people to mirror these successful people, and these successful people all are white, that's not good. I understand that, because I'm telling them to be like white folks ... Okay, now if a black person does all those things, those white, is he an Uncle Tom because he's doing that? Because he wants to be successful? Or do you need to do all those things?

Stan hoped that if he continued reading, he would find some answers:

I haven't read far enough to get the connection, okay, where do you want me to go ... I tell my students, I am a prejudiced person. I don't like lazy people. And lazy people come in all shapes, sizes, colors, and religions ... And that comes back to my middle-class upbringing of hard work, okay. So is that a white thing that I'm doing, teaching these kids, or something that I see they can be successful? I don't know (interview, 1-31-07).<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Stan was not the only staff member who struggled with questions about the racial overtones attached to popular notions about the importance of teaching Centerville students "middle-class values." For example, Roz Nelson wondered if the school rule prohibiting male students from sagging their pants was an

What Stan and others like him needed were further opportunities to discuss their questions. But not only did the majority of staff fail to take interest in Singleton's message; building administrators failed to follow up on his visit in any kind of sustained way. Wendy Swensen interpreted the slow pace of administrative follow-up as a function of uncertainty and ambivalence about how to proceed. "They said, you know, take this survey," she said. "Then they got the books in, and they were really slow to like dole,

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appropriate way of reinforcing middle-class values or whether it was a racist practice that squelched the self-expression of black boys. Though both black and white boys sagged their pants, Roz saw the practice of sagging as an expression of black masculinity. "It's a cultural expression. I mean it is an expression of themselves, and sort of going against society, and identifying with African American male culture. I guess. So to speak."

Roz then referred to a conversation she had held with one of her black students about the no sagging rule. "His thought on it was, trying to make everyone fit into that cookie-cutter mold of white middle-class America. Which really kind of disempowers them in a way, so it's almost about power. But on the other hand, I've had a lot of African American individuals tell me no, they have to embrace this to fit in ... They're not going to make it looking and dressing like that. I don't know if I believe that. I guess if they're in corporate America where they're in a business where they have to be cookie-cutter. But I don't know if they're all going to work in corporate America, all the students, so" (interview, 4-20-07).

Roz's comments show just how difficult it was for Centerville staff members to disentangle issues of race from issues of class in imagining what students most needed for the future they were most likely to have. Roz's desire to give black males the space to be expressive through their style of dress was based on the assumption that they weren't going to work in corporate America anyway. But the presence of such an assumption—regardless of Roz's attempt to respect the dignity of her black male students—actually helped to keep black males' low class status in place.

In contrast, teacher Robin Riley maintained that sagging *ought* to be irrelevant to teaching and learning. "To me, the sagging of the pants is a side issue .... The sagging of the pants, the hip-hop culture is an issue for you not teaching that child. So I come in like this (she mimics kids trying to hold up their sagging pants while they walk). The best teachers don't address that. Do they? The ones where the kids are learning, that's not an issue in their class, is it. The ones where it's failing, that's an issue. Because they're looking at that child, and they're looking at how they're dressed, and that they're ignorant because they're dressed that way. But that's what's out there! ... The white boys do it too! (laughs) Come on!"

Robin argued that kids who sagged their pants were hardly different from kids who dressed in a Gothic style. "This is rebellion. So how do you get past that and still teach? .... When some of them wear the big earring here, and they're wearing all black, or they're looking green, they want your attention! Come on, teachers! But do you address that, or do you just teach. You smile at them, because some of them might be a brain surgeon. With the ring in your nose. Hair looking crazy. Fingernails painted black, orange, pink. Changing your hair color every ten days." When I commented that I never heard teachers calling out Gothic kids for their style of dress, Robin explained how race was a subtext in attacks on sagging. "It's a racist thing. It's the hip-hop culture. It's the racist thing .... Like you said, the Gothic, they don't deal with it. Or they do, but that's not a real big issue to them. They consider that as, I'm used to that. My kids might dress like that (laughs). Here in my own home .... They're not doing the hip-hop in your class. They're not up dancing in your classroom! So why come they can't learn?" (interview, 5-2-07).

like they didn't want to give out the book."<sup>111</sup> When Wendy heard that district administrators had arranged for one of Singleton's consultants to come back and lead a half-day workshop with building principals on the day before Christmas vacation, she was encouraged. "I'm like, wow, that's good, that's really good planning. They're going to train the principals first. They did that at Christmas, I think, and so then I was kind of waiting."<sup>112</sup> But afterwards, teachers heard nothing. "I have no idea what's ever happened with it," Wendy concluded. "But to go from September to Christmas, and then from Christmas now to spring break, and there's really been no follow-up ... it really kind of fits the same old pattern. We're going to stir up this huge can of worms, and then not really deal with it" (interview, 3-29-07). Teachers like Grace Thomas weren't surprised. "It needs to go on," she said. "But it started that day and it look like it ended that day" (interview, 6-12-07).

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<sup>111</sup> According to comments made by Cora Nicholas at a school board meeting in December, the delay in handing out Singleton's book was not entirely a matter of administrative dithering; Singleton himself did not want the books distributed until administrators had a plan for how to proceed. "Glenn said other districts didn't have leadership for the conversation, and if you don't have leadership, it might turn into something you don't want," Cora told the board. When board members raised concerns about the cost of Singleton's services, as they had in August, Cora emphasized how crucial it was to have Singleton's continued guidance. "We're not going to be able to do this work unless we're all on the same page," she said. Survey results after Singleton's visit indicated that district employees as a whole both were and weren't on the same page. Cora reported that 83% of survey respondents agreed that equity was an issue in Centerville as it pertained to classroom instruction. Conversely, only 48% of staff members found value in Singleton's talk (fieldnotes, 12-7-06).

<sup>112</sup> While administrators met with Singleton's representative, Cindy Hayes, on the day before Christmas vacation, the rest of the district's staff attended professional development workshops focused on reading strategies and approaches to evaluating writing. On the morning of the professional development day, I asked Cora if I could sit in on the administrative meeting, thinking it was a natural request given the number of curriculum and school improvement meetings I had sat in on in the past. To my disappointment, Cora told me the meeting was for administrators only. "We're trying to build trust," she explained. "I've had other people ask and I've had to tell them no." It was the only time in three years of fieldwork I was ever denied access to a meeting (fieldnotes, 12-22-06).

## Seeing and not seeing race

Cindy Hayes, the representative from Glenn Singleton's organization who was assigned to work with district administrators in December, addressed the Centerville school board on the topic of equity at a regularly-scheduled board meeting during her visit. When Cindy began her remarks by saying that the achievement gap existed because of institutional racism endemic to all public schools, some school board members seemed taken by surprise at the bluntness of her language. "Institutional racism, you say it so easily," board member Jacqui Ford said. Jacqui wondered how it was possible to indict institutions without addressing the actions of individuals within them. Cindy responded that while there were laws to address individual wrongdoing, racism was systemic and therefore harder to pull apart. "It's a matter of teaching people to see what they can't see yet," she said.

Although Cindy didn't explain what it was that people in Centerville weren't seeing, I was acutely aware of the number of staff members who insisted that they simply didn't *see* race, despite powerful evidence to the contrary. In the majority of interviews I conducted where race came up, white staff members began by denying that race was important to how they thought about dynamics in Centerville. But in response to my follow-up questions, these same staff members invariably revealed the extent to which strong beliefs and emotions about race were lurking just under the surface of their claims. Close analysis of the discourse moves that occurred during these exchanges helps to illustrate the ways in which opinions about race were in fact *driving* staff members' thinking, even as individuals insisted that this was not the case.

In the following extended example, white support staff member Lisa Marshall brought up race—only to deny it—in her answer to my very first interview question asking her to define school culture in Centerville. Although later in the interview race came up repeatedly, Lisa initially took a colorblind approach in her talk about the school:

J: So when I talk about that term, school culture, or if you hear it floated about, you know, as teachers talk or as administrators talk, what comes to mind?

L: The environment of the school as a whole. Not races, but as a whole. The, the school as a whole.

Over the course of my research, I came to see this move as part of a familiar pattern in which staff members would raise the subject of race in relation to talk about school culture in Centerville, only to say that race was not what they were thinking about or referring to. But by emphasizing that she did not mean “races” when she referred to “the environment of the school as a whole,” Lisa actually indicated how present race was in her thinking, as subsequent exchanges between us will illustrate.

Later in the interview when I asked a follow-up question about how Lisa would describe Centerville to people who were unfamiliar with the place (“And so when you start thinking of Centerville as a whole, how do you describe this place .... like if you had to explain it to somebody that didn’t know anything about the community?”), she began by making general comments on what she perceived to be the offensive attitudes and values of Centerville students and their parents:

They want things given to them. And the kids think that ... we have to give this stuff to them. You know, instead of this, I tell them, that’s your parents’ responsibility, not mine. (mimicking students’ rude response) “Well.” I said no

... I didn't ask your parents to give birth to you. So I'm not going to raise you. I'm not going to support you. I will not. That's your parents' job. But the parents have taught the kids that, *they owe you*. You know, the parents think that we owe them. And that's just, you know, the majority of the kids, I think, feel that way.

When I asked Lisa what it was that parents and students thought they were owed, she first invoked attitudes she associated with people living in poverty. But then she shifted her focus to attitudes she associated with black students in particular, characterizing them as inordinately preoccupied with race and racism:

J: So what are they owed? What are they looking for?

L: To be given everything ... If they don't have any money for lunch, we should give it to them. If they don't have, they come *totally* unprepared for school. Every day. They never have pencils, they never have paper. 'My mom doesn't have to buy that, you guys have to give it to me.' No, we don't. I supported my own kids. No one gave my kids paper and pencil in school. You guys can take care of your own. But the, you know, they just expect us to give, give, give. All the time. And I said if I gave to every kid in this building, I wouldn't be able to take care of myself ...

And then they use, um, that they're, a lot of the black kids, you know, everything's racist, racist, and it's, and it's our fault, and I tell them, then you. You know, *you* are the one that's living up to *your* reputation, not me. And you have to prove me wrong, then. Don't sit there and talk like that until you prove me wrong as a whole. You prove everybody wrong. Instead of fitting into the stereotype. There's plenty of people that have proven that stereotype wrong. So you prove it to me. But they don't want to do that. Because that's work.

By saying that black students were "living up to their reputation" and that they needed to "prove the stereotype wrong," Lisa demonstrated how deeply her views of black students had been shaped by racist discourses about "black" attitudes and behaviors circulating in the larger society. In her framework, black students started from a deficit position in

having to “prove” that they were not as bad as reputation and racist stereotypes would lead some adults to believe.

And yet as we talked about specific teachers that students perceived to be racist, Lisa went on to show how beliefs about race didn’t just shape her views of black students; they caused her to feel deeply jaded in her daily interactions with them. The more Lisa talked, the more she revealed how much pent-up frustration and anger she had developed in response to black students’ repeated accusations of racism in their conflicts with adults:

W-we’re racist if we don’t give them this, that, or, you know, the, w-we’re racist if we don’t give them, they just, they don’t know what the meaning of the word is. I don’t think a lot of parents really know, you know, there’s a lot of, um, they think it’s just, you’re racist, you don’t like black people .... Somebody’s always racist. I had one kid come in here one time, and I said you know what, if you ever speak that word to me again, I’m going to come over this desk, and I will knock you out. I said you don’t understand what you’re talking about. You haven’t got a clue. And until you do, don’t *ever* talk like that again.

In response, I acknowledged that I too had observed students talking often about racism. I then tried to connect Lisa’s focus on black students’ attitudes to what I saw as a larger movement to examine race in the district. I alluded to district administrators’ decision to bring in Glenn Singleton and to present racially disaggregated student achievement data at a school board meeting,<sup>113</sup> and then went on to ask Lisa directly about the significance of race in the district (“So do you think there are any ways that race *is* significant?”). Though this was a question I usually avoided (along with its

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<sup>113</sup> Cora Nicholas presented student achievement data to the school board in early December in the process of trying to secure board approval for continued work with Glenn Singleton. When board member Leroy Meeks wanted to know “where we stand with the achievement gap,” Cora replied that the gap had been clearly identified at the middle school and the high school. “Our African American students exiting high school typically have the skills of eighth grade students,” she said (fieldnotes, 12-21-06).



unproductive yes or no formulation), Lisa's candid comments about race led me to ask increasingly candid questions. In response, however, Lisa claimed that she *didn't see* race or racism in Centerville:

J: Well um, the number of times kids bring up racist, and I've heard it too, um ... It does suggest that they're thinking about race a lot. And I go to board meetings, and I know there were a couple of gestures around here toward getting people to talk about race.

L: Right.

J: Just, what role race plays in the education that's being provided in the district. So do you think there are any ways that race *is* significant, aside from the students, you know, calling on that maybe too much of the time?

L: I don't ever really see it. I really honestly don't. I don't see where any teacher is racist against one person or the other. I don't ever really see anything like that. Because if a teacher, you know, tries to make a student understand, that they don't, they're talking to the student wrong, you know. And that they shouldn't be saying those kind of things instead of, you know, when they're trying to talk to them. And the, I don't, I don't see where it's a black and white issue at all.

J: Why do you think they called in a consultant at the beginning of the year to talk about race, then?

L: I don't know. I, I honestly don't know because—

J: Remember that?

L: Yeah, because I personally don't see it ....

It is important to note that I likely set Lisa up to respond defensively when I asked if there were any ways in which race was significant in Centerville ("I don't ever really see it. I really honestly don't."), and that I further pressured her by asking her to explain why, if there was no racism, the district saw a need to hire Glenn Singleton (she

“honestly didn’t know”).<sup>114</sup> But after her initial assurances that she didn’t see race, Lisa moved gradually from *denial* that race was significant in interactions with students to the possibility—and then the *assertion*—that race was very significant in relationships involving specific staff members. Here’s what she said as she continued her answer, picking up where she left off in the previous excerpt:

L: Yeah, because I personally don’t see it. You know, I hear the kids talk about it all the time, but then, they use it so matter-of-factly, like *if*, *and*, and *the*. You know, that it doesn’t, I just don’t think that they know exactly what the kids themselves are talking about. Now it might be, it might have been teachers thinking about ... you know, administration-teachers as a race thing. Because I know sometimes that’s been thrown around.

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<sup>114</sup> Because I took an ethnographic approach to interviews (Spradley, 1979), the questions I asked and the statements I made about race always took shape in relation to my attempts to intuit people’s feelings on the subject within the context of their experience in the school. I was intensely conscious of the need to position myself as someone whom participants could trust to understand their struggles and frustrations with race, regardless of my opinions of their racial beliefs. Based on this self-positioning, people did seem willing to tell me many different kinds of racial stories during their interviews—stories that were marked by emotional valences ranging from anxiety and discomfort, to anger and resentment, to humiliation and despair.

I know that my own beliefs and emotions can be seen in the ways I responded to participants’ statements and stories about race, despite my desire to take a neutral stance. The fact is that I was never neutral. This can be seen in my somewhat forward response to Lisa’s statements. Had Lisa not made such bold claims about race (“Everything’s racist, racist .... Somebody’s always racist”), I might not have asked her so directly about how race was significant in Centerville, or why administrators called in a consultant at the beginning of the year. My questions reflected my desire to challenge Lisa’s thinking without shutting down the conversation.

More often, when people made statements that I perceived to be racist, I attempted to respond with matter-of-fact follow-up questions that asked for clarification. This was a function of both my research method and my need to process what I was hearing in the moment. Racist statements (including statements made in racially-coded language) may be glaringly apparent to me now, but during the interviews, things were murkier. Sometimes when references to race came up, I wasn’t sure how to make sense of them. Even when statements struck me as deeply problematic, I tended to be so intent on trying to understand where the person’s beliefs and ideas were coming from that challenging them explicitly was not an option. I know other researchers might have made different choices (cf. Larsen, 2003; Marx, 2006). At the time, however, I was in the midst of sorting out my own understandings of race and racism. In most cases, I truly did not have insights that I was withholding from interview participants as they fumbled to articulate race-based views. I was often fumbling right alongside them.

In contrast, when people told stories about traumatic experiences related to racism, I attempted to remain quiet so they could tell their whole story. I know that I was far more emotionally demonstrative in these situations, nodding as I listened, trying to show compassion through my facial expression, offering participants a tissue if they began to cry. I was also much more likely in these cases to make statements that revealed my underlying beliefs about the significance of race and racism in Centerville. I will discuss these statements in the next extended example.

J: What comes up when that gets thrown around at that level?

L: That, about the teachers?

J: Mm hm.

L: Nothing's ever done. It's just doesn't matter.

J: But what would be a circumstance when that would get thrown around? Like what would make it come up among them?

L: Well that would be ... you know Ms. Yancey?<sup>115</sup>

J: Yeah.

L: She never liked me ... But yet she had two secretaries that never came to work, always called in, or never called in at all for a week or two at a time, and, but they were all black. But she would fight to the death for them ... *She* definitely to me has a racist attitude. And the kids always said she was, too. They were always, she was always meaner to the white kids than she was to the black kids ... And the, and the teachers all, some of the teachers all had that feeling, too. That she was. Very racist (interview, 4-23-07).

Here Lisa moves from denying that she sees race at all to speaking very candidly about a specific black staff member whose practices struck her as “very racist.” In talking about the alleged racist acts of a black administrator, Lisa positioned herself and other white staff members as victims in the face of black people’s favoritism of their own kind (“nothing’s ever done,” “she never liked me,” “she would fight to the death for them”) (cf. Fine, 1997).

It is significant to note that after criticizing black students who accused staff members of being racist, Lisa made the same accusations of a fellow staff member

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<sup>115</sup> Evelyn Yancey was a black assistant principal who was abruptly transferred from the high school to an administrative post at another school in the district at the end of the fall semester during the 2004-05 school year. At the time she was transferred, I overheard Pat Waddell and Sandra Altman repeating accusations students had made about Ms. Yancey’s negative treatment of white students and her favoritism of black students—the same accusations that Lisa Marshall repeated in an interview over two years later (fieldnotes, 11-10-04).

herself. She then bolstered her accusation by going back to invoke student accusations of racism and by insisting that “teachers had that feeling too,” though she hedged her initial claim that “all” teachers had the feeling (“all, some of the teachers all had that feeling, too”). The fact that Lisa referred to a “feeling” that teachers shared rather than any direct conversations or incidents involving Ms. Yancey further illustrates the ways in which frustrations and resentments over race shaped interactions among Centerville staff members implicitly rather than explicitly.

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As the interview with Lisa Marshall shows, race played a profound role in shaping Centerville staff members’ responses to students, school events, and each other. And yet because people went to such lengths to avoid talking about race, racial tension as well as racial dilemmas went unaddressed. But not talking about race did not make racial conflicts and racial questions go away. Instead, silence around race meant that people internalized their frustration and suppressed their feelings about racially-charged situations. Through the stories they told about racial incidents at the school, race-conscious staff members conveyed just how aware they were of their colleagues’ denials, obfuscations, and internal struggles with race in Centerville.

During interviews, however, these same passionate and outspoken staff members approached the topics of race and racism with caution, at least at first. The tentativeness with which they broached the subject of race suggests that they were simultaneously feeling me out and maintaining a habit of discussing race obliquely. This can be seen in a second extended example, where black teacher Robin Riley used racially-coded language to refer to race in some of her earliest comments about school culture in Centerville.

Here race can be seen as a subtext, both in her comments about the student population and the strained relationships among staff members:

J: So can you characterize some of the things that make Centerville different from what we find 20 minutes away?

R: Um, diversity. The mixture of the kids here ... the socioeconomic culture within this group, which is the lowest in the county, so that makes this a different culture ... Um, the vision makes this culture different, because I don't know the vision, for one. I feel that within the last, maybe seven years, there hasn't been a real vision that I can follow .... it's sort of like a fragmented culture. Because I feel if you don't have vision, you don't have purpose. If you don't have purpose, there's a crack in the culture, a crack in the system. That needs to be fixed, because right now I feel it's broken. So culture is sort of divided, if I could say that (laughs).

J: Yeah. I've heard that a lot.

R: It used to be more cohesiveness ... so, uh, consequently the students are in the culture, and they're being affected. Their learning is being affected by this culture.

By referring to "diversity" and "the socioeconomic culture," Robin indicated how central race and class were in her perceptions of culture in Centerville. At the same time, when she mentioned a fragmented culture and a lack of cohesiveness that affected student learning, I sensed that she was making a veiled critique of teaching and learning at the school, so I asked her to say more about that:

J: What do you think it is that's dividing the staff? That's creating this fragmented quality that the students are being affected by?

R: (8 second pause) I think there's a lack of really wanting kids to learn. I sense that some do, and some don't.

Robin's 8-second pause before answering my question speaks powerfully to the decision she must have been making about what and how much to say to me. As was my habit, once she began speaking, I listened quietly to see where and how far she would go. First Robin referred vaguely to some of her colleagues' teaching practices, explaining how at times she needed to "put on blinders" to block out what was happening in particular classrooms. Then she asked me to stop the tape recorder so she could describe those practices in more detail, but off the record.

When she signaled that I could turn the tape recorder back on again, Robin spoke further about ineffective teaching in the building, arguing that staff meeting time was used poorly and that there wasn't enough modeling of what good teaching is. She noted how often students told her that teachers didn't care. At this point, she became explicit about race for the first time, asking why there was a lack of equity between black and white students:

Achievement is a part of culture to me. That's a big part. If students aren't achieving, what, where is the gap? Why aren't they achieving? Why isn't there equity? Amongst the blacks and the whites. Why is it that only certain students are in AP classes? Why is it that only certain students, quote-unquote, are passing math? Science. Why? They're not idiots. They're not stupid. They all have a brain. Every child can learn. But if you're not giving them the tools, or you're not teaching them that they can learn the material, if they all are (laughs), um, what do you call it? (3 second pause) If they don't feel like they can succeed in your class, they won't.

With growing indignation, Robin went on to note the extreme failure rate in some classrooms. "How come you haven't asked those teachers who have 70% of their kids *failing* what the problem is?" she asked, thumping the table. "It's not a student problem. I'm sorry."

Recognizing that Robin had now made the conversation racial by invoking equity and disparities in achievement between blacks and whites, I tried somewhat awkwardly to signal that I recognized the problems she was describing. But since I didn't flag race explicitly, Robin shifted her focus to class issues:

J: I really want to talk more about this, because I don't study the numbers or anything, but I *know* that there's an equity problem here, and I *know* that there's perennial failure. Among—

R: Uh-huh. And I know that too, but perennial failure to me is an *excuse*. That's an excuse for you .... We can blame it on the parents, you know, (mimics) "Well, parents didn't do their job." Well you know what? This is a safety net for a lot of them, when they come here .... Some of them are just surviving. But survival can be that they learn something that day. That they learn that I can write, I can read, I can do this math. If it's set up that I'm not stupid, and I'm not illiterate, that my parents, you know. The socioeconomic did not affect my learning *that* much.

Robin then returned to the topic of grading practices, connecting grading patterns back to school culture. Once again she moved to make racial issues explicit, but she did so tentatively, referring to topics she "wouldn't get into," to "hard issues here," and to "not wanting to talk about race" before naming race as the real problem:

R: And then the grading system. (laughs) You know. That's just a part of it, but I won't get into that. That's just a whole other thing that just ticks me off (laughs) .... That's a culture. To me, that's a part, achievement, that's a culture .... It wasn't always like this. But when the vision stopped, it continued to downward spiral. When they didn't address the *hard* issues of achievement—

J: Right.

R: There's some hard issues here. (quietly) And they just put it under the carpet (3 second pause).

J: Can you talk more about the hard issues that really need to be discussed that aren't being discussed? And what's getting in the way of this achievement for more students here?

R: (4 second pause) I think the hard issues is that they, they really think that, well they, and, and it happens (3 second pause). And I don't want to talk about race, but race is a part. When you have black males that fail frequently, why (3 second pause). When you're sitting in a classroom and I'm black and I'm white and I'm Hispanic, why does that happen? (4 second pause) Blacks can't learn? (3 second pause) Why is it that they can learn in *your* class? All the time? Because you push. You don't *see* that as a problem. You don't discriminate. But over here, it's a problem. Why is that? (a knock at the door)

In this last turn of talk when Robin did finally make race explicit, her reluctance to take on the topic directly is noticeable. Discourse moves reveal her hesitation, which can be seen in the ways she repeatedly stumbled while trying to articulate what the "hard issues" were ("They, they really think that, well they, and, and it happens"), then paused for three long seconds, and then claimed she *didn't* want to talk about race before going on to show that she really *did* ("I don't want to talk about race, but race is a part"). My question that set up this statement ("Can you talk more about the hard issues that really need to be discussed?") shows my own reluctance to ask directly about race.

Like Lisa Marshall, Robin gradually revealed through discourse the extent to which beliefs and emotions about race were lurking under the surface of her early statements about school culture. Though Robin was far more willing than Lisa to address race issues directly, her tentativeness and hesitation in broaching the subject show how careful she had learned to be about discussing race in Centerville. After our conversation was interrupted by a student knocking on her classroom door, my fumbling attempts to pick up where we had left off demonstrate how much I was struggling to both



acknowledge that race was a factor in the school and manage my own anxiety about whether it was appropriate to probe further into the issue:

R: (laughs) Now where were we?

J: Well we were talking about equity. And why it's so hard to get to the meat of the problem? And you, you started by saying, I don't want to talk about race. But clearly—

R: But race is an issue—

J: —race is a factor, and—

R: Racism is an issue—

J: Race *and* racism. And it's *really* hard for some people to talk about, right, it's a threatening subject—

R: Well no, it's not hard for me. Because I've experienced it, you know, uh, several times.

J: Mm hm.

R: Click off.

When I told Robin that race was “hard for some people to talk about” and “a threatening subject,” I might have thought at the time that I was being sensitive to her feelings. But in fact I was contributing to a discourse in Centerville that constructed race talk as taboo. What I was really saying was that race was hard for *me*—and many white staff members like me—to talk about. Even as I tried to encourage Robin to bring race talk out into the open, I communicated an expectation that she would not want to do so. In response, Robin pushed back, repositioning herself in relation to the subject (“No, it's not hard for me”). But in asking me again to turn off the tape recorder (“Click off”), Robin showed

that she too had learned to exercise discretion in terms of how far she would go with speaking candidly about race.

This time when the tape was off, Robin focused in on a very personal and very explicitly racial conflict she had experienced with one particular staff member a number of years ago. As she talked, she began to cry.<sup>116</sup> When she indicated that I could turn the tape recorder back on again, Robin explained how deeply and permanently the conflict had affected her. At first she spoke matter-of-factly about the importance of resuming normal interactions with this colleague. “I could have gotten the person almost fired,” she said. “But I chose not to ... I could deal. And come to work every day and still look at the person and say, okay, I can still work with you. But there’s this underlying piece that makes me not trust you anymore.”

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<sup>116</sup> When Robin began to cry, for me it was the most intense moment of any interview during my fieldwork. My reaction speaks to the power of race and racism to paralyze and silence white people, so conscious was I of never having experienced such a humiliating, personal, and emotionally-charged attack. As Robin told her story, I wondered what I should say when she reached the end. But the more she talked, the more I realized that I might not have to say anything. Robin needed room to tell her story, so I listened as quietly and intently as I could. I offered her a tissue. I nodded and tried to communicate my sympathy through facial expressions.

I also began wondering immediately about what I should do with such a story. Should I omit it from the study in order to protect Robin and her colleague’s privacy? Should I include it because Robin had done most of her talking on tape, not off? Or should I include it for a different reason—because stories of people’s private experience with racism in Centerville needed to be told? Though it felt like hedging the decision, I figured I had to wait and see. I took a writerly approach: I would decide what to do once I began drafting chapters and figuring out what direction the story would take. Over two years of working with this data, and over several days of working on this section, I finally decided that Robin’s story was simply too important to omit.

Interestingly, however, I began to feel more convinced of the need to include such stories at the end of my interview with teacher Grace Thomas during the last week of the 2006-07 school year. After talking at length about her own experiences with racism in Centerville, to my surprise, Grace thanked me: “I’m one of those people, um, and you’ve been in our staff meetings. I don’t talk very much. Okay. It doesn’t mean that I don’t have things to say. But I also want to say maybe this is another way for me to, um, voice my opinion. Get some things out there ... I don’t say a lot of things to people. But there’s a lot of things that I see and hear and perceive about Centerville, as well as you. And I thank you for this interview. I really truly deep down inside believe you understand the things that I’ve experienced and am still going through at Centerville. And I appreciate that interview that you gave me” (interview, 6-12-07). Though Grace’s intent was simply to thank me, her comments served to deepen my belief that there was value in bringing such stories to light, despite the risk for all involved.

As Robin's comments show, going back to normal with this colleague was not possible. Nor was it possible to go back to normal in her work with students and staff members. The personal experience of a racial conflict raised Robin's consciousness about the presence of racism in the building. She began paying more attention to grading practices and enrollment patterns in upper-level courses. When she learned that students were being denied access to those classes if they didn't have a C or better in the prerequisite class, she saw racism:

I said this is discrimination (slaps table). I actually told them, I said *how can you?* I said, you can make a choice to fail whoever you want. Or give them a D. And guess what, they can't go to the next level! Why come can't they go to the next level? A D is passing. Anywhere in America. Maybe in college they have those things, but we're high school! We're an institution of getting them *to* the next level, not stopping them! Why do we *stop* kids from going to the next level?

Robin objected to the enrollment policy and eventually got it changed. But when she recalled how the administration tried to keep the original conflict between her and her colleague quiet, she again began to cry:

This is why I was so mad that year. (begins to cry) Superintendent, everybody hid it ... They covered it up!<sup>117</sup> ... So I was mad, I was pissed! And I should

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<sup>117</sup> Support staff member Roseanne LaChance also commented on the tendency of administrators to "cover up" racial situations, especially those involving conflicts between students of different races. "It's, it's under something. It's there, but it's not out .... people are trying to cover it up ... I mean if it is happening, they going to try to not make it happen, you know what I'm saying? If it's a fight, the kids are black and white, and it's really a racial thing, they going to play it off like it's something else. Because they don't want people to think, *oh my God!* It's like, you don't want to keep the crowd going, everybody going against each other, you don't want that. So they will hush-hush if it is a situation like that" (interview, 5-23-07). Support staff member Mary Jo Horne described her tendency to self-censor talk about race: "I think because of the era we grew up, it makes us more aware of color. Than what the kids do. And because of that, I think your first initial reaction, as adults sometimes, is to think, is it a racial issue. That comes across your mind first, is it a black-white issue .... When I see things sometimes, well I see the kids fighting, for instance. If it's a white kid and a black kid, my first initial reaction is, I wonder if it's a racial issue. Or, is it something over, they said something about their girlfriend. That usually doesn't come across my mind first, honestly. I usually think, is it a white-black thing .... See, I *think* that way. But I

have been! So you cover up racism (crying), and it affects everyone. And it affected me (sniffs). But my husband told me, he said you know what? You're a better person ... you're still there fighting for those kids. Don't give up fighting.

What was striking to me as I listened to Robin was not just how the experience with racism had wounded her emotionally. I was even more struck by how the experience had challenged her to find ways of responding constructively, not vindictively, to colleagues who had hurt her, and how the experience had deepened her resolve to fight on behalf of Centerville kids:

I looked at racism as a person that tries to steal life out of you. But I refuse to not live. And I said I'm going to move forward and I'm going to live past that. Because racism is (crying) is bad for people. And I've seen it happen in so many cases here. They do nothing about it. And you know, I, I started to make it public. I started to contact the *Ann Arbor News*. I started to do some things that could have been destructive. But then I thought (sniffs), that's fighting on that territory of ignorance ... So I figured that they'll learn. You know. Through circumstances, through whatever, they will learn. And what they've learned is, that they had to let the kids in ... That to me was a battle won, because then the kids could have the opportunity to get the same information as anyone else, if they desire to take those courses ... racism in that area was defeated (interview, 5-2-07).

Robin framed the struggle to help black students gain access to higher-level classes as a battle won against racism. But in the aftermath of such a battle, the relational damage for people like Robin and her colleague was profound. Feelings of anger and hurt over race festered, feeding what Robin called a "divided" and "broken" culture.

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don't verbally say anything. And then when I find out it's over a girl or something, which it usually is, over something stupid, basketball or something, then I'm like, oh thank God. Because I don't want that" (interview, 5-23-07).

Robin was not the only staff member whose personal experiences with racism changed the way she viewed her colleagues and interpreted events in the building. Black support staff member Lynn Nation described an incident in which a white staff member's hallway conflict with a black student erupted into a larger conflict with her, which she ultimately read as racial:

I've had incidents that happened where I've gotten into it with some people here, and I felt that it was a racial, it was a racial, uh, situation .... The whole thing started because, um, there was a black student that [a fellow staff member] attacked in the hall, very verbal ... He was so *angry* at the student, I felt that I needed to step back and let him just deal with it. And then he looked at me and said, "Aren't you going to do your job?" And then I thought, whoa! You know, where's *that* coming from, you know? You're getting angry at me, you're already angry at him, it's just escalating. So I'm like, I'm just going to leave it alone for a minute .... But he attacked me. You know, he turned around and started hollering at me, he was hollering at the student, I could see anger, I'm like, whoa, you know, I'm going to back off of this one for a minute. After he turned to go to the office, I went and got the student and said, you need to come with me. You're wrong, you know. He's a staff member here. But see, I didn't know that there was a prior problem. With him and this student. That they didn't ever get along. They always bumped heads. So I'm coming in on the middle of something that I know nothing about. And then it was like, I didn't do *my* job.

Lynn's account shows that from the start she was paying attention to race differences between the staff member and the student, and she was alarmed by the anger her colleague exhibited. Without other evidence, perhaps she could have written off his anger as the product of a bad day, or frustration boiling over because of an ongoing bad relationship with a particular student. But Lynn became even more disturbed when she heard a remark this same colleague made about her at a staff meeting:

I'm thinking, okay, it's over, boss is like, "Don't worry about it." But then you get in the meeting, and it comes back to me that, "What happened? He said if the

building was on fire and you were burning, that he wouldn't piss on you to put you out. What, what happened?" And I'm like, oh my God, he did not say that ... you're telling me that my life means nothing to you. I mean someone comes in here with a gun, and I'm down that hallway, you might say, "Go that way, or you know, where's Lynn at? Oh, she's right on that corner down there!" (laughs) So, that, that's probably the worst scenario of, um, prejudice.

Taken in isolation, the hallway scenario and its aftermath could be read as an unusually vicious dispute between two staff members who happened to be of different races. But Lynn went on to say that the incident heightened her awareness of racial patterns in this colleague's interactions with students. The more closely she observed him, and the more she talked with students about his behavior, the more clearly she saw racism:

But what I seen between him and this young man, and not just that young man, but a lot of young men. You know, that *buck*, you know, that are boisterous. Now if you're kind of submissive, you know, and you kind of follow the rules or whatever, he doesn't have a problem. But if you in any way try to kick against him, I mean it's going to be an ugly situation. And I don't see any of that, any of it, with the Caucasian students. At all. And I've observed. So eventually after that happened with me, I really paid attention, to see, was it just me thinking that, or was it just a isolated incident ... But then I started noticing, and I started asking other kids, and, they was like, yeah, well, you know, that's just how he is, so, you know, you just get used to it.

Whether there was or wasn't a racial pattern in this staff member's interactions with students isn't really the point here. What matters is Lynn's perception. Racial tension in Centerville led both black and white staff members to read race into a vast number of situations, and my stance as an ethnographer was to accept their stories as the truth *according to their experience*.<sup>118</sup> Discourse analysis convinced me that race was on a

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<sup>118</sup> Of course, patterns across interviews balanced by years of fieldwork in Centerville played a huge part in my interpretations of staff members' stories about racism. Even though people were extraordinarily careful

great many staff members' minds, whether they admitted this explicitly or not. Not talking openly about race was both a signature of school culture in Centerville and a fundamental source of the toxicity produced in day-to-day interactions.

Without explicit talk about race, the best that staff members could hope for was an uneasy truce after incidents like the ones involving Robin, Lynn, and their unnamed colleagues. Students in Centerville may have resolved to "get used to" racially tense interactions with staff members, and to some extent, Lynn may have resolved to do the same. But like Robin, Lynn described her relationship with her colleague as profoundly damaged after their conflict, despite the appearance that the two of them had made amends:

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*never* to identify the person by name when they recalled a racist interaction, the stories different individuals told contained details that repeatedly zeroed in on certain departments and certain individuals. On the other hand, there were times when I heard stories and had no idea who the staff member was talking about. The literal truth of these stories mattered less to me in the end than the more general trustworthiness that developed out of accumulated testimony about race and racism.

I did sometimes hear similar accounts of the same event or pattern from different people. Here's an example of a statement made by Dorothy Loveland several months earlier that reinforced the credibility of Lynn's story. "I've never, okay. I'll put it like this. I've never seen the anger, like I see now. Uh, the frustration, I don't know if it's anger, I don't know if it's anger or the *frustration* of the black students. They're frustrated .... I know they had a few students say, black students, they think the white staff members don't like them, or is prejudiced. They said they have seen it. Then I've had adults come in and say the same thing about this person. And so, I don't know, um, some things are embedded" (interview, 11-28-06). To this day I'm not sure who Dorothy was talking about, or whether the person she mentioned was or wasn't the staff member Lynn referred to. The value in Dorothy's account was the confirmation it provided that there *were* adults in the building who were struggling with race, and that students as well as staff members were feeling the effects of racial tension.

Similarly, while Wendy Swensen did not talk directly about racist incidents in Centerville, she was emphatic that there was a problem with racism in the building. She attributed at least part of the problem to white staff members' implicit fear of black students. "They're talking now about the study that was being done in like fourth, all of a sudden in like fourth grade, is when all the MEAP scores are dropping ... And it comes out, that's when some of the boys start getting taller, and getting bigger, and the, the, the (pause), the white female teachers are suddenly viewing them as black males, and not black little boys, and it sets the whole dynamic up for this kind of fear to come in, like this, feeling intimidated thing to come in, and so your reactions, I think, it just, it goes down to racism on the base level, you know, you're just not comfortable" (interview, 3-29-07). Dorothy Loveland told me that she had seen the same thing. "It takes a super strong person to teach in a diverse area like ours. You got to be tough ... you got to be *wise* ... I don't know how to do it, but I have seen the *fear* ... Fear, frustration, and insecurities, you know what I mean? And how it comes out is anger and a referral" (interview, 11-28-06).

I get along fine with that person now ... I guess we agreed to disagree. Since we work in the building together, we have to get along with each other, you know, because they depend on me, and I kind of like depend on them. So we kind of smoothed it over, but ... even though you choose to be cordial to that person and everything, you know where their heart is, because of the situation that happened before (interview, 2-13-07).

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Robin and Lynn were two of a number of racially-conscious staff members who recounted the range of ways in which their colleagues demeaned, evaded, or shut down the conversation about race in Centerville. They described how white staff members in particular used very specific discourse moves to get around or away from race in discussions of curriculum, the treatment of black students, and school culture in general. When Robin recalled the tension that developed around *Voices of Love and Freedom*, a multicultural curriculum adopted during the 2003-04 school year, she noted how her colleagues used negative comments about curriculum materials and manipulative forms of self-positioning to drive out staff members who had positive things to say:

I can remember they had a grant, the *Voices* grant ... they had them reading novels and literature of black writers, black stories. And when they brought up the issue of racism (thumps table), the white teachers felt *offended* ... I don't know why they would be offended (laughs). The kids loved it. But they would talk about it in such a negative way that I didn't go to meetings anymore .... *Voices* to me was great literature for the kids to read in the classroom ... it was books that they could relate to and respond to and write about. But they took that out .... That's what happens here. They take stuff away. They don't *add* to the learning. If it seems like the issue we can't deal with, then we take it away (interview, 5-2-07).

Robin's account demonstrates how white teachers' negative comments about the curriculum alienated and ultimately excluded her from the conversation. Because Robin found white teachers' comments to be so hostile, she stopped going to meetings. As a



result, white teachers had greater freedom to make disparaging comments that went unchallenged, and they lost the opportunity to hear the perspective of someone who might have helped them to see the value in the *Voices* program. Also, by claiming that they were offended by the curriculum, white teachers positioned themselves as victims. In the process, they shifted the conversation away from the racial issues at hand and, in effect, turned the focus on themselves. The hostility that some white teachers exhibited toward *Voices* suggests that they actually found the material—and the conversations it provoked—to be threatening. Eliminating *Voices* was easier than examining why the curriculum produced such racially-charged and polarized reactions across the staff.<sup>119</sup>

On other occasions, white teachers used more oblique methods to avoid discussion of race. When confronted with racist patterns in the treatment of black Centerville students, white teachers would feign ignorance and pretend not to see situations as racial. Describing a meeting in which white teachers claimed they were unaware of methods being used to exclude black students from certain classes, Robin explained how her colleagues “played dumb” in order to evade and elide racial issues:

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<sup>119</sup> While I don’t know precisely how the decision was made to eliminate *Voices*, I did witness staff resistance toward the *Voices* program during some of my earliest visits to Centerville. On one of the last days of school in the spring of 2004, I stood chatting in the hall with Neal Morton before classes began. Wendy Swensen approached us with a shopping bag in her hand. Laughing, she pulled a rainbow-colored beanie cap—the kind with a propeller on top—out of the bag and handed it to Neal. The staff luncheon was that afternoon, and staff members would be performing skits and roasts to celebrate the end of the school year. Neal was in charge of a skit called “Vices,” which he explained would make fun of the *Voices* curriculum they’d been required to use (fieldnotes, 6-10-04). A week earlier, Doug Henderson had complained to me that the *Voices* curriculum itself was racist. “Sometimes when you start talking about racial problems, it gives kids ideas and aggravates problems that were already there,” he said (fieldnotes, 6-2-04).

Staff resistance to *Voices* in 2003-04 was actually quite similar to the resistance Glenn Singleton encountered in Centerville three years later. Grace Thomas believed that the anger with which some staff members responded to Singleton’s message was an indication of underlying feelings that needed to be dealt with. “You need to look at the way you’re perceiving, and maybe teaching, if you’re feeling that negative about what he was talking about,” she said. “I mean, maybe there *are* some things there that you may not even be aware of. You know what I’m saying? You may not even be aware that you’re feeling this way ... There has to be a reason why you’re feeling so negative” (interview, 6-12-07).

You hear a teacher say, “This kid can’t be in my class because they’re a loud mouth.” Well a lot of African Americans speak at higher volumes, if you know the history. They speak at higher volumes. (mimics) “They’re not going to be in my class! They can’t *take* my class.” Now I’m hearing this. (whispers) I know this kid! This kid is not a negative kid except for, yeah, they talk loud. But academically, they function! And you can redirect a kid ... you can say to them, okay, let’s keep it at this level. But it wasn’t academic. It wasn’t anything, it’s just that you didn’t like that kid. And maybe that got in your little collar ... But I’m hearing that ... So I thought to myself, how do I deal with this. I brought it up in a bigger meeting, but I didn’t say who it was. You know. I just made the statement. Just to see if they would deal with that issue ... And they said, “Oh, does that happen?” I said yes, it just happened. Because see, I’m not going to just let things go under the carpet anymore if I can say something (interview, 5-2-07).

For white teachers being directly accused of racism, expressions of vague surprise that racially exclusionist practices occurred were much safer than grappling directly with the racist patterns in their work with students. To look at it another way, it’s worth imagining what else these teachers could have said in the face of such a fundamentally threatening accusation. If they had admitted that yes, there was racism implicit in the ways they assigned students to classes, how could these teachers have continued to work together? Robin’s indirect approach (“I just made the statement. Just to see if they would deal with that issue”) gave teachers a way to save face, whereas a direct confrontation would have probably shut down the conversation altogether. At the same time, however, Robin’s approach allowed white staff members to distance themselves from the problem and, in effect, choose whether or not to respond to the underlying issues she was raising.

Those staff members who wanted to get a conversation started about race often took an indirect approach, which increased the likelihood that those who wanted to evade

discussions of race would be able to do so. For example, when members of the Charleston group attempted to get the staff to look at the role that race was playing in school culture, they began by asking staff members very general questions about how they described Centerville to outsiders. Tina Olsen recalled the large number of people who offered “really flippant, kind of joking responses”:

A question that we actually asked was, when somebody asks you from outside of this area, what is Centerville like, what’s teaching at Centerville like, how do you respond? That was how we worded it. Because we do get asked that a lot (laughs). I do, by everybody that I know ... And um, the responses were really, there were maybe two or three that were thoughtful from the whole staff, or that seemed thoughtful to us. I mean, there were responses like, one of them I remember was, “Coaching is great.” Like that’s the response. Lots of things like that, or these really positive, flowery kind of, working at Centerville is wonderful, the kids are great, blah blah ... Maybe our question was bad, partially we thought, looking back on it, maybe it was. But we didn’t get any relevant kind of information back from that.

Tina went on to note that the problem was more than just asking a bad question. As long as staff members’ personal relationships were strained and distant, deeper conversations about race were not possible. “We have to know each other and like each other better, at least respect each other, before we can ask each other to start talking about these really important things and be honest. And we just don’t have that level of trust or knowledge of each other and what we’re trying to do here” (interview, 12-1-06).

Because of that lack of trust, race-conscious staff members grew frustrated with what they viewed as their colleagues’ refusal to grapple with racial issues. Those who could see the presence of race in so many situations and interactions had little patience

for evasions and denials.<sup>120</sup> Robin acknowledged that some Centerville staff members might not be conscious of the role race was playing in their responses and interactions (she urged staff members to do “self-checks” whenever accusations of racism came up), but she was still angered by the ways in which so many people actively pretended or deliberately deceived themselves. “Some of them, every day. (mimics) ‘I don’t see race.’ How come you can’t? You’re lying to yourself if you don’t see it. I walk in the classroom, I see black, white, Hispanic, Arab, I see it. You’re lying to yourself if you don’t see it!” (interview, 5-2-07). Dorothy Loveland argued that the stress of daily work in a racially-mixed building would eventually bring out racial feelings, despite staff members’ attempts to suppress them. “See, you can hide it for a while, but if I *am* prejudiced, right, you’ve got a class full of 35 people in that class .... it’s going to come out .... And you going to blow up .... The feeling is going to show up if it’s hidden. You know, if it’s really embedded, oh, it’s *going* to show” (interview, 11-28-06).

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<sup>120</sup> Their frustration was all the more intense in light of racial patterns that were so pronounced. Some staff members focused on the practices of individual teachers, stopping short of calling those teachers racist but impugning their work just the same. “I know it’s hard to teach,” support staff member Roseanne LaChance said. “But it’s *got* to be a way they got to treat everybody equal, no matter if they from the ghetto or from wherever. And I know it’s not, it can’t be happening. Because you’re getting people that’s getting A’s in *all* five classes for example, *all* the classes but one. So how can you have a student getting A’s five classes, and the sixth class, for some reason they’re failing it ... Something’s, that’s a, that’s an issue there” (interview, 5-23-07).

Other staff members focused on attitudes that pervaded the staff as a whole. Assistant Principal Frank Simpson refrained from calling it racism, but he spoke candidly about the racial pattern in disciplinary referrals that came through his office. “I will tell you right now, that a majority of the write-ups will be African American males. Why? Are white males that much better a people? No. The reason why is because a lot of people don’t want to *understand* the African American male. They don’t want to *understand* what he may be going through ... By no means am I saying do we cut breaks and make things easier. But you’ve got to start to recognize and be able to communicate. And say, you know, I *recognize* who you are. I recognize where you’re at. And, and respect that. And I think we have a difficult time doing that” (interview, 3-22-07).

## **Individual struggles with race**

Despite the many strategies staff members used to avoid or resist *public* interactions around race, a number of staff members were grappling *privately* with intense racial questions and racial dilemmas. During interviews, many of these people let me know that they were acutely self-conscious when it came to racial issues in the classroom and in the building, though they might never let on in a staff meeting or other public conversation. New staff members in particular had a heightened awareness of how they were being “read” racially upon arriving in Centerville, both by students and by fellow staff members, and they spoke candidly about the discomfort they felt when students brought up race directly in the classroom. Several went a step further to explain how working in Centerville was challenging their views of themselves and their home communities. Because the topic of race was so fraught in Centerville, however, these people had no place to go with their questions and anxieties. As a result, their racial struggles went unseen, even by colleagues like Robin who could have been their supporters and allies.

New staff members revealed that race was on their mind when I asked them to talk explicitly about what it was like to be new in Centerville. In response to this question, most brought up race at some point, even if they did so in veiled or indirect ways. Some people acknowledged their awareness of race when they explained how different Centerville felt compared to the schools they themselves had attended and the places they had always lived. “I’m new to this type of environment, being, you know, an inner-city environment,” teacher Emma Middleton said. “And so from that perspective it’s been a huge difference for me” (interview, 3-29-07). While Emma used the

euphemism “inner city” to allude to the race and class demographics in Centerville, fellow new teacher Allison Gratsch commented on those demographics more explicitly. “Where I come from, everybody looks the same,” she said. “This is my first experience in a school like Centerville. Where there is racial and socioeconomic diversity” (interview, 2-15-07).

Other staff members mentioned the majority-white schools they’d come from in order to note how working in Centerville had deepened their awareness of race, particularly the experience of African American students. “I came from, my background is from suburban white schools,” Frank Simpson told me. “And we just had very few, um, black or brown students ... And so, with just being here for the last year and a half, the learning that I’ve gone through, um, the inequities that are out there for many of our kids, just based on the color of their skin” (interview, 3-22-07).<sup>121</sup> For some new staff members, however, being from a suburban white school felt like a liability. Student teacher Amber Sandstrom admitted that she felt judged by one of her colleagues based on her white identity. “I went to a predominantly white school,” she said. “I felt like [a particular colleague] was sort of judging me in the beginning ... as this, like, preppy little white girl that was just coming to this school and had no idea what was going on, and I felt, I know I was offended by that at the beginning” (interview, 4-18-07). Amber was

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<sup>121</sup> Simpson’s reference to “black or brown students” is a marked example of Glenn Singleton’s influence. *No one* in Centerville referred to minority students by using the phrase “black or brown.” In fact, brown students—or Latinos—were virtually invisible in Centerville, given the amount of energy staff members spent focusing on tensions between blacks and whites. Meanwhile, Glenn Singleton used this phrase all the time, both in his public lectures and in his books. Frank Simpson’s use of the term shows the way discourse moves can signify membership in a particular social network or belief community (cf. Gee, 1996). Using the term “black or brown” was a way for Frank to position himself as in agreement with Singleton’s ideas and as a member of a small group of staff members who were pushing for greater attention to the role of race in Centerville.

upset by this judgment in large part because she had spent so *much* time thinking about race, specifically the impact of her whiteness on classroom interactions.

In many cases, however, new white staff members *were* being judged, by both black and white veterans, and often in thinly-disguised racial terms. Harry Greiner assumed that new white teachers from suburban backgrounds would find the environment of Centerville to be “foreign” and thus would not be successful:

I look at some of our new hires, and I wonder, eeh, you know, this is really foreign to them, they’re going to have some struggles ... When you talk to someone who spent five years in Minnesota at a private school, you can’t get much more foreign than that (laughs). Hopefully that person’s going to have support, because it could be overwhelming (interview, 11-8-06).

In contrast, Harry believed that new black teachers, especially those with ties to Detroit, would automatically fare better. “You look at someone like [an African American teacher who joined the staff in 2004-05], she went to school in Detroit, it’s not a completely foreign environment to her” (interview, 11-8-06). When I told Sandra Altman that I was glad to see one of several open positions get filled with a permanent teacher just a week after the 2006-07 school year began, Sandra was less than enthusiastic. Like Harry, she immediately assessed the new teacher’s chances of success in relation to her race. “She’s from *Rosedale*,” Sandra said disparagingly, referring to a small rural town that was predominantly white. “I wonder what kind of experience she’s had with our population. Talk to me in a week” (fieldnotes, 9-6-06). Similarly, when Al Liggett grew frustrated with one of the new hires later that year, he criticized the individual using coded references to his race. “He’s got that suburban attitude,” Al said. “I just don’t like the man. He’s too country club for my taste” (fieldnotes, 3-7-07).

Neither Al nor I knew at the time how much thinking this person had actually done about race and equity issues since he began working in Centerville.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Black staff members were *most* likely to make implicit racial critiques of their white colleagues when they were frustrated by a conflict they observed between a white adult and a black student. For example, several different black staff members commented on misunderstandings and misreadings of black students that arose out of white teachers' inexperience with black students' vernacular language use. "You've got to know your audience," teacher Camille Plumley told me. "And we don't know our audience. We don't even know the language they speak. There was a staff member got mad at a kid because he told him to do something, and [the student] said 'Okay man, I feel you.' Which means, okay, you're right, I understand what you said. [The staff member] wrote him up. Because he said it was rude and disrespectful. That wasn't rude and disrespectful. It was just saying okay, I understand, you're right. I get where you're coming from" (interview, 4-4-07).

Other moments of vernacular miscommunication had a comic quality, at least when discipline and power issues were not involved. Lynn Nation and I could barely stop laughing during our interview when she explained how easy it was for her to communicate with Centerville students because she spoke their language, and how mystifying that same language could be for some white teachers. "They know they can come to me and say, 'You know Boukie? And, and Shoo-shoo?' You know, and I'm like, yeah, yeah, I know Boukie and Shoo-shoo, and they momma's name is Boo-Boo, okay? (laughs) Where, they couldn't go to a teacher and say that, because the teacher is like, 'Who? What's a real name?' (laughs) You know what I'm saying? And uh, and one time a teacher was listening to us talk, and she was like, 'Man oh man, what are you guys talking about? Baking cookies or what?' And we're like, 'You know Cookie? And uh, Donut? You know, Donut, that used to play basketball. Yeah, I know Donut!' And so, you know, everybody's talking in they slang languages, and the teachers don't, they just don't have a clue" (interview, 2-13-07).

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Sometimes the misunderstandings between teachers and students were far more sobering, especially when they resulted in conflicts that further eroded relationships between staff members. One morning Reggie Bridges had stopped to talk to me on his way to visit a remedial math class where the long-term sub was having trouble controlling the students, and such a conflict unfolded in our presence.

"I'm frustrated," Reggie said. I glanced at the handful of yellow referral forms in his hand.

"Why don't we take all the students with the lowest skills—our neediest students—and put them in the same classroom. With a substitute teacher. These are our priority students!" He shook his head and looked down the hall to the math class.

Our conversation was interrupted by the sound of a door opening, and a black student named Armel came out into the hall. His teacher, a young white woman, had started work in Centerville in October following a succession of four other teachers in her subject area who each taught for a couple of weeks and then quit. Reggie turned his attention to Armel.

"What did you do?" Reggie asked, chiding him affectionately.

"She said I was talking when she was talking," Armel said with a shrug.

"Okay, so you were taking away from your learning and the learning of others," Reggie replied, beginning a familiar refrain. "What were you talking about?"

"She was saying how you lose skin cells in the winter, and I said, 'So that's why you get winter itch.' Someone behind me said, 'What's winter itch?' So I turned around, and then he asked me something else. And then someone said, 'Shut up!' And I said, 'No, you shut up!' And she said, 'Get out!'"

"So she felt you were being disrespectful," Reggie said. "What are you going to say when she comes out?"

Armel just smiled, raised his eyebrows, and looked down, shaking his head.

"Come on, I'm her!" Reggie said. He waved his hand back and forth, gesturing to Armel like, come on, you and me. "Let's role play it. Why were you talking when I was talking?"

Armel still wouldn't cooperate. Reggie told him he had to apologize for disrupting the class. "But you can tell her it was on-task conversation. Did you know that? You can say that to teachers."



Some new white teachers anticipated these racial readings, especially from black students, and they responded defensively. Rachel Moses tried to compensate for what she believed was the liability of her whiteness by invoking her ties to Detroit in an effort to either impress or intimidate black students:

I guess I sort of expected them to resent me a little bit ... at least the students of [a] different race than mine .... My first day in here, I was like, well I'm from Detroit. Because I was born in Detroit, I did live in Detroit for a while. But, and they just immediately thought, "Oh, well I can't mess with her." You know, they thought, well if you live in Detroit, you know, it's way worse than Wilmont ... That sort of shocked them for a minute (interview, 6-6-07).

From her comments, it seems that Rachel invoked Detroit in order to convey to students that she had street smarts, toughness, and an urban "black" sensibility. What is

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"Nah, they won't believe you," Armel said. "They think it's their room, so they can tell you what to do. It's a power thing. I think it should be a democracy, not a dictatorship." He bent down to adjust his pants, which were bunched up by several inches on top of spotless white sneakers.

"Armel, I like you," Reggie said. "I want you to go back in there and learn. She doesn't know you. Well, she knows you, but she doesn't *know* you. Let her get to know you. But first, you need to take off the headphones."

Armel pulled a pair of earbuds out of his ears and put them in one pocket of his white zip-front hoodie. The cord stretched across his stomach to the CD player in his other pocket.

Then Reggie's handheld radio went off. "Mr. Bridges, do you copy?" I recognized the voice of a secretary in the main office.

"Yes I do," Reggie said. "I'm having a conference with a student. I'm on my way."

He walked over to me.

"Do you have a minute?" he asked.

I said of course, and we moved a few steps down the hall.

Reggie looked back at Armel, then turned and spoke to me in a low voice. "He is *brilliant*," Reggie began. "They have communication styles, and these teachers ..." His voice trailed off for a moment as he searched for the right words. "They think they're being disrespected." Reggie tipped his head back toward Armel. "He sees what's going on. And unlike most of our students, he's articulate enough to express it."

Reggie shook his head. "Why don't we take our neediest students," he began again. I looked at him sympathetically, but he didn't finish the thought. Focusing again on the referrals, he turned and walked away.

I took a seat on the floor and began writing up my notes. Over the next ten minutes, several students and a teacher stopped to talk to Armel, who lingered outside his classroom. They all wanted to know why he got kicked out. Armel put his earbuds back in and laughed when he told the story. Near the end of the hour I heard the door open again. The teacher spoke to Armel in a soft voice, presumably about what transpired during class, but he didn't respond. Moments later I saw him wander down the hall towards the office, a referral form in his hand (fieldnotes, 1-25-07).

significant here is not the authenticity of her self-positioning, but her *expectation* that black students would “resent” her.

New black teachers, on the other hand, had to deal with the *assumption* on the part of students that they were from Detroit (or from Wilmont, a smaller city with a sizeable black population). Though this assumption might have worked to young black teachers’ advantage, student teacher Sonia Huddleston understood that students’ assumptions about race intersected with assumptions about class to produce a particular—and often inaccurate—racial reading of black teachers:

I know when I first came in here .... a lot of them assumed that like I was from Wilmont rather than Ann Arbor .... They were much more understanding of the fact that I grew up in Detroit than of the fact that I live in Ann Arbor ... So anyways, just I guess kind of expecting that like, you’ve had similar circumstances as them. I think media has a lot do with that, saying that there is a certain lifestyle for this race as opposed to that race or whatever, that you would expect more of a common ground, so I guess race is associated with SES [socioeconomic status]... I guess there’s that assumption (interview, 4-19-07).

Though class did matter a great deal in new teachers’ acclimations to Centerville,<sup>123</sup> the stories new teachers told about their moments of greatest discomfort in the classroom invariably focused in on race. Though the racial differences between

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<sup>123</sup> Class was always a factor in Centerville people’s thinking to some extent, probably because discourses of poverty were so pervasive in the school. Therefore some experienced staff members—even those who demonstrated race consciousness on other occasions—talked about new teachers’ adjustments to Centerville in terms of class. This emphasis on class may also reflect staff members’ tendency to invoke colorblind discourses rather than race-conscious discourses when talking about the social distance between teachers and students.

Roz Nelson talked about her own class-based acclimation: “I came here being a middle-class person, and came into a different socioeconomic group of individuals and it was very culturally shocking for me my first year” (interview, 4-20-07). Support staff member Mary Jo Horne focused on the class status of new teachers trying to get used to Centerville’s challenges. “You get a teacher in here that hasn’t got any familiarity with this neighborhood, and what’s going on on the streets, and they come in, and they’re say, from an upper-class situation, and they’re coming down here, and you know, I don’t want to say the ’hood, because it’s not the ’hood. You know, we’re not in ... Detroit where there’s a, you know, but there is challenges, different challenges ... you can’t come in here blind” (interview, 5-23-07).

young white teachers and their majority-black classes were readily apparent to anyone who glanced in a Centerville classroom, these teachers still described being blindsided by race when students brought it into the conversation. For Tina Olsen, this happened on the first day of school:

I remember my first day here in this school, I did a compare and contrast activity to introduce the kids to this graphic organizer that I use in class, and they had to also introduce themselves by getting with another student, comparing and contrasting themselves, and I stood up (laughing) in the front of the room trying to give an example, and I said, “So, what might be some ways you could contrast yourself with me?” And the first thing one of my students said in my first class of the day was, “You’re *white* and I’m *black*.” And I just was unprepared for that (laughs).

Tina’s struggle is all the more ironic given the fact that she had sought out Centerville as a place to work. Because of her awareness of larger injustices in society, Centerville was Tina’s first-choice district when she applied for teaching jobs. And yet despite her desire to “make a difference” in the lives of Centerville, she had a very hard time building relationships with students:

I always kind of felt like if you taught at a Prospect or Ann Arbor, it would be a great place to teach, but those kids are going to be fine, regardless of who their teacher is. Most of those kids are going to college, and they’re going because their parents are going to be sure that they go. This is the kind of school where we need teachers who can really make a difference .... But I still had a terrible first semester here. I thought, my God, can I even do this job? Maybe I’m in the wrong field totally, because I couldn’t relate to the kids, even though I knew they were from a background and I knew all those issues were affecting them, I could not seem to reach them. They were just trying to push my buttons every day, and I was reacting, so it was really difficult, even though this was the place I wanted to be (interview, 12-1-06).

Tina's account shows that even though she *thought* she recognized and understood the different "backgrounds" Centerville students came from and the "issues" that were affecting them, she had not given any consideration to race. Only later, when she began to contribute to work on school culture with the Charleston group, did she recognize how much her blindness to race had impeded her work.

Joyce Jones also came to Centerville from a majority-white middle-class community, and she too had an unnerving racialized experience early on. Here she describes the lasting effects of a student's hostile comment and the racial questions it raised for her:

One of the first comments I got from a student ... one of the kids, right off the bat the first year, like probably within the first semester, said to me, "You need to go back to the suburbs where you belong." And I'm like, do I need to? You know, it made me think, am I really, you know, the wrong person? Am I racist? Because I think that's what he was saying.

Even though a black staff member later told Joyce that the student was "just trying to play the race card" and was "striking back at her" because she "confronted him on improper behavior," Joyce was deeply shaken by the experience. Like Tina, she wondered if she was in the right place and if she could do this work, given the "cultural gap" that her student had forced to recognize.

Although the racialized interaction between Joyce and the angry student threw her off balance, Joyce did come to form extremely close relationships with many Centerville students in the years that followed. Seeing herself in a motherly role helped her to form those relationships. "There's something about the kids at Centerville that I really love," she said. "You know, I'm just me. I don't try to be anybody else. But I do tell them I

was a mother before I was a teacher. And I think that's what sucks them in a little bit, because I think sometimes they need that."

Joyce formed an especially close relationship with a student named Char'quez: she served as an unofficial mentor to him and, in the process, became close to his family. But even after years of building that relationship with Char'quez and his mother both in and out of school, Joyce recalled a moment when race took her by surprise:

After ten years, he told me, says, "Well, my mom doesn't like white people." And I'm like, hhh- (shocked reaction). I said she doesn't? I mean, this is the lady I gave my mom's walker to, to use with her mom. I mean, I took Christmas dinner over to them last year .... and then he tells me that she hates white people. Wait a minute! (laughs) What is wrong with that picture? And I said I had no idea. And then he proceeded to tell me that one of his stepbrothers had married a white woman, and that had kind of precipitated it, and I'm like, whoa! This is a real shocker to me, after knowing the family, being in their home, she's been to my house for dinner. I mean, I've loved her children like they were my own, and I'm thinking, I never saw it .... But anyhow, so that gap is like blinders. I didn't see it. And I think that that could exist with kids that I don't see. You know, like you don't see that, that gap. It's not just a cultural gap, maybe it's a racial gap. And I know that I have things that could be considered, you know, racial, or cultural, but I do contemplate about it and I reflect on it. So if I think I'm doing something, then I try to correct it (interview, 5-9-07).

Joyce's story suggests that she assumed she would eventually reach a point in her relationship with Char'quez and his family when race would cease to matter. Learning about his mom's general dislike for white people fundamentally disrupted that assumption and helped Joyce to see what she had not been seeing, which was the extent of her blindness to race. She noted how the experience caused her to consider how she might still be blind to the role of race in her work with students more generally ("I know that I have things that could be considered, you know, racial or cultural"). But in the way Joyce concludes the story on a neat, self-assuring note ("If I think I'm doing something,

then I try to correct it”), she shows how averse she is to lingering on the possibility that she might *always* be blind to race in some way.

Other staff members who acknowledged the significance of race in their work with Centerville students made similar attempts to erase any lingering questions, doubts, or uncertainties they had about the effect of race on their teaching. Allison Gratch recognized that working in Centerville had the potential to show herself things about herself that she hadn’t seen before—like the possibility that she harbored “hidden prejudices.” But as soon as she raised that possibility in our interview, Allison immediately fell back on the discourse of colorblindness to reassure herself that race didn’t matter:

I was a little nervous, because I wasn’t sure how I was going to feel. Not so much how I was going to be received, but how was, you know, these ideas that I have about myself. When I come into the classroom, are they going to be challenged? Am I going to find hidden prejudices that I didn’t know, or am I going to find myself, you know, as open-minded as I thought. So, I’m pleased to announce (laughs) that I am as open-minded as I thought. And the kids are teaching me that. They’re teaching me that kids are kids everywhere.

At the same time, Allison explained how much more conscious she was of race when she returned to her majority-white middle-class community each night. She began by pointing out the deep and implicit racism that she had begun to see there, imagining how community residents would react if she brought Centerville students to town for a field trip:

I thought, well my, my goodness, I could just imagine if I brought my students on a field trip to my community. They would be very condescending. It would be one of those things where they go out of their way to show that they’re not prejudiced. To show that they’re not racist at all .... They want to go out of their

way to say “No, no, we’re not like that, we don’t pull out the white robes at night.” It’s like they don’t want to be racist. But they secretly are.

Then she noted her increased awareness of the explicit presence of racism among her friends:

I discovered too that I have friends that are *way* more racist than I ever thought that they were. And it’s like I have to find myself going, you know, I *really* don’t like it when you use that word, or, I really don’t like it when you refer to that group of people like that. I said, that’s your opinion, and that’s fine, but, you’re really making me uncomfortable with that word. And either they used it before and I was never aware of it, or I’m just hypersensitive now. And it’s been interesting ... that’s *their*, you know, my friends’ culture. Is to have that be okay. And they didn’t realize that I’m not okay with it, and I guess I never really have been, but just not so open about it (interview, 2-15-07).

In order for Allison to maintain her relationships with these friends, she needed to compartmentalize racism as simply an element of her friends’ “culture,” even as she distanced herself from that culture. What she could not do was explore the ways in which her associations with those friends, and her residence in a community full of what she described as closet racists, had affected her. She needed to maintain the belief that she could be a member of that community and a participant in those friendships without being affected by the many forms of racism that surrounded her.

Amber Sandstrom had a similar epiphany about the gaps between her friends’ racial views and her own. Unlike Allison, Amber moved to *excuse* her friends’ offensive comments, saying they weren’t racist, but an example of things that white people laugh at all the time. At the same time, Amber also recognized how easily she could be drawn into those jokes and the stereotypes that fed them:

I was telling a story about one of my students to a friend of mine, and my friend made a comment about the student's name, because it's a, an African American name, kind of a, a very different, like typi-, like, atypi-, like, typical like, black girl name? If you know what I mean. I'm being very stereotypical right now. Um, and my friend laughed about it, and I laughed about it with him. Um (3 second pause) and like, like looking back, I, I feel bad, it's like I was like falling into the, the stereotyping, and stuff. With him .... It was kind of one of those things that white people laugh at all the time. Like type things. Put that all in quotes (laughs).

Amber's anxiety about this story can be seen in her discourse—how she stuttered as she tried to say “typical black girl name,” how she paused to collect her thoughts, and how she asked me to put her comments all in quotes. These moves show her attempt to tell the story honestly in spite of her ambivalence about its implications and in spite of the risks that sharing it entailed.

When I asked Amber why she still remembered the incident, she paused for eight seconds. Then she said:

Well, it's like I feel bad that I laughed with him, but then I think about it and I'm like, most of the people that I'm friends with or hang out with have those same stereotypes or probably would have reacted the same way. But my friends aren't *racist* by any means. If those two statements don't contradict too much. Do you know what I mean, it's like, those are stereotypes that even people who are the most accepting of other cultures might still go along with. Does that make sense? (interview, 4-18-07).

Here Amber tries to both acknowledge the offensive quality of racial stereotypes about “black girl names” *and* distance herself and her friends from the possibility of racism (“But my friends aren't racist by any means”). Amber's discourse gives her away, though, when she makes hedging statements about the contradictory and nonsensical quality of her claims (“If those two statements don't contradict too much ... Does that



make sense?”). Those moments indicate that on some level, Amber knew she was caught in a contradiction. People who are not racist do not laugh at racist stereotypes.

Amber and Allison were just two of a number of white staff members who struggled to cope with the racism that surrounded them and, at the same time, function in Centerville. Such balancing acts were extremely difficult. Interactions in Centerville were so frequently underscored by racial tension, it's no wonder that white staff members grew anxious and defensive when talking about race. Even the most racially self-aware white staff members were sometimes taken by surprise when it came to racially-charged conflict. Knowing my interest in the topic of race, support staff member Andrea Lyons talked with me one day about her own entanglement in an unintentional racial conflict that had just developed with a fellow staff member.

### **Ethnographic Interlude: “Race trumps everything!”**

It's the end of the day, and I'm writing fieldnotes at the table in the back of the main office when support staff member Andrea Lyons stops by to check her mailbox. I ask how her recent field trip went. The field trip allowed ninth grade girls in a special mentorship program to meet their college mentors at a nearby university.

“It went well,” she says. “Now I'm working on organizing follow-up meetings here.” She wants to help the college students build lasting relationships with the high school girls, but she's struggling because the college students are afraid to visit Centerville neighborhoods.

She pauses. “You know, I've really been looking at myself in new ways this year.”

“How so?” I ask.

She begins to tell me about a racial conflict that arose in connection to the field trip, but she stops abruptly when another teacher walks up to use the copy machine. This black teacher, who has her back to us, is the very teacher Andrea had just started talking about. We listen as the machine begins to whirl. Andrea stands there frozen.

In order to help her extricate herself, I pack up my notes and we leave together. Once we’re far from the office, Andrea resumes her story, standing close to me and speaking in a voice so quiet, it’s almost a whisper.

“When I was planning the girls’ field trip, I asked for chaperones, and several people came to me immediately.” She lists the names of three white female teachers. “Then I bumped into Trina Gallagher, and she asked, ‘So who’s going on the field trip?’ I told her the names. ‘All white,’ she said. And walked away.” Trina is one of just a handful of black staff members in the building.

“I was so upset!” Andrea cries. “It had never occurred to me to consider race with the chaperones. I thought, ‘What do I do? Do I ask one of the white chaperones not to go?’” She looks around to make sure we’re still alone.

“So I asked Sylvia if she would go.” Sylvia Thacker is another one of the black staff members. “She said no. I thought, ‘Should I ask some of the others?’” We’re both mentally running through the short list of black female teachers. “It turned out Roz Nelson couldn’t go, so I was able to ask Roberta Worthy.” Roberta is black.

“I went up to Trina later and said, ‘You know, I just never thought about it.’ She seemed surprised. I was so mad at myself! I said, how could you not think of it? I could hear in her tone that it bothered her. She said, ‘I was just joking.’”

“But as soon as someone says that, you know it’s not a joke,” I reply. By now I’ve heard so many references to so-called jokes about race in this school, I always look for the subtext.

“Right,” Andrea says. “Otherwise, why would they say it?”

The following week, Andrea finds me writing notes in the cafeteria after lunch. She calls out to me from the open doorway, then walks over and shows me a sealed envelope with Trina’s name on the front. She tells me it’s a card she’s written to apologize about the chaperones. “I thought you’d be interested,” she says. “I struggled with the wording, but I figured it came from the heart.” She continues on towards the gym, where she hand-delivers the note to Trina.

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A few minutes later, teacher Kevin Shulty stops in to see me. He’s coming to U of M tonight to speak to a class of preservice teachers, and he wants to confirm that he’s talking about challenges that arise when white teachers work with black students. I explain that that’s just one part of our agenda—the class is concerned with any kind of cultural difference in the classroom. Last year our students thought we made the course too much about race.

“No!” he exclaims. “Race is the most important factor! Race trumps everything!” He starts pacing around. “It comes down to where you are on the continuum, from totally racist up here to colorblind down here.” He marks out a spectrum by raising and lowering his hand. “Don’t tell me you’re colorblind! There is no colorblind! Race is still a factor!”

It's not the first time we've had this conversation, but I never tire of listening to him. Our relationship was forged through talk about race, and we've been talking about race ever since.

"My very survival depends on my race," he continues. "If I'm driving through the wrong neighborhood, or the mountains of North Carolina at two in the morning, I don't want to become a statistic."

I recognize this story. His college-aged son was the one pulled over and questioned by North Carolina police in the middle of the night. He was driving back home to Michigan.

Kevin spins off more anecdotes. How his wife's colleagues in another building talk about blacks. How they respond to the behavior of white boys compared to black boys. How his white friend at the middle school tells cruel racial jokes.

"So new teachers come here, and all these media images of black youth, they're like a filmstrip in their mind." He pretends to be a new teacher reacting to Centerville students. "'See? They don't value education.' It confirms everything they've always heard. And the barriers go up. Pedro Noguera says that education is our only hope. But we can't fix it until we admit there's a problem. Race is a problem!"

"Nothing's going to change until white people get involved and say this can't go on. That's why it's so good that you, as a white person, as a doctoral candidate from the University of Michigan, are doing this," he says. "You can be a spark for the movement."

—Fieldnotes, 3-9-07 and 3-14-07

Though Andrea was deeply committed to racial justice, and though she spoke to me candidly on several occasions about the problem of racism in Centerville, she was still distinctly unprepared for Trina's negative reaction to a group of all-white chaperones. Like so many white staff members discussed in this chapter, Andrea was blindsided by race in the course of her attempt to do good work with Centerville students. Her angst, regret, and self-criticism were evident in her response to Trina's comment and in the actions she took to make amends. Trina may not have understood just how affected Andrea was by her mistake, given the tendency of Centerville staff members to suppress talk about race, but their exchange clearly had a powerful effect on Andrea. Perhaps Andrea's response also had an effect on Trina. To this day I don't know; I was too uncomfortable to ask.

Racial tension endured in Centerville in large part *not* through deliberate acts of malice, but through unwitting hurts and misunderstandings, and through the self-censorship that people—including me—engaged in. Andrea and Trina were participants in a much larger racial dynamic that was not of their own making. As members of the Centerville staff, however, their actions had the potential to add to racial tension or to diffuse it. Apologizing to Trina was a good first step on Andrea's part, but unless she and Trina were both to go forward with a greater consciousness of race and a greater commitment to talking about sources of racial tension, conflicts like the one over chaperones were likely to keep happening. Centerville staff members had the power to choose *how* to talk about race in their school, but also *whether* to talk about race at all. Toxicity was sustained in Centerville precisely because so many people chose *not* to talk about what bothered them most.

Kevin's comments on the very real relevance of race in his personal life and his professional work—spoken in the very same room, just moments after Andrea shared with me her attempts to make racial amends—illustrate the drastic differences between staff members when it came to consciousness of race. Though Andrea and Kevin were both racially conscious to some extent, Kevin *lived* his race consciousness every day, whereas Andrea could forget about race in some situations, only to be abruptly reminded of it later. Kevin could never forget race. His insistence that race dynamics would not change in Centerville—or in the larger society—until white people got involved points to the importance of Andrea's internal struggle. Her efforts to take responsibility for the unintended message that her choice of chaperones sent to staff members like Trina served as a first step toward bringing her internal struggle out in the open, something few Centerville staff members were willing to do. The longer I stayed in Centerville, the more I learned about the presence and the intensity of those struggles, for black and white staff members alike.

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Several weeks later I sat down to chat with Reggie Bridges during a rare moment of relative calm in the building. We began by comparing notes on the challenges the district was facing in the coming year: The school board had been debating for the past five months about whether to close a building due to their budget deficit, and they still hadn't made a decision. Administrative positions throughout the district were up in the air until the board hired a new superintendent, who would be the district's third in four years. Meanwhile, student enrollment continued to decline.

“But you know, that’s all right,” Reggie said. “I know where I want to be. And it’s here. This community gives us so much, and we give them so little in return. They send us their children. All they ask is that we give them the best possible education to prepare them for a quality life. And we’re not doing that. That’s why yesterday I brought up the notion that we need to have a conversation about why we’re here. I know the system’s broken,” he added. “But we have to start somewhere.”

Our talk turned to a professor at U of M we both knew and her work on the academic resilience of black students in urban schools.

“She’s invested in the things I think are important,” Reggie said. “And she’s pretty direct. She tells it like it is. I’m still learning to do that.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

“For a long time, I was detached here,” he said. “I held people at arm’s length. I was so conscious of being one of the only African American males in the building, I wasn’t sure I could do this. I thought, I can’t be a role model to these kids. And I can’t be anything more than a stereotype to the adults in this building. If I let them know who I really am and how I really live, they’ll never take me seriously.”

His words shocked me. I never had any idea that Reggie was so conscious of his racial identity in majority-black Centerville. But when I considered the majority-white staff, I saw him in a new light. I contemplated the ways in which he was vulnerable.

“Here, let me give you an example,” he said. “I like rap music. Not all rap music, but especially the stuff from the early to mid 90s—I like it. But I didn’t want anyone to know. They would think, he’s no different from the kids. But in a lot of ways, I *am* no different from the kids.”

I thought of all the times I had silently noted Reggie's appearance, his crisply pressed dress shirts, his silk ties, the close cut of his hair. I had never considered that there was a reason for it other than personal style, or that his style might be a kind of disguise.

"I couldn't be myself," he said. "I kept Reggie separate from Mr. Bridges. When a kid would come to me and say, 'This is what I did,' I couldn't say, 'I know, because I've experienced that too.'"

"You mean you were holding back in the way you responded because you wanted to keep the personal separate?" I asked.

"Exactly," he replied. "And I was not as effective as I could have been. So I've been learning over the past five years to bring more of myself into it. To be less detached, to channel my emotions, so in discussions of the achievement gap, or what goes on around here, I can bring more of my full self to the conversation.

"So that's my free therapy for today," he joked. He said the same thing after our interview in November.

I thanked him for sharing his story and his insights. Then I confided in him how hard it had been for me to ask so many people for interviews and to always be thinking about research, even in the most personal moments.

He spoke slowly and quietly. "All people want to be heard. And you've provided an amazing service to people here."

"I hope so," I said uncomfortably.



“It’s clarifying to take the time to reflect. We’re in a very isolating profession. Especially here. It’s good to be able to step back for a moment and talk to another person about it. You provide people with that opportunity.”

“Well, thank you,” I said, getting up and moving toward the door.

“I’m in a good place,” he replied, reaching for the mouse on his computer. “I’m okay with whatever happens. This is where I’m meant to be” (fieldnotes, 4-18-07).

## **Conclusion**

Though the majority of Centerville staff members claimed that race was not an issue in their school, when I stepped back to consider the cumulative effect of countless offhand remarks, private confessions, and personal testimonials about racially-charged interactions, it became clear that the landscape of the school was deeply and thoroughly racialized. Individual staff members denied that they were thinking about race, only to turn around and point out racial patterns in the school that bothered them. Veteran as well as beginning teachers read their students and each other in racial terms, even as they claimed to be colorblind. Through their individual and collective discourse moves, staff members revealed how intensely a school-wide shared awareness of race was driving their thoughts and interactions. The more individuals suppressed strong feelings about race, the more ingrained racial tension and racialized conflict became.

While many staff members were willing to acknowledge race as a factor in students’ seating patterns and friendship groups, few were willing to look for those same racial patterns in their course enrollments, grading practices, and discipline referrals. When confronted with evidence highlighting the exclusion of black students from upper

level courses and the disproportionate presence of black students on the suspension list, some staff members pretended not to see a pattern. Others naturalized the pattern by blaming the failures of black students on their lack of effort and the discipline problems on their lack of manners and self-control. Still others used claims that they were “offended” by the mere suggestion of a racial pattern in order to deflect or subvert explicit race talk. Insisting that they did not *see* race gave staff members a way to avoid becoming entangled in racially contentious conversations. Clinging to the notion that they didn’t see race also allowed teachers to believe that when they repeatedly clashed with or failed certain black students in the classroom—even students that did not have trouble with any other teacher—they were simply enforcing behavioral and academic standards. These strategies may have allowed staff members to get around direct discussions about race in the moment, but they ensured that racial tension would fester within individual relationships and the school as a whole.

The presence of enduring racial tension led staff members to divide themselves both personally and professionally into race-based factions. In part the staff split along racial lines, as white and black staff members consciously and deliberately constructed segregated social groups. However, some individuals formed friendship networks and workplace alliances according to shared racial ideology, which sometimes crossed racial lines. In general, racially-conscious staff members stuck together, as did staff members who denied the salience of race. The shared racial ideology within these groups ensured that individuals’ existing beliefs about race would be reinforced and that staff members would avoid having their views challenged by colleagues who saw things differently. In this way, staff members were able to hear what they wanted to hear and see what they

wanted to see when it came to race. Consequently staff members constructed radically different readings of racialized events in the school, which deepened existing polarization among groups and individuals.

Staff members who experienced direct racial conflicts with their colleagues emerged from those conflicts with a heightened consciousness of racial patterns in the building, and in some cases, with a greater willingness to publicly address racial issues and fight against racial inequality. But because most racial conflicts were left unresolved, staff members had to find ways to continue working together despite lingering feelings of anger, betrayal, and hurt. Private accounts of these conflicts revealed how deeply individual staff members felt the presence of race in their subsequent interactions, and how lasting the effects of racialized conflict could be. Because these conflicts had the potential to be so explosive, staff members learned to broach the subject of race with extreme caution. Individuals' reluctance to speak candidly about their experiences and struggles with race made it harder for like-minded people to find one another and harder for the staff as a whole to recognize and confront the racial patterns in their midst.

Glenn Singleton's visit was an attempt on the part of administrators to initiate a deliberate and sustained conversation about race. The intensity of staff members' resistance to Singleton showed just how threatening many individuals found such a conversation to be. The large number of negative responses to Singleton's talk showed staff members' strong need to cling to the belief that race was not a problem for the school or for them as individuals, despite strong evidence to the contrary. On the other hand, those staff members who were willing to take Singleton's ideas into consideration

indicated that in order to begin addressing race, they needed practical strategies for managing racial difference in the classroom. When Singleton was unable or unwilling to provide such strategies, some people emerged from their experience with him feeling *more* frustrated and *more* resistant to dealing with race. Despite that resistance, however, Singleton's visit did push a few individuals to begin grappling more openly with racial questions and dilemmas. The lack of sustained follow-up to Singleton's visit on an institutional level highlighted ongoing ambivalence about the risk of addressing race in Centerville and the difficulty of breaking out of an ingrained pattern of avoiding racial conversations.

Contrary to public appearances, many Centerville staff members *were* struggling privately with profound racial questions and racial dilemmas. However, unanswered questions about the role of race in classroom interactions were difficult for individuals to live with. In order to continue to function each day, some people chose to cope by blinding themselves to the presence of race in the school. From this standpoint, willful blindness to race was not an obstructionist stance as much as a survival mechanism. Even those staff members who were willing to think about race resisted acknowledging the extent to which their lives were entangled with and implicated in racist structures. Those staff members who began to recognize racist patterns in their home communities and personal friendships networks needed to find ways to excuse or somehow coexist with those racist views. Again, this was a matter of survival, since confronting racism had the potential to destroy friendships and undermine comfortable patterns of everyday life. In short, dealing directly with race posed a host of risks and threatened to disrupt not

only staff members' professional working relationships, but also their ability to maintain normalcy in their personal lives outside of school.

Had race-conscious colleagues *known* about their fellow staff members' efforts to grapple with race, individuals in both groups might have felt less isolated. Discomfort with talking about race not only kept the school immobilized; it kept individual staff members from articulating their enduring race-based questions and dilemmas. For some staff members, not talking about race was closely linked to the fear of saying the wrong thing and being perceived as racist. For other staff members, it was rooted in the fear of being attacked for bringing racial issues into the open. As a result, staff members of both races found ways to suppress or avoid race talk, including joking about the significance of race, pretending that they didn't realize certain situations were racial, and, in the context of this research study, asking for their racial views to be recorded off the record. As a researcher I had to decide on a moment-to-moment basis whether and how to probe into staff members' views about race once the subject of race came up. When staff members shared sensitive stories about their experiences with racism, I faced another set of decisions about what to do with such racially-charged data.

Several staff members let me know that going public with race was a way to have their frustrations and hurts recognized and acknowledged. The stories people told me privately, both in confidential interviews and in spontaneous day-to-day interactions, demonstrated just how much people had to say about race and racism in Centerville. What people lacked, however, was a feeling of trust that it was safe to bring more of their experiences, questions, and dilemmas forward. Time and again, race-conscious

individuals had to decide not just *how* to talk about race, but *whether* to bring it up at all. More often than not, people indicated to me that the risks were not worth the benefits.

Despite a host of obstacles, some staff members *were* able and willing to push through their fears and get to a different place when it came to race talk. While I know I was not privy to the full range of racial conversations that occurred in Centerville, I learned a great deal about the process of surfacing and examining race from members of the Charleston group. Through individual stories these group members told me, both in the moment and retrospectively, they exposed the slow, halting, and messy nature of the process of engaging with race. In doing so, they also identified the conditions that made a new kind of conversation possible. Because they learned to talk across racial lines, to surface race-based questions and dilemmas, and to *see* race in situations and places where they had not seen it before, members of the Charleston group were both challenged and changed by their interactions. Although seeing race did not solve the problem of toxicity, it did help members of the Charleston group to understand that problem in a new light. By sharing their revelation that school culture in Centerville was toxic, these staff members opened up a space for me to investigate just what was behind the divisiveness in Centerville, and just what hope there was for getting past it.

## CHAPTER FIVE CHANGING SCHOOL CULTURE

And so we started some issues on race. And there were some doors opened up where we became a little bit more comfortable .... And so we just worked on it, and we were safe to talk about our feelings .... If you could open some of those doors, where you can actually talk about things out loud, especially in a mixed group, it's actually very liberating. And that's what we wanted for our school. But I don't know. You can't reinvent Charleston. You can't reinvent the small group.

—Kate Seabrook

When the members of the Charleston group began a conversation about school culture, they did not plan to focus on race. But in the course of discussing their school's problems, group members could not get around the number of ways in which race came up in conversation. They noted that race was an unavoidable element in the academic achievement gap, which staff members were required to address as part of their school improvement plan under the terms of No Child Left Behind. They also noted how race loomed in the social landscape of the school, as seen in segregated staff friendship groups that inhibited the chances of meaningful whole-school discussion. While these racialized patterns were familiar, talking openly about the reasons for them was not, even among a group of teacher leaders who had voluntarily agreed to collaborate on school reform work at an out-of-state conference.

Only when race surfaced as a factor in the Charleston group's own *shared* experience did group members enter into a different, more personal, and more candid

conversation about the role of race in Centerville. Fraught though it was, that conversation sparked new insights for several members of the group, changing the way they understood each other and their school's problems. While their conversation did not eliminate the problem of toxicity, it did open up a space for group members to explore a subject that the staff as a whole had traditionally avoided. Discussing their personal experiences of both racist treatment and racial discomfort allowed group members to grow in their willingness to examine race in the context of the school reform effort as well as their private lives. Looking back, white group members in particular spoke candidly about the conversation as one that changed them personally and that they hoped would change their school.<sup>124</sup> At the time it occurred, however, the impact of the conversation was not so clear.

I knew something important had happened in Charleston when Sandra Altman invited me over to her house to talk just days after the group got back. Though I expected to hear more about the concept of school culture and how the group might expand on the work begun in Charleston with the rest of the staff, our conversation repeatedly circled back to race.

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<sup>124</sup> Of the five members of the Charleston group, three were white women (Sandra Altman, Tina Olsen, and Kate Seabrook), while two were black men (Reggie Bridges and Shaun Coleman). Although Sandra, Tina, and Kate each spoke candidly with me about her experience in Charleston in the context of individual interviews, neither Reggie nor Shaun mentioned the trip. There are at least two possible reasons for this. First, my interviews with Reggie and Shaun were slightly different than my interviews with the others, in that I interviewed Shaun early in the fall when the themes of the study were still taking shape and I was less skillful as an interviewer, and I interviewed Reggie on a typically hectic day where, after several interruptions, we had to cut the interview short. Had either of those interviews occurred at a different time, it's possible that the subject of Charleston would have come up. On the other hand, it's possible that the experience in Charleston was simply less significant for Reggie and Shaun than it was for the white group members. As with the subjects of race and Glenn Singleton, I let participants take the lead in bringing up Charleston because I was leery of *imposing* significance on these topics through my interview questions. Because I don't know how Reggie and Shaun experienced Charleston, my discussion of the event will focus only on the impact the trip had on Sandra, Tina, and Kate.



**Ethnographic Interlude: “There was an incident in Charleston.”**

“They don’t want to make it racial,” Saundra begins, offering me a seat at her kitchen table. “Instead, they want to focus on socioeconomic issues.”

I reach into my folder and pull out a sheet of paper to take notes. Because Saundra and I have sat together in so many meetings for the school-university partnership, she’s used to my note-taking habit.

“They have conflicting opinions, despite being on the same page,” she continues. “They’re not sure whether they should share data showing there’s a problem right away. It could be seen as negative.”

“What kind of data would they share?” I ask.

“Well, there’s the marching band. It’s smaller now than it used to be, and it’s almost all black.”

I’m surprised that this is the first example that comes to mind for her, but it’s certainly not the first time I’ve heard about the problem of Centerville’s segregated school clubs and athletic teams.

“We want to use the school culture team as a vehicle,” Saundra explains. “We don’t want this to steer us away from our overall school improvement plan. Central office has been breathing down our neck, putting pressure on us to raise our math and reading scores, as they should. We see this as a means to an end. But it’s not just how you deal with kids. It’s how administration relates to staff, how staff relates to administration, how staff relates to staff. Have you ever noticed in staff meetings, how the black teachers all sit together? Kids notice these things.”

I tell her I have, and I mention how Beverly Daniel Tatum's book takes up the same topic concerning kids in the cafeteria.<sup>125</sup>

Saundra walks over to the stove to make us a pot of tea. "There was an incident involving Reggie in Charleston," she says, pausing at the sink to fill the kettle. "At one of the work sessions, a facilitator asked Reggie to read aloud, as teachers are often asked to do in these situations. Afterwards someone commented on Reggie's oral reading ability, saying how well he read aloud. And Reggie took offense to that. He said the only reason she commented was because he's black!"

I nod, agreeing that there was very likely a racial subtext in the interaction. Saundra shakes her head and places the kettle on the burner.

"Then I guess I'm naïve!" she says, leaning back against the sink. "In a room full of educated people, as opposed to UAW people ... " Sheepishly, she admits how stereotypical she's being by denigrating union workers. "I just had higher expectations from my colleagues," she explains. "I did not want to believe that in that setting, that inference was being made."

The water starts to boil. I wait quietly while she fills our cups and brings them over to the table.

"Reggie took it to us that night, and to the whole group the following day. Naturally people said they never had any intention. They would have done the same thing to anybody! It made everyone uncomfortable in our group, especially Kate, Tina, and me. We were so cautious after that statement."

I talk about how hard it is for white people to see these things, and how the last thing a white person wants is to be accused of being racist.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> See Tatum (1997).

“I sure won’t be telling any more white woman stories,” she says. “That only makes it worse. But I went to high school in Wilmont! It was the post-Civil Rights era. 30% of our students were students of color, and every club was racially diverse. I had so many friends of color, good friends, too! Those kids weren’t uncomfortable!” Looking down at the table, she slowly stirs her tea.

I don’t say anything.

“Well, maybe they were,” she admits softly. “But we were all involved in everything! There were lots of African Americans on yearbook and newspaper.”

“So why not tell any more white woman stories?” I ask.

“Because people will say, you can’t understand, you haven’t walked in my shoes,” she replies. “We told Reggie, we had no intentions of offending. He said it wasn’t *about* intentions.”

“It never is,” I say.

Saundra is still thinking about her high school. “I could contact my old classmates and ask, were there these issues? We did things out of school together. What didn’t I know? What didn’t I see? What wasn’t I conscious of?”

She hesitates before answering her own question. “A lot.”

We talk about what should happen next in Centerville. “I don’t want it to become a racial issue,” she repeats, revealing that this isn’t just the group’s opinion, it’s her own. “We want our kids to feel empowered. We want to create kids who believe they can succeed. But in order to do that, we need parents who think school is important.”

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<sup>126</sup> See Tatum (1992), Blum (2002).

She asks if I've heard about an incident that happened at school that afternoon. After some kind of classroom disruption, a teacher kicked a student out of class for the rest of the year. At the end of the day, people in the office were all talking about it.

“There are so many problems, and we don't know how to tackle them,” she concedes. “So we try to keep the kids in their seats and hope another day goes by without confrontation.” Pushing back her chair, she stands up and reaches across the table to take my empty cup and saucer. “At the end of October, a kid is kicked out for the rest of the year. What is that breaking point? And what is the damage done to that child?”

—Fieldnotes, 10-24-05

Saundra's interactions with Reggie in Charleston clearly left her feeling unsettled. Despite repeated protests that neither she nor the Charleston group wanted to make school culture work “racial,” race preoccupied her throughout our conversation. Not only did the trip to Charleston reinforce Saundra's awareness of racial division within the school; race also took her by surprise at the conference itself. When Reggie protested the patronizing treatment he received at the hands of conference facilitators, Saundra was forced to revise her reading of what might have otherwise seemed like a harmless comment. Reggie wanted Saundra and others to grapple with the possibility that race had shaped—and lowered—their expectations of him. Had they thought Reggie could read well orally, they would have seen no need to praise his performance.

By insisting that no one meant Reggie any harm, Saundra attempted to smooth over the conflict and repair Reggie's relationship with the larger group. This was a necessary move if they were to complete their collective work together. At the same

time, Sandra's attempts to defend and excuse the facilitator's comment ("Naturally people said they never had any intention. They would have done the same thing to anybody!") served to turn the focus away from Reggie and toward the emotional lives of Sandra and her white colleagues. But Sandra's story didn't stop there. Her comments indicate that she was truly shaken by Reggie's remarks ("We were so cautious after that statement .... We told Reggie, we had no intentions of offending. He said it wasn't *about* intentions"). In response she grew anxious, inhibited, and wary of subsequent group conversations.

Though one might expect that Sandra would reject further reflection on race ("I sure won't be telling any more white woman stories"), internally there was much more going on. Reggie's comment caused Sandra to begin cycling through memories of other experiences with other black people, dating all the way back to her friendships in high school. If she had missed the racial significance of the facilitator's comment about Reggie, Sandra wondered, what else might she have missed throughout the course of her life? In the moment, she processed her conflicted reaction by toggling back and forth between assertions that things had been fine racially during high school ("I had so many friends of color ... those kids weren't uncomfortable!") and concessions that maybe there were racial elements she had not understood ("What didn't I know? What didn't I see?").

Working in Centerville made it impossible for Sandra to put aside her questions and anxieties about race. In a racially-mixed school environment, race came up every day. Though it would have been easy for Sandra to have joined the majority of her white colleagues in colorblind avoidance of race, ultimately she made a different choice. Here too, Reggie was instrumental. Because Sandra and Reggie were collaborators on

school improvement work, they continued talking and interacting long after the trip to Charleston. Only at the end of the following school year when Sandra and I finally sat down for an interview did I learn the extent to which their shared work had affected her attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions toward race. All I had to do was ask her to talk about school culture.

Sandra defined school culture by bringing up issues that were strikingly similar to issues I'd heard Shaun Coleman and Reggie raise. Like them, Sandra emphasized the importance of perception and how adults' worldviews infuse their work in the classroom:

When I think about school culture I think about, you know, the broader sense of what culture means ... what everybody brings to the building. Their, their background. Their, uh, their education. Their race. Um, their religion ... their ethics. Values. All of that is what we bring to education. And what we bring ... directly influences our perceptions and our actions and the way we work. So to me, that's, that's what we're talking about here.

Sandra emphasized that she hadn't always thought this way. "In all honesty, it took me a while to get to this point," she said. "In fact, it took me a very long while. In the early part of my career ... I really didn't *think* about cultural issues. I didn't learn until later that I—" She sighed. "How do I want to say this. I thought that I had done everything I needed to do."

Sandra explained that her first shifts in consciousness occurred in relation to social class, and they predated the school culture team's work in Charleston:

I was conscious about small, petty things in the beginning. I was conscious of how I dressed. How much jewelry I wore to work. Where I went on vacation. What I talked about. It started out on that level. And then we had a teacher here, several years ago, who ... um, did the opposite. And kids would tell me how

uncomfortable that made them feel. They felt very disenfranchised, you know, just couldn't, didn't relate. They were always feeling that a judgment was being made of them.

I recognized this account. Sandra had told me the same story during my first semester of fieldwork in Centerville when she was advising me about how to prepare our university students to be classroom tutors (fieldnotes, 9-7-04).<sup>127</sup>

When it came to race, however, Sandra explained that her consciousness developed much more slowly. "I was either blind or I wasn't aware," she said. "And that I'm not even sure of yet. I mean it's, it's an ongoing process." Though she pointed to the work in Charleston as a catalyst in her development, she emphasized that she was still trying to figure things out where race was concerned. "A lot of that originated when we took that one trip, you know, to South Carolina, and I had that conversation with Reggie ... I just didn't *get* a lot of it, I don't think, until then. I'm not sure I still do .... I still have an awful lot to learn. An awful lot."

I asked what it was about the conversation in Charleston that was so pivotal. Retrospectively, Sandra did not even mention the conflict with Reggie that had upset her so much at the time. Instead she focused on the impact of having Reggie point out racial patterns to her at the high school, coupled with the powerful effect listening to him talk about a lifetime of experiences being read and judged racially, and what that might imply about the experience of black males in Centerville:

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<sup>127</sup> Sandra went on to explain how, even as she adapted to the Centerville context, working in the district entailed daily movement between different social worlds that she experienced as psychologically jarring: "I used to kind of actually joke about how my life was so different outside of this building that I sometimes felt schizophrenic. That between the kids that I worked with, my associations at school, and then my associations outside of school, and my own private social life, there was such a diversity, that, to be honest with you, very many times I felt (3 second pause) I-, who is this person? (laughs) I was Centerville by day, and I think I can say this to you and I hope you understand. And I was Spring Meadow Country Club by night" (interview, 6-13-07).

Mostly it centered around racial issues. And Reggie's observation of the, especially his observation of the, the treatment of black males in the building. And so our conversation really focused on that. And then his own upbringing, his, his own personal upbringing, you know, he shared a lot of that with me. You know, his, his background and how he has been perceived, you know, by others. And I guess the conversation just took off from that. I'd not paid attention to some of those things in our building. Again, I don't know if I just closed the door, or ... I didn't think about those things.

Saundra emphasized that despite Reggie's testimonials and repeated observations, it still took her a very long time to *see* the degree to which race was shaping—and limiting—the experience of black students. “It started with an observation. Or a handful of observations. Just pointing, pointing out incidents to me,” she explained. “I could look at data and I knew kids that were failing, but I didn't totally put the package together.” Saundra's account demonstrates the way in which she and so many other Centerville teachers could simultaneously see and *not see* the impact of race on teaching and learning in the building.

Because of her years of work with Reggie, however, it eventually became impossible for Saundra not to notice the patterns he was pointing out to her. “We are really looking at *a* specific group of kids. And how they are constantly being, they're failed, they're sent out of the classroom, you know, the discipline approach, the whole nine yards,” she said. “I'm not trying to make this interview about Reggie,” she added, “but you know, he's really kind of my mentor in this area.” Once more, in the end, she placed the emphasis in her story on *seeing*. “I could look at those things, but ...” She paused. “I didn't, I didn't see it clearly ... for what it was” (interview, 6-13-07).<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Saundra's narrative here suggests that the evolution of her thinking was linear and smooth, but in reality her experiences grappling with race were marked by conflict and tension throughout much of her work with



Kate Seabrook and Tina Olsen provided slightly different versions of the conversation in Charleston and its aftermath. In separate interviews, however, each of their accounts also circled back to the powerful effect of hearing Reggie raise the issue of race and speak personally about his experiences being read racially in the world. For Kate, the lesson was visceral. When she and a different group of colleagues went to a bar with Reggie at a conference in Nashville the summer before their trip to Charleston, Reggie was treated differently than Kate and the other teachers. Seeing him being discriminated against in the bar made it impossible for her and her white colleagues to ignore the role that race was playing in their group. “We started a conversation because we went to some bars, and Reggie was looked at as, you don’t belong here. In Nashville ... Like we were in some redneck bars, and I remember thinking, ‘Well I don’t really fit in here, either.’ But, I’m white, and I do fit in. Reggie got looks. Like, ‘Who do you think you are? Coming into this bar?’ And then, so we started some issues on race.”

The experience of seeing Reggie experience racial discrimination created a space in the group for people to broach the topic of race in ways they might not have wanted or needed to otherwise. Kate explained how at first, their conversation was a matter of

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Reggie and the Charleston group. Four months after she returned from Charleston, Sandra spoke far more equivocally than she does in the above quote about the role of race in school culture work and about divergent thinking among group members. “People are going in different directions,” she complained. “They think different things are important. For some, it’s a racial thing, but if you look at data on out-of-school suspensions and failure rates, it doesn’t support that. Maybe I’m naïve, but I say we don’t understand the culture of poverty.” She added that the abundance of white, middle-class women on the teaching staff was not the source of problems in school culture. “Even our newest teachers deal pretty well,” she said. “Maybe a minority teacher would tell me I’m crazy. I know Reggie feels strongly about it. The issue is not the language that we use. It’s not having high enough standards. That’s a problem in people’s subconscious. The issue is so big, I don’t know” (fieldnotes, 2-22-06). Sandra’s thinking here is powerful for what it demonstrates about the influence of different discourses on her understanding of the school’s problems. At the same time she denies the significance of race and the impact of language on patterns of interaction in the building, she also acknowledges the influence of “people’s subconscious” on the standards they set for students. In this moment, Sandra has not made the connection between adults’ beliefs about race and class, the language they use to speak to and about students, and the academic standards that these forms of thinking and believing produce, but the pieces are all present in her mind.

white group members gaining the courage to raise questions. “And there were some doors opened up where we became a little bit more comfortable, asking questions, you know, like, ‘A student said nigger in my classroom. Can I tell them to not say that? As a white woman, do I have the right?’” Reggie encouraged these questions and told group members they could rely on him when it came to developing greater racial knowledge. “He was saying that I should use him as my black resource,” Kate laughed. “But he was like, ‘You have the right, you know, that is a derogatory term. And they just don’t realize it.’ Like these students don’t realize, it’s used so commonly, they don’t realize its roots ... And so I have the right.”

For Kate, the precedent of a previous conversation about race made it easier to begin a conversation in Charleston: to her it felt like a continuation of work that had already begun. Without mentioning anything about the incident between Reggie and the group facilitator, Kate explained how the group was able to shift into addressing race in the context of problems at their school. “And then we went to Charleston, and after a few drinks, the doors started getting open again ... so we started talking about the achievement gap and why does it exist. Isn’t some of the fault on the kids? You know, we were just able to be *honest*.” Kate acknowledged the personal risk involved in discussing race, especially when white group members’ questions might reveal ignorance or insensitivity. “A lot of times, well, a white person just doesn’t feel comfortable discussing issues about black people, due to the fact that they just don’t want to come off as seeming racist.” She emphasized that in this particular group, however, she was able to reach a point where the risk was tolerable because of a deeper feeling of security and trust. “We were safe to talk about our feelings,” she said (interview, 1-24-07).

Tina, like Sandra, framed her experience of the Charleston conversation in terms of learning to see. But for her too, seeing began in the context of listening to Reggie talk about his life experiences. “When we went to South Carolina, we just had a lot of conversations within our group that were really eye-opening to me. Especially hearing, I guess, what Reggie had to say.” Reggie’s stories allowed Tina to see the world, if only for a moment, through a different pair of eyes. “He talked about his childhood growing up, his own personal experiences as a black man in this society, and, you know, some of the anger that he’s had ... and I understood what he was saying.” But it wasn’t stories alone that prompted Tina to rethink her understandings and reconsider her views when it came to race and education. Reggie also helped Tina to make a very clear connection between his adult reflections on race and the ways her black students might be feeling in the classroom. “I was able to understand from him because he’s a very, you know, he’s an adult,” she laughed. “He can explain things ... He was not afraid to communicate things that a teenager in your classroom would never tell you, a little bit about how some of our students might be feeling. And that really helped me.”

Talking about race with Reggie caused Tina to rethink some of her fundamental assumptions about the relationship between poverty and race in education. She noted how she, like so many others in Centerville, had focused on poverty to the *exclusion* of race:

I had thought a lot about poverty being a big factor in student success. I think that I kind of always thought in my mind that ... the reason that more black students have trouble than white students is because of the poverty, not because of the race issue. And I think in South Carolina I first started to think about maybe that’s not true. Maybe it is the race issue. Because of talking to Reggie and hearing what

he had to say, more than anything else ... he really explained things in a different way that I hadn't thought of before.

Here the influence of Ruby Payne's work is strongly apparent. Tina had been *taught* to think that poverty was the biggest factor in student success through her school's relentless focus on Ruby Payne in professional development workshops. The discourses that circulated in Centerville about the culture of poverty further reinforced Payne's message. Tina's account of her interactions with Reggie shows how *gradually* a person's consciousness may shift in relation to race ("In South Carolina I first started to think ... maybe it is the race issue"). Instead of provoking a sudden transformation or epiphany, Reggie presented Tina with an idea that she had to think about for a long time before she could begin to change her position.

Thinking about Reggie's experiences and the role of race in Centerville was not easy for Tina. In fact, taking a new look at her work in relation to race unsettled her views on several levels:

I'm kind of a really idealistic person in some ways ... I tend to think, you know, I don't judge my students by what race they are, so I guess in a perfect world, we wouldn't need to consider race ... But we're not in a perfect world, and the bottom line is, we know racism still exists in society even if we want to try and claim that we're exempt from it. There's always going to be certain judgments that people make based on race about each other. And I guess I was really struggling with that as a teacher.

Like so many white teachers in Centerville, if Tina was going to consider the role of race in her daily interactions with students, she was also going to have to consider the role of race in the way she herself lived and interacted in the world. Much as she might want to "try and claim [she was] exempt from it," *racism*, as well as race, was a part of her—as it

is all of us—by virtue of living in a racist society. Tina’s acknowledgement of the active struggle involved in reexamining her views is instrumental when it comes to considering what it would take for other teachers to engage in similar growth and self-questioning. Also important is Tina’s acknowledgement that she did not withdraw from the conversation, but instead, she kept coming back and working with colleagues like Saundra, Kate, and Reggie on difficult concepts: “I think I have chosen to put myself in situations where I can think about these things and explore those issues, and there’ve been several opportunities for me to do that, and think more about it” (interview, 12-1-06).

### **Lessons from the Charleston group**

Though the Charleston group tried and failed to bring their conversation about race to the school as a whole, the experiences of individual group members suggest that such a conversation was not impossible for their colleagues. While traveling to Charleston did provide time for discussion and space for group members to get some distance on their school’s problems, time and location were not the most important factors in the group’s experience. Instead, having the opportunity to talk across racial lines was far more significant. As examples from previous chapters show, talking across racial lines in Centerville could sometimes be disastrous. For a variety of reasons, however, the Charleston group had a different experience. Their experience is instructive for understanding the conditions as well as the *process* by which a group of colleagues grew in their willingness to grapple with the influence of race in their lives and in their school.

When white group members listened to the racist treatment Reggie had experienced at various points throughout his life, and then when they witnessed racist treatment of him firsthand at a professional conference, they were challenged on a far more personal level to enter into serious reflection about the role of race in their lives and the lives of others. Both Sandra and Tina acknowledged that they struggled with feelings of discomfort and resistance in the process. Reflection on Reggie's story forced them to reconsider their own experiences and ask themselves difficult questions about their prior beliefs and assumptions. At the same time, coming to an understanding of how race had shaped Reggie's life was necessary in order for them to begin examining race on an institutional level in Centerville. Being able to move *gradually* from reflections on the personal to examinations of the institutional was an important element in their learning.

While Sandra's experience began with uncomfortable racialized conflict, her role in the school improvement process required her to keep coming back to ongoing work with her fellow group members. This gave her the opportunity to layer new conversations on top of old ones and in essence, continually revisit and revise her views on race. This long view on the subject proved to be vital to her growth: she explained that it took numerous and repeated interactions with Reggie before she could *see* the significance of race in the school data that he showed her, and even at the end of her third year working with him on school improvement, she was *still* in the process of sorting out what she had learned. Their ongoing collaboration allowed Sandra to weather difficult moments without giving up on the process. Tina also indicated that the conversation in

Charleston served to raise initial questions in her mind about race, but it took much longer for her to begin revising her views of what was going on in the school.

For Kate, Reggie's stories opened up a space where she could ask questions about race that she had previously suppressed and do so without destroying her relationships with valued colleagues. In contrast to Sandra and Tina, Kate's account points to the value of engaging in difficult interpersonal work away from school where, "after a few drinks," doors would open. Going to Charleston created a more personal space for conversation with colleagues, which in turn created the conditions for a more personal form of conversation. Talking on a personal level, while initially threatening for some individuals, did help group members to establish a sense of closeness and trust in the long run. The interpersonal understanding that developed within the group also helped to provide a stronger foundation for the challenging work they would continue to be engaged in.

These combined accounts suggest that Reggie's openness to his white colleagues' questions, combined with his acceptance of the gradual nature of their learning, were key elements in group members' ability to work together. At the same time, however, my interviews and interactions with Reggie revealed that on other occasions he struggled to manage his frustration with colleagues who neither saw him in his own light nor understood the critiques he was making of conditions in the school. Reggie was not responsible for facilitating the growth of individuals in the Charleston group or anyone else in the school, but in these and other cases, he was clearly a catalyst for it.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Although I am wary of creating an account that heroicizes Reggie, I do see him as central to the growth that Sandra, Tina, and Kate experienced. At the same time, Reggie let me know that he too was learning

As much as Kate emphasized the need to feel safe and comfortable in discussions of race, the story of the Charleston group shows that some individuals will probably always experience moments of insecurity and discomfort when it comes to interracial dialogue around racial issues, especially participants who are reflecting on the significance of race for the first time. Members of the Charleston group were helped by Reggie's reassurance that it was okay not to know things. They were also helped by the opportunity to continue working together over a long period of time.<sup>130</sup> Although the experience of interpersonal conflict with Reggie dominated Sandra's account in the immediate aftermath of the Charleston trip, when she told the story a year and a half later, the element of conflict had fallen out of her story almost entirely. This form of narrative revision<sup>131</sup> is extremely significant, since fear of conflict underscored so many

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how to talk about race and how to manage his emotions during conversations with white middle-class colleagues. In the end, however, my portrait of Reggie is less nuanced than I would like simply because I did not get as detailed an account of the Charleston group's work from Reggie as I did from the others.

<sup>130</sup> Here with regard to time, I'm referring to the Charleston group's willingness to sustain their conversation over months and years. But Kate also noted that when it came to the group's conversations at any given after-school meeting, there was never *enough* time. In fact, the time constraints of those meetings worked against the group's efforts to resume meaningful conversation: "It's like, whenever we would meet, we would have to say, 'Okay, where were we?' ... Even once a month is really not enough if you're trying to talk about and handle some really hard issues ... The days where we got to stuff were on half days and full days [for professional development meetings]. Where we got to really discuss ... We started coming up with an action plan, but we never really, it was like we'd just [get] into the discussion and just get it going, in our small group ... which takes a while to get there, to be safe enough to start really discussing hard issues, and then we're like, 'Okay, we've got to bring this to the staff,' and then it would be like, *ding!* You know, the day's over. So that's the lack of time. And I think that happens in a lot of things in education, you know, you have these big ideas, but to implement them, it takes time, and when are we going to get that time" (interview, 1-24-07).

Shaun Coleman added that the problem of a lack of time prevented otherwise well-intentioned teachers from doing the interpersonal work they knew they needed to do: "We have a huge time deficit here. People are exhausted, people are frustrated ... and I think people in those situations are a lot less likely to say, yeah, I'll stay after for an extra hour and a half and do a book study so that I can understand my students better. It's what we need to do, it's what we owe the kids that come here, but it's not what we've done yet ... We work hard, but I don't think we always work smart. And our kids are the ones that are losing out" (interview, 11-3-06).

<sup>131</sup> Mishler (2004) discusses how retellings of the same narrative event inevitably vary. Illustrating his argument with an analysis of the 1972 film *Betty Tells Her Story* (dir. Liane Brandon), Mishler argues that the contrasting accounts Betty provides of a narrative event do not require a viewer to regard one as less "true" than the other. "We might instead view them as representing two versions of her, neither one more or less true than the other," Mishler writes. "Each person has multiple perspectives on the same event, and



Centerville staff members' comments to me about race and, as a result, diminished their willingness to engage in racial dialogue. Sandra's experience shows that it is possible for memories of conflict and resistance to be replaced by deeper feelings of appreciation, gratitude, and self-efficacy. Her account also shows that personal growth around race is far more likely to have an inconclusive quality than the mark of transformation or epiphany, and staff members who admit what they *don't* know are the most likely to learn and change.<sup>132</sup>

### **Widening the conversation in Centerville**

Members of the Charleston group were not the only ones thinking deeply about the problems they faced at Centerville High School. The extended interactions I had with staff members throughout the building revealed that many people were thinking about the complexity of their work with low-income and minority students and the dilemmas inherent in that work. When Jimmy Wolfe noted that the staff didn't talk about the things that really mattered, when Roz Nelson wondered about the implications of teaching low-income and minority students "middle-class values," and when Wendy Swensen talked about stereotypes her brain fought with, each signaled an awareness of the profound

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the one that comes into play depends on variations in contexts, audiences, and intentions, that is, on how one positions oneself within that set of circumstances" (p. 116, 118). For another example of how the same story can be told in more than one way, see Wolf (1992).

<sup>132</sup> Although the Charleston group's work began a year before Glenn Singleton visited Centerville, their experiences talking about race do closely resemble what Singleton (2006) calls "courageous conversations about race," and they lend credence to his approach. In his "field guide for achieving equity in schools," Singleton urges participants in courageous conversations to adhere to four conditions, which include staying engaged, experiencing discomfort, speaking your truth, and expecting and accepting non-closure (p. 58). Singleton also emphasizes the importance of speaking personally about one's own racial experiences (p. 74), considering multiple racial points of view (p. 106), establishing interracial dialogue (p. 119), and examining the role of whiteness in the problem being addressed (p. 182). Apart from examining whiteness, the Charleston group adhered to each of these principles and made significant progress in developing a shared racial consciousness, which raises questions about what might have happened had Singleton done more work in Centerville, or if someone like Reggie had actively taken up Singleton's approach with the rest of the staff.

challenges the staff faced in their attempts to fairly and equitably meet the educational needs of Centerville students.

Recognizing the complexity of their shared work was an important first step if staff members were to take on the task of changing toxic school culture. Fortunately, Jimmy, Roz, and Wendy were not alone in thinking this way. In my role as an ethnographer, I was able to see that people throughout the building—veterans and beginners alike—were raising questions, articulating dilemmas, and pointing out things they did not know when it came to how best to proceed with their work in Centerville.<sup>133</sup> Though staff members might not have realized it, these moments of uncertainty offered an important opportunity for learning. By acknowledging what they did not know, staff members revealed an implicit understanding that there were no easy solutions to the complex problems the school faced. And yet by acknowledging complexity and uncertainty, staff members were unwittingly opening themselves up to the possibility of meaningful dialogue that could potentially lead them to the same kinds of personal and professional growth experienced by members of the Charleston group.

If more staff members had publicly admitted what they did not know about managing and responding to social and cultural difference in the classroom, they would

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<sup>133</sup> Previous examples may suggest that white staff members alone were the ones struggling with questions and dilemmas, but black staff members also struggled to make sense of what appeared to be raced and classed dimensions of student behavior. Sonia Huddleston, a black student teacher from the same teacher education program as Amber Sandstrom and Linda Spencer, wondered in an interview what to make of the “sassy” conversational style of girls in Centerville. As she described the problem (and she did frame it as a problem), she first theorized that “loud talk” (cf. Fordham, 1993; Lei, 2003) was a racial practice, and then she speculated that it was a reflection of social class. Finally she gave up and conceded that she didn’t know how to read it: “Once I started here, I didn’t really have many problems with students as a whole, but like I noticed that the girls’ kind of style of, um, I don’t know .... If I say something to them that they need to, you know, change behavior, sit in this seat or something like that, it just seems like .... just kind of with the girls, that they, they put on a little bit of a front, even if they can be sweet and all that, it seems like that they’re put into this role of being, you know, a little bit sassy or a little bit, you know, well, I’m going to talk back .... I don’t know if it’s necessarily just African American culture but like, I know that, um, no, I wouldn’t say that ... it seems like more so like ... I don’t want to say like it’s, you know, related to like, low income or anything like that, but just kind of, I don’t know” (interview, 4-19-07).

have increased their chances of finding others to join with them in exploring these challenges. Publicly admitting uncertainty<sup>134</sup> was one of the conversational moves that helped the Charleston group get started in its work, but too many other staff members lacked assurance that any good would come from making a similar move themselves. Because conflict was endemic in Centerville, staff members' reluctance to go public with their questions was understandable. However, if staff members had known how many others were grappling privately with ongoing dilemmas, they might have felt a greater willingness to risk articulating dilemmas of their own.

Similarly, it was striking from an ethnographic perspective to discover how many staff members had a critical perspective on the school's problems, despite the overriding pattern of deficit talk in the building. In fact, some of the same staff members who engaged in deficit talk about students would then turn around and point out problems with the performance of adults in the district.<sup>135</sup> While these staff members weren't

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<sup>134</sup> Cochran-Smith (1995b) goes a step further to argue for the value of uncertainty as an ongoing *stance* in discussions of racial and cultural difference. In her work as a teacher educator focusing on issues of race and teaching, she writes, "I have become certain only of uncertainty about how and what to say, whom and what to have student teachers read and write, about who can teach whom, who can speak for or to whom, and who has the right to speak at all about the possibilities and pitfalls of promoting a discourse about race and teaching in pre-service education" (p. 546). She writes that as beginning teachers construct knowledge about race and teaching, the process "was more akin to building a new boat while sitting in the old one, surrounded by rising waters. In this kind of construction process, it is not clear how or if the old pieces can be used in the new 'boat,' and there is no blueprint for what the new one is supposed to look like. It is also not clear whether the new boat will float, hold the weight of its builder, or hold back water. And of course, as one is trying to build the new boat, one is stuck inside the old one, struggling to negotiate tricky waters, not to mention rapids, hidden rocks, and unpredictable currents" (p. 553). I want to extend Cochran-Smith's discussion by arguing that the uncertainty she describes regarding issues of race is a necessary part of discussions about class as well, and about any interaction between people who are separated by forms of social and cultural difference in this stratified society.

<sup>135</sup> This pattern occurred even during interviews where I had extreme difficulty getting participants to talk. For example, immediately after my interview with support staff member Erika Lindberg, I judged our interaction to be a disaster. No matter how I framed my questions, I couldn't get Erika to elaborate or reflect on any aspect of her experience working in Centerville. To make matters worse, each time our conversation hit a wall, Erika would pause and yawn loudly. This happened three times. Our interview was also interrupted when she stopped talking to take a personal call on her cell phone. From an objective standpoint, I knew the problems with the interview were not entirely because of me: for over a year, Erika had given me unsolicited updates on her ongoing efforts to find a new job and get out of Centerville

presenting fully-developed institutional critiques, they were thinking in more than one way about the school's problems. The ability of these staff members to present multifaceted explanations of school failure demonstrates that people's thinking could be influenced by more than one discursive ideology, and it reinforces the idea that discourse use is both patterned and inconsistent. Discursive inconsistency also presented a space of opportunity in Centerville: if staff members could understand their school's problems in more than one way, then they could also learn to look for the complicated interconnections between students' low skills, administrators' lack of vision, and staff members' resistance to collaboration instead of simply blaming low-income and minority students for not valuing education. Again, dialogue could have helped to tip the balance for people, strengthening their ability to draw on critical discourses and sharpening their awareness of the damage done by deficit discourses.

If meaningful conversation was what was lacking in Centerville—whether in staff meetings, at lunch, or in professional development workshops—taking a more conscious

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(fieldnotes, 2-22-07, 5-2-07). Even so, her yawns and distraction made me feel tense and ineffective as an interviewer.

And yet despite these obstacles, when I examined the transcript of our interview two years later, I could see that Erika's forms of talk were marked by the same conflicting interpretations of Centerville's problems that surfaced in other interviews. On the one hand, Erika believed that Centerville students and families did not value education: "Kids are really not prepared, they don't come with a whole set of skills that you might see in Ann Arbor or Wilmont or Anchorage or Middletown, you know. Where education is valued, has outward value, and is critical to success ... Kids don't see it because the families don't see the value of it. They don't realize the connections for success that you get out of education." At the same time, Erika recognized that dynamics in the school were partially responsible for students' low skills and poor performance: "There isn't really a strong sense of direction, where anybody's going. So there's no real vision, I think .... There isn't really a driving force of, you know, where do we expect Centerville to be? What is our goal and our mission? You know, what do we want to produce?"

Erika also realized that feelings of vulnerability arose out of antagonistic staff interactions and prevented colleagues from helping each other: "People sort of keep to their own areas .... They're not really open and sharing .... There isn't, you know, collaboration going on. There's a lot of stuff that High Schools That Work suggested that we never followed through on that would have created a better culture ... Even going to look at other people do lessons, and giving feedback, and sharing. Many people aren't that open to that, you know. They don't want the feedback ... They don't want criticism. I think that ... their general fear might be that they would be criticized or chastised as opposed to positive learning encouraged" (interview, 1-22-07).

approach to the conversations that *were* (and weren't) happening offered a way for the school to move forward. In Charleston, staff members began their work, as Kate Seabrook reported, by asking what their school's real problems were. Discussing toxic *conditions* in the building—and approaching those conditions from a critical perspective—led group members to grapple with the underlying *causes* of toxicity. Because group members came from different backgrounds and brought different perspectives to the conversation, individuals were challenged to stretch their perceptions and consider alternative points of view. The opportunity to talk across racial and cultural difference was a crucial element in the progress made by individuals as well as the Charleston group as a whole. Within the larger staff at Centerville, if those who were asking critical questions about conditions, policies, and practices in the school could have entered into dialogue with those who had become stuck in helplessness and frustration, more staff members might have experienced the kinds of gradual shifts in consciousness that occurred for Charleston group members.<sup>136</sup>

When the Charleston group moved from discussion of problems in Centerville to an exploration of the causes of those problems, they moved into a space of productive complexity that the staff as a whole rarely inhabited. Too often in Centerville, staff members could not *get* themselves from a collaborative recitation of problems to any other form of conversation. That is not to say that the problems staff members faced

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<sup>136</sup> Even staff members like Matthew Meissner, who resisted some aspects of the Charleston group's work (in particular, the notion that any of Centerville's problems could be racial), saw the value of conversation and recognized the learning that could result from hearing a different perspective. Matthew recalled how helpful it had been under previous administrations to have his teaching observed and then talk about it afterwards. He emphasized that the conversation itself could change his understanding of what had happened: "It makes you think differently. It makes you reflect on how you're doing things ... If you have somebody else in here, they're going to see things *totally* different. And, you know, you get their different perspective, now all of a sudden you can have a collaborative discussion about what you did, why you did it, what kids did, why they did what they did ... Because they, oftentimes it's totally different than what we think it is" (interview, 12-13-06).

were not real—Centerville’s problems were sometimes staggering to contemplate, even for me as an outside researcher. But by staying fixated on problems, staff members limited their chances of developing agency to construct solutions. In addition, because so many staff members were immobilized by the magnitude of Centerville’s problems, they couldn’t capitalize on their shared knowledge and expertise.

Staff members further limited themselves by accepting the most reductive explanations for their problems and by proposing draconian solutions that did not get at the deeper issues immobilizing the school.<sup>137</sup> In contrast, members of the Charleston group learned to accept complexity and take a long-term approach to school improvement when they began examining the role of race in their lives and in the classroom. That is, race became the starting point for a more general examination of adults’ attitudes and beliefs toward Centerville students. While it’s true that the Centerville staff did not have time to lose when it came to their school reform agenda, the approach that the central office staff took during the three years I spent in the building—purchasing packaged instructional materials and moving from one set of instructional interventions to another—did not work.<sup>138</sup> Equally ineffective were building administrators’ desperate attempts to find a combination of rules and consequences that would intimidate students

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<sup>137</sup> For example, when I asked Ellen Garrity what steps she thought needed to be taken to improve school culture in Centerville, she focused exclusively on toughening up discipline policies. Not only did her focus ignore problems that existed within the staff; her discourse positioned disruptive Centerville students as criminals who needed to be ticketed and incarcerated (cf. Ferguson, 2000). “I think seriously that the policies that are currently set could use some toughening up .... I literally believe in the three strikes, you’re out principle. I can’t see why that can’t happen .... You give these kids all these chances, they’ll rob you blind. I mean that’s just, that’s just a fact ... If they get in a fight, they need to be arrested and ticketed. I mean, seriously! A \$275 ticket will affect a lot of them very quickly ... The school that I came from, kids get in a fight, they’re arrested. Put in handcuffs, hauled off, no questions asked. Done deal. And a ticket is issued. There’s no evidence of tickets getting issued [here] ... These kids are like, ‘Oh, so-and-so got in a fight, they’re getting suspended.’ I keep wanting to hear, so are they getting a ticket? Do they have to go to court? ... If you get in a fight out on the street, and you assault somebody, that’s a court offense. But I don’t make those decisions” (interview, 12-11-06).

<sup>138</sup> For a discussion of the way beliefs about poverty manifest in reduced academic and intellectual rigor in urban and under-resourced schools, see Beers (2009).

into reporting to class on time. These approaches did nothing to examine the underlying problem of a staff that was mired in unanswered questions about what it meant to work with students who were racially and economically different from what most adults in the building were used to. Without support in interrogating the *implications* of race and class differences, too many staff members fell back on easy interpretations of difference as lack, and their work with students suffered accordingly.

Although outside consultants sometimes encouraged these reductive interpretations by reinforcing stereotypes about low-income and minority students' learning needs and intellectual potential, the materials provided by consultants—books by Glenn Singleton and Ruby Payne in particular—did serve to get people talking. Conversations about poverty and race provided staff members with at least some form of interaction around core issues that shaped their work in the school. But without the support to analyze and interrogate ideas presented in professional development sessions, staff members were likely to rely on unchallenged *assumptions* about the role of class and race in student performance—assumptions that were reinforced by sensational comments about Centerville's reputation, counterproductive interactions between staff members and students, and students' own contributions to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The private struggles that occupied so many staff members provided an important starting point for conversation about the messiness of teaching across race and class differences. When staff members genuinely did not know whether low-income and minority students valued education, or whether race was influencing the ways they interacted with their students, they were not well-served by staff meetings that focused on revising the tardy policy or dealing with student attendance problems. These topics got

ongoing attention because attendance and tardiness were enduring problems in the school, but by dwelling on them, administrators reinforced the idea that there was some combination of rules and policies that would eventually change building culture. Given the staff's dynamic of antagonism, the rule-and-policy approach could only keep adults locked in power struggles with students and each other while core dilemmas about teaching went unaddressed.

### **The implications of talk**

While several staff members argued that an ongoing contract dispute between central administration and the teachers' union was the biggest obstacle to collective work on changing school culture,<sup>139</sup> a deeper issue was lack of trust within the staff. On some level, staff members knew that talking at length about their school's problems and its culture was dangerous. No one could predict what would come up in conversation, how one staff member might react to what another one said, or what lasting damage might result from an argument or confrontation. But damage was being done every day when staff members engaged in discursive interactions with students and each other without thinking about the implications of their language choices.

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<sup>139</sup> Obstacles presented by union issues were very real, but a discussion of the teacher's union is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is important to note that at the start of 2006-07, members of the Charleston group were on the verge of holding a weekend staff retreat in order to support a larger group of staff members in exploring many of the same school culture issues that they had attempted to raise, with little success, in the fall one year before. But in light of the teachers' unsettled contract, Sylvia Thacker, speaking as a former teachers' union negotiator, warned teachers that they needed to think about the message they sent to their union leadership when they signed up for a voluntary retreat. Silence hung in the room as staff members contemplated the conflict that Sylvia had highlighted between members of the Charleston group and the strong union advocates in the room. After a long pause, Reggie said, "Out of respect for the negotiators, we shouldn't do it. This was meant to be an opportunity for us to work together. The last thing I want is for this to divide us. So let's not do it" (fieldnotes, 8-31-06). Though some staff members like Roz Nelson hoped that the retreat could simply be postponed until the contract was settled, the retreat never occurred because a settlement was not reached until January, 2008.



Adults who told students that they were lazy, unmotivated, and unlikely to achieve success based on their current attitudes and work habits might have thought they were presenting an objective assessment of students' future prospects. After all, students who repeatedly fail their classes are most likely to drop out of high school, remain stuck in low-wage jobs, and experience periods of unemployment (cf. Fine, 1991). But when Shaun Coleman gave students a series of assignments to investigate school culture, he learned how closely students were listening to the comments adults made to them, and how demeaning and discouraging students found those comments to be:

Students are troubled about the way in which they're talked to and talked with by other staff members and people in the building .... Students have reported, um, pretty negative-sounding things that relate to their abilities, and where they're going to be in five years or ten years .... things that drew some unfair, and some, some really difficult to imagine how the person would know that about them, conclusions about the students, and their potential. And that stuff can be so, I mean, for all the obvious reasons, so damaging to a young person (interview, 11-3-06).

Given the extent to which deficit discourses shaped many staff members' thinking about Centerville students, it's not hard to see how staff members would draw the kinds of unfair conclusions that Shaun described. Discourses *supplied* staff members with reductive understandings of Centerville students' abilities and potential. Unless they talked explicitly with students and each other about the implications of language choices, staff members had no way of knowing the effects that their language use was having on people.

When students were routinely positioned as failures, it should come as no surprise that they responded to adults with hostility. During one hall sweep, I watched a student begin yelling and cursing at Kendra Wheatley, one of the staff members who was

assigned to write disciplinary referrals on everyone who was tardy that hour. Later Kendra told me that the student's behavior that day was unusual, and that he had come to her afterwards to apologize for his outburst. In reflecting on the situation, Kendra focused on the negative role that language often played in adult-student interactions:

People say, they don't respect us. Well sometimes it's the way they talk to them, too ... I mean you seen the incident that happened the other day. He was down here the next day apologizing. And really, he ... he's never talked to me like that before ... His mom come in two days later, she was yelling at him and stuff, and I had to say in his defense, he never has been disrespectful to me before, before that day. And I honestly think it was because *I* was the person standing there. And he said that. He said, "I shouldn't have went off on Mrs. Wheatley because she's the only one that ever talks to me decent. No matter what I do." But I was the one standing there. So I got it (interview, 3-13-07).

This student's comment to his mother about his interactions with Kendra exemplifies what many students experienced on a day-to-day basis in Centerville. To be able to name only one staff member he could rely on to talk to him "decent" at school, no matter what he did, helps to explain why this student might have had a tendency to act out and perform poorly. Admittedly this student may have had other problems—one of his teachers told me he was "in big serious trouble with the law"—but language clearly mattered to him and played a role in how he responded to adults in the building.

Some staff members argued that students expressed defiance or hostility in the face of adult directives because they needed to make sure they were not being disrespected in front of their peers. Student teacher Sonia Huddleston attributed this behavior not to any messages that adults were sending with their language use, but simply to peer dynamics in Centerville neighborhoods:

If somebody kind of acquiesces to the teacher's command, like you might hear a snicker or something like that, like, "Oh man, they just played you," or "Man, they *told* you to sit down," something like that, and then that's when they kind of feel like, oh, I need to put something else forward .... A lot of these kids here see each other all the time, you know, it's a very close community, and so they do see each other outside, so it does kind of get around ... I feel like they're very aware of each others' perceptions of each other (interview, 4-19-07).

What Sonia didn't consider—and what probably wouldn't have occurred to her unless she examined the broader negative pattern of interaction in the building—was how students might simultaneously be saving face *and* resisting the ways in which adults' language use demeaned them.<sup>140</sup>

At times staff members *knew* they were making bad choices in their language interactions with students, but they couldn't stop themselves from making cutting remarks in the face of student behavior they did not understand. Jimmy Wolfe was bewildered by the ways in which students who lived in a low-income community and who needed education in order to advance themselves could spend so much time and

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<sup>140</sup> Sheriff's Deputy Randy Milford also noted that issues of respect were commonly at the heart of teacher-student conflicts. But rather than examine the nature of teacher-student interactions, Randy simply advised teachers not to take conflicts with students personally. In fact, Randy argued that the teacher was usually *not* the issue: "There's no reason to ... take it personal that the kid walked away or swore under his breath. Don't take it personal. There's more to that thought process or that behavior than you being the problem. I don't believe that too many kids, um, are, are so focused on the teacher being the issue."

And yet as Randy related what students would say to him about their interaction with the teacher after getting kicked out of class, the teacher's actions clearly had a great deal to do with the conflict. "I think in a lot of cases it's possible that the kids might have felt disrespected. More often than not I've had kids come down to my office and just suggest that there's no reason the teacher had to confront him or say what they said to him in such a group setting. So now we're getting right back to that respect ... This is just somebody who disrespected me, so my norm is to strike out and lash out against this individual. Whoever disrespected me. And I think a lot of cases ... if you have something that might be a little bit more aggressive that you want to talk to the student about, do it one-on-one, and you'll get a lot better result. A lot better result" (interview, 1-23-07).

Randy's reasoning here is a good illustration of how adults could both see *and not see* the impact of their actions and choices on student behavior. At the same time Randy notes that students handle conflict with an authority figure much better if they are in a private, one-on-one setting, he insists that not many kids "are so focused on the teacher being the issue" when it comes to classroom conflict. It stands to reason that the teacher is at least *part* of the issue in a classroom showdown that results in the student getting kicked out of the room, but Randy's framework focuses solely on the actions and choices of the student.

effort acquiring and maintaining brand-new sneakers. During our interview, Jimmy told me a story about how his frustration with a particular student's shoe obsession precipitated a language interaction Jimmy later regretted. In the way he narrates his story, Jimmy demonstrates how he made sense of the student's behavior in terms of his class status and how he degraded the student for having what he saw as misplaced priorities and foreign values:

Supposedly this is a low-income district. You get on the internet, this is low-income. There's kids here wearing new shoes, new clothes, the nicest stuff ... they just have different values than us ... As long as I *look* like I'm cool, and I'm wearing nice new pants and shoes, and "Don't scuff my shoes up, now!" Some of the kids here, you'll never see them wearing some of the shoes that I wear when I'm at home. They get a scuff mark on their shoes or some dirt and they throw their shoes in the garbage. Buy a brand-new white pair. That's *crazy* in my mind ... Just goes to show you where priorities are ... Just because you have new clothes, new shoes, doesn't mean that you're going to go places.

I remember there was a kid here a couple years ago that used to bring a book bag to school. He was a basketball player. And he didn't have any books in his book bag. He had like three pairs of shoes in his book bag. He would switch his shoes. Depending on what outfit he was wearing .... and he would leave boots and shoes in my class ... you know, would you lock these up for me kind of thing. But he had no goals to do anything. He had his shoes, though. And I said something to him one time ... And it probably wasn't the right thing to say, and it's not good to be sarcastic with kids, but I told him it's nice that you have that many pairs of shoes, brand-new shoes, because I said with no job, no license, I said you're going to do a lot of walking (laughs). So you're going to need all those pairs of shoes because you're going to be burning them up when you walk all over, wherever you're going. And it wasn't the right thing to say to him. I wish I wouldn't have said it to him. But ... that's what I was thinking at the time. I just didn't understand why you'd have five pair of brand-new shoes (laughs). You know. That was the most important thing in your life. Those shoes (interview, 4-25-07).

Jimmy knew that what he said to the student was wrong. But what he couldn't know was how frequently students heard comments like Jimmy's, and how discouraging the

cumulative effect of those comments could be.<sup>141</sup> With an offhand facetious remark, Jimmy sent a message to the student not just about his behavior in school, but about his life chances. Such talk positioned students as failures before they even finished high school. Examples like this one help to illustrate the power of adults' language to lock students into undesirable identities, and they make it possible to understand behavioral outbursts in a different way. Some students simply refused to be positioned as worthless.

On some level staff members understood the power of language to diminish an individual's feelings of value and worth because of the ways they themselves were addressed by Centerville administrators. Matthew Meissner explained how the superintendent's ways of talking negatively positioned teachers, and how that positioning affected his sense of self-worth as an employee and as a person. "He almost talks about teachers as though they're this other, you know, this entity that he wishes he didn't have to deal with," Matthew said. "Well, that doesn't give you very much sense of self, and, you know, doesn't make you feel very good about what you do and who you are, and about doing it for him" (interview, 12-13-06).

Similarly, Emma Middleton explained how damaged she felt by her supervisor's ways of talking to her after a routine classroom observation. Instead of focusing on the intellectual rigor of her lesson, Emma's supervisor ran down a list of petty behavioral

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<sup>141</sup> The sneakers example is significant because it came up so frequently when staff members talked about what it was like to teach students living in poverty. Even staff members who claimed that students' low income level wasn't a big factor in Centerville's school culture would go on to point out how their colleagues held poverty against students when students wore expensive sneakers. At the same time, these staff members revealed how they themselves also had trouble accepting low-income students' right to wear expensive shoes. "He holds it against them a lot," Lisa Marshall said, referring to Dr. Warner's views on student poverty. "He talks about it all the time. He tells anybody that walks in here how many kids are on free and reduced meals, and why their parents are so lazy and don't go out and get a job, and you know, he goes on his little tirade. Which I think is totally inappropriate. I don't think any kid holds it against any other kid, and I know I don't know any adult that would hold the free and reduced—except for when they come in with these big shoes, and the MP3 players, and then tell me they don't have a pot to pee in. I think if you got rid of the MP3 player, and bought shoes from Kmart, instead of \$200 pair of shoes, so I have no sympathy in that department" (interview, 4-23-07).

infractions he observed, such as students sharpening pencils without permission and wearing backpacks during class. What upset Emma was not the fact of being criticized, but the way his words silenced and belittled her. “It was this laundry list of negatives,” she said. “And at points I’d kind of try and speak, and he’d just keep going. And I have never felt so awful about what I do in the classroom.” Emma went on to explain how being positioned as inadequate took away her dignity and caused her to enter into a state of mind that threatened to alter her disposition. “It was so *demeaning* in some ways .... I was feeling like I wasn’t adequate, both as a person and as a teacher .... I can’t get it out of my head. I honestly can’t get those words out of my head ... I couldn’t go to sleep last night. I woke up at 3. It’s making me a bitter person, and I’m not that kind of person” (interview, 3-29-07).

Emma was lucky, in that supervisors at her previous school had seen her talent for teaching and had, by making different language choices, positioned her as a beginner with great potential. These prior experiences gave Emma a measure of resilience and enabled her later to push back against her supervisor’s criticisms. The majority of Centerville students were not so fortunate. Considering how powerfully language affected teachers like Matthew and Emma, it’s not hard to see how language could damage and diminish students, turning them into people who behaved and interacted at school in ways that they and their families might not recognize.

In order to change toxic school culture, Centerville staff members needed to realize the work their language was doing to reveal underlying beliefs about low-income and minority students, divide adults into different ideological camps, and create student identities. But as much as language use was a choice, changing school culture was not

simply a matter of using more politically correct terminology. It was a matter of learning to *see* students differently. Kate Seabrook explained how a conversation with the Charleston group about low-income students and their tendency to buy expensive sneakers challenged her to rethink the standard view among staff members, which was that expensive athletic shoes were an indication of vanity and wastefulness in low-income homes:

It was like, we're middle-class, kind of looking down on them, saying "Well, if they can't afford lunch, then why do they have new tennis shoes?" ... like just, this judgmental look on this lower class ... but instead of us looking down and judging them, maybe if we could understand where they're coming from .... like the mother doesn't have any money, and so they have to scrape everything together, but she gets some money for something, she wants to make her child feel well, so she goes and buys him an expensive pair of shoes. Well that makes more sense to me (interview, 1-24-07).

Kate's conversation with her colleagues heightened her awareness of the class-based bias in her view of Centerville students. While she and others might always question why students and their families would spend hundreds of dollars on athletic shoes when they didn't have enough money to pay for everyday necessities, the conversation challenged Kate to see her students' decisions and motivations from another perspective.

Staff members' ways of seeing Centerville students had profound consequences, not just for the things they said in the teachers' lounge, but for how they thought about and proceeded with their work in the classroom. When staff members saw students as unskilled, unmotivated, and uninvested in their learning, it was easier for them to decide that chronic low achievement was inevitable, given the population they taught. If staff members believed that Centerville students were not headed to college, but instead to

jobs where they would need to wear hard hats, punch the time clock, and obey the boss's orders, it made sense for them to emphasize discipline and rules at the expense of intellectual curiosity and creative problem-solving. Deficit discourses about low-income and minority students encouraged staff members to rationalize and naturalize the differences that existed between Centerville and other school districts when it came to assignments, instructional approach, and even time spent on task during any given class period. At the same time, deficit discourses blinded staff members to the ways in which the choices they made in the classroom helped to keep student achievement low.

Staff members were not the only ones who believed that it was natural to take a different approach to teaching in Centerville than one might take in a more affluent school district. When I began visiting the district, I joined in some early conversations with staff members working on curriculum development. I was told after one of these meetings that students in Centerville were a special population with a very specific set of academic needs, and therefore the ways I had formerly taught English would not work in this environment (fieldnotes, 8-7-04). No one told me *why* this was true; instead, staff members seemed to assume that the reasons were clear. As a newcomer to Centerville, I was bothered by these assumptions, but then I wondered if staff members knew things about low-income and minority students' specific needs as learners that I did not. Though I brought ten years of experience teaching English to students of wide-ranging ability levels at two very different school sites, I doubted the value of my professional knowledge. Maybe my ideas were irrelevant, I reasoned, in a place where skills were so low and failure rates were so high. Deficit discourses made me second-guess what I



thought I knew about good teaching. Maybe Centerville people *did* know what was best for these kids, and maybe I didn't.

The ways staff members talked about and thought about Centerville led them to develop place-specific expectations that seemed utterly logical, given the deficit discourses that circulated about the school district and its students, even as those expectations trapped teachers and students in a cycle of failure. I felt the power of those discourses as they worked on my own thinking, and I understood how easy it was for staff members to acquiesce to them. Given the consistency with which people spoke about Centerville as a place filled with unsolvable problems, it was hard to imagine any other reality.

In moments when outsiders asked staff members to explain the reasons for chronic failure at the high school, Centerville teachers revealed through their answers how trapped they themselves felt in the identity that had been established for them through discourse. Wade Anderson described one such moment. At a Centerville teachers' union meeting, a teacher from one of the elementary schools asked Wade what was going on at the high school to cause so many students to get into fights and drop out of school. Rather than open up a conversation, the teacher's question only served to increase Wade's frustration. While he didn't explain how he responded to the teacher in the moment, when Wade recounted the incident to me, he took a cynical stance. "Now this is a teacher in this district," he said. "She lives in the 'Ville. She knows Life in the 'Ville. And yet she's bought into the community cultural viewpoint of this high school. We're a den of thieves. A house of ill repute."

I understood Wade's defensiveness. His colleague's question was a "face-threatening act" (Johnstone, 2002, p. 126); whether intended or not, it was framed as a search for someone or something to blame for the high school's problems. But Wade also revealed how the question reinforced his feelings of helplessness and invited him to give in to the reality that she imagined. "That lady believes that this building is violent. And unsafe. What am I going to do? What am I going to do to prove her wrong? Have her spend a couple years here? ... That will just *cement* all of her beliefs. I can't change that. We are the inner city of Lincoln County. Deserved or not" (interview, 12-6-06). Through his words, Wade kept that "inner city" reality in place. He had convinced himself that no other reality was possible.

### **The role of discourse in creating and changing school culture**

Members of the Charleston group were not alone in their desire to change toxic school culture in Centerville. Almost every staff member I met agreed that change was needed in the ways adults approached their work with students and each other. And yet despite the fact that staff members were collectively engaged in a comprehensive school improvement process facilitated by an outside school reform organization, their shared work did not lead to substantive changes in student achievement *or* in school culture. Due to enduring patterns of antagonism and divisiveness, shared work was more of an appearance than a reality, undermined as it was by staff members' inability to agree upon common goals and a common vision for their students. Professional disagreements were further exacerbated by the personal conflicts and grudges that formed in the aftermath of staff members' racially-charged interactions with students and each other. Because staff

members who disagreed were unlikely to talk with each other directly, conflicts remained unresolved, locking staff members into lasting personal and ideological stalemates.

Staff members were well aware that interpersonal divisions hindered their school reform efforts. But because no public conversation about the *nature* of those divisions ever took place, staff members formed very different private understandings of the school's problems, and they developed very different ideas about the kinds of changes that were needed in order to bring about school improvement. These differences were fundamentally rooted in competing beliefs about how best to work with low-income and minority students and whether success with those students was even possible. Through discourse, staff members revealed how conscious they were of students' race and class status, and how assumptions about race and class informed their thinking about students' attitudes, values, and potential.

That staff members had class- and race-inflected ideas about students should come as no surprise. Staff members' beliefs about Centerville students began to be formed long before they began their jobs due to the discourses that circulated in Lincoln County about Centerville High School and the Centerville community. Through newspaper reports, offhand comments by acquaintances, and what Wade Anderson called "cultural memory," people developed fixed ideas about what kind of place Centerville was and what students were likely to accomplish there.<sup>142</sup> Many staff members read their

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<sup>142</sup> When read against this "cultural memory," racial tension in Centerville is easier to understand. Multiple staff members invoked the concept of cultural memory when they told me about a tar-and-feathering incident that occurred in Centerville in the early 1970s. "When I started here," Wade Anderson told me, "someone at another job I worked at at the time, like, 'So uh, you hear about that principal they tarred and feathered, right?' And I'm like, what? Said, 'Well yeah, they tarred and feathered a principal.' I'm like, I've never heard of it. I started asking around. And yes, in the early 70s, more than thirty years ago, there was a principal here who was tarred and feathered. You know, one of the individuals here *saw it happen* when he was in high school in this building. *Saw* it happen. So yes, it's a true story. But that true story lives on in the surrounding community." Turning the conversation to me, Wade emphasized the impact of

day-to-day struggles in the building against ideas that had been supplied to them by outsiders—as well as colleagues—about the low-income and minority students they taught. Deficit discourses led staff members to theorize that these students did not value education and did not aspire to lives any different from the ones they had. This deficit theorizing helped staff members to explain to themselves and each other why Centerville students achieved less than students elsewhere and to naturalize students' poor performance as a function of their race and class status. When students behaved badly or performed poorly, staff members' deficit theories were confirmed. The more frustrated staff members became, the more likely it was that their interactions with students would produce patterns of conflict and resistance that sustained deficit discourses and kept the school locked in a cycle of failure.

What few staff members could see were the ways in which their day-to-day decisions contributed to students' low academic achievement. When staff members explained why they kept assignments simple, did not ask students to do much writing, and placed more emphasis on compliant behavior than on rigorous academic work, they revealed how their thinking had been shaped by deterministic assumptions about the kinds of lives Centerville students had and would likely continue to have in the future. Staff members reinforced and internalized those deterministic ideas when they used student demographics as a way to explain why students would never accomplish as much

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cultural memory on perceptions of Centerville and the school district's reputation. "Are *you* going to send your kid to the school that had a principal tarred and feathered? Even if it happened thirty years ago? Would you? Think about it." I admitted that I would have concerns (interview, 12-6-06). Andy Ellis noted that the tar-and-feather incident came up for him when he first took a job in Centerville and had to explain his decision to friends and neighbors. "I had people even in my own neighborhood at home, 'Ooh, you teach at Centerville, ooh' (laughs), you know, rough. They still remember the tar-and-feather incident of '68 or '72. That's thirty years ago. You know, we're not tarring and feathering administrators in our district anymore, last time I checked I haven't seen, you know what I mean? It's like, they still have that image in their mind" (interview, 12-19-06).

as their peers in other area school districts. Similarly, when staff members communicated with students primarily by yelling at them, chiding them for their bad behavior, and moralizing about how little they would achieve if they did not change their work habits, they conveyed to students how little faith they had in the possibility that students could alter the storyline of perpetual academic failure in urban and under-resourced schools.

While the deficit discourses that circulated in the building may suggest that staff members' ideas about Centerville students were locked in place, many individuals were privately struggling with questions, dilemmas, and feelings of personal discomfort as they interacted with students who were racially and/or economically different from them. Although it was common for staff members to make sweeping generalizations about the role that poverty played in their work, discussions about how to *respond* to conditions of poverty were rare. And although generalizations about the role that race played in staff members' work were comparatively more coded and veiled, discussions about how to think about and *respond* to racial differences were almost non-existent. Because race differences in particular were so threatening for some staff members, most adults in the building denied that race was a factor in their interactions. When staff members did bring up race as a topic for discussion, individuals responded in ways that shut down racial conversations. White staff members would claim to be offended by the mere suggestion that their thinking or their interactions were racist, while black staff members would pass their concerns off as a joke or otherwise withdraw themselves from the conversation. Avoiding engagement with race in these ways was safer than grappling with open-ended questions that required significant personal examination and reflection. Without support

for such personal and taxing work, staff members repeatedly defaulted to explanations of school failure that focused on *students* as the problem.

In light of the staff's resistance to openly grappling with race- and class-based questions and dilemmas, individuals' reliance on deficit discourses is certainly understandable. Without any other sources of information about low-income and minority students as people and as learners, many staff members came to view defiant or resistant behavior as a confirmation of all the bad things they had heard about urban schools and students, especially since staff members who struggled were left entirely on their own to make decisions about how to proceed in their work each day. But adults' struggles were not confined to interactions with students. Staff members also struggled in their interactions with each other. Adults read each other in terms of race and class status: they drew conclusions about their colleagues' belief systems based on interactions they observed as well as offhand remarks, and they nursed wounds and grievances long after the experience of a racially-charged conflict. Because staff members were just as uncomfortable talking openly about the differences that divided the staff as they were talking about the role of race and class difference in their work with students, race- and class-based tensions among adults were left to fester, intensifying interpersonal division and ensuring that the staff would remain immobilized in its collective work.

Discourse played a key role in the toxicity that plagued Centerville, but through discourse, staff members also had the potential to change their school's culture. While most adults recognized that they and their colleagues held different beliefs and took different approaches to their work with Centerville students, they were less conscious of the ways in which *language itself* contributed to an ongoing state of divisiveness and

negativity in the school. Through language, staff members revealed their beliefs about who students were and what they were capable of achieving. Language also provided staff members with a way to signal their ideological positions to one another, which in turn drew some staff members together and drove others apart. By continually circulating deficit discourses about low-income and minority students, some staff members positioned students as failures who were locked into identities created and defined by their race and class status. By objecting to those discourses and the positions they created, other staff members set themselves in opposition to their colleagues and sought to challenge the status quo in the building. Staff members may not have realized that their language use was producing these positions, divisions, and identities, but language is powerful precisely *because* it works invisibly so much of the time.

Because so much of people's language use in Centerville was automatically cued through ordinary forms of social interaction, staff members had little reason to consider the implications and consequences of their language choices. Complaining about the limitations and inadequacies of students was such a familiar and natural practice in Centerville that *not* participating in such conversations created a degree of social risk. Staff members who chose not to join in these conversations had to accept the possibility that they might work in isolation, eating lunch alone in their rooms and missing out on interactions at social gatherings. This social fragmentation made it that much harder for like-minded individuals to find each other, and it allowed deficit discourses to circulate unchecked. Deficit-oriented language use created shared understandings that seemed so commonsensical to most people, they went largely unquestioned. Without intending any

harm, staff members perpetuated damaging worldviews that fed the toxic interactions so many adults genuinely wanted to change.

Examining the forms of language that circulated in Centerville could help staff members begin to recognize the *sources* of their beliefs about students and the ways in which individuals unconsciously communicated their beliefs to others in the course of everyday interactions. Furthermore, by growing more conscious of the presence and power of deficit discourses, staff members could begin the process of interrogating the assumptions embedded within their language use. This call for examination and interrogation of language deliberately positions staff members as having agency to make different choices, which is a crucial point in any discussion of language use. Staff members in Centerville did not create deficit discourses; rather, these discourses existed both inside and outside the school in the form of accumulated commonsense understandings that acted upon staff members' thinking as they sought to make sense of their experiences with Centerville students. At the same time, once they *recognized* these discourses, staff members could choose to enact or disrupt damaging patterns of language use in the course of everyday conversations. Despite the helplessness that many staff members felt in the face of the challenges that accompanied teaching in Centerville, staff members did have the power to make changes in the ways they thought about, talked about, and proceeded with their work.

While language use served to divide Centerville staff members into different ideological camps, an examination of language use could also help staff members to see the nature of their differences more clearly. Whenever I compared the transcripts of interviews with staff members who didn't like each other, I could almost always



recognize differences in stance and ideology. Closer attention to language could help staff members to understand *why* they disagreed with certain individuals and to better grasp the nature of their differences. Similarly, while language use could serve to lock people into opposing positions, it could also be used to open a shared space for people to reveal what they did not know and to construct more complex understandings of their work with low-income and minority students. The irony of talk in Centerville was that even as adults talked constantly about the school, the students, and the community, certain subjects like race, which sat at the core of many people's experiences and dilemmas, remained off-limits. As long as there were topics that could not be talked about in Centerville, staff members would remain isolated in their struggles and limited in their effectiveness.

The Charleston group provides one example of the ways in which a different approach to talk could help individuals to deepen their relationships with each other and to form new understandings of the problems and conditions that shaped their work. But members of the Charleston group were not the only ones who were thinking critically about dynamics in Centerville. Before I began asking questions about school culture, Wendy Swensen had noted and wondered about the persistence of negative patterns even in the face of a large retirement buyout. Wade Anderson had observed the ways in which different ideas about good work with Centerville students created a "feudal society" that was weakened by competing visions and lack of consensus. Doug Henderson had identified the ways in which negative talk damaged students' sense of self-efficacy. Robin Riley and Andrea Lyons had articulated critiques of the racial dynamics in the building. While my presence seemed to provoke further conversation and reflection,

even if only in the context of private interviews, it did present me with an opportunity to document the critical personal and professional work that many staff members were already engaged in, largely unbeknownst to each other. With greater attention to patterns of language use and patterns of interaction, Centerville staff members could talk themselves into new understandings of their problems, which in turn could lead them toward new solutions.

### **The relevance of school context and school culture in education**

By opening their world to me, the people of Centerville High School gave me access not just to the inner workings of their school, but to a host of unexpectedly intimate and moving accounts of their experiences. Taken together, these accounts provide a portrait of individual and collective struggle undertaken by a group of educators who cared about the students they taught and who wanted to make a difference in students' lives. Time and time again, however, adults' good intentions were undermined by the larger toxic dynamic of which they were a part. Too many staff members *could not see* how their ways of thinking, talking, believing, and interacting worked against them and limited low-income and minority students' chances of success (Gee, 1996). While school culture was tangibly apparent to some who acknowledged the currents of negativity that were pervasive in the school, it was invisible to those who engaged in toxic interactions without awareness of the patterns of conflict and failure they were perpetuating.

The stories that individual staff members shared about their work in Centerville reveal the power of school culture to shape, constrain, and at times undermine people's

experiences in education, but they also show the willingness of individual staff members to engage in significant forms of personal and professional growth when challenged to do so. Thinking deeply about the context in which they taught led some staff members to consider for the first time the problematic attitudes and values expressed in their home communities, the ways they perceived and were perceived by others, and the origins of their belief systems. Reflecting on the culture that was produced in their particular school context led other staff members to become more observant of interpersonal dynamics, to question the ways they had always seen things, and to take a different approach to their work with colleagues and students. The personal nature of this reflection and growth required individuals to stretch themselves socially, politically, and emotionally at the same time they strove to manage the daily exigencies of their jobs.

These are not commonplace or ordinary forms of professional development for educators, particularly in the era of high-stakes testing where so much emphasis rests on school accountability and student achievement. Educators who might otherwise see value in deep examinations of school culture may instead feel obligated to focus on more immediate forms of instructional intervention that promise to raise test scores. Members of the Charleston group were torn between these two impulses when they wondered how to justify work on school culture, given the immediate and pressing need to improve student achievement under the terms of No Child Left Behind. And yet accounts from staff members throughout the school provide compelling evidence that it was not *possible* to raise achievement without taking a careful look at the culture within the building and the messages that circulated within it. Students could not achieve success academically when they were immersed in an environment where adults positioned them as

uncommitted to their learning and unequipped for rigorous academic work. Such positioning was not done with malice; rather, it was simply the byproduct of everyday talk.

The majority of staff members in Centerville believed that *students* created school culture through their behaviors, habits, attitudes, and values. But conditions of toxicity were actually produced through a larger system of patterned interactions in which *adults* were equal participants. Students played into these interactions and contributed to toxicity when they engaged in disruptive and self-defeating behaviors, but it was *adults* who returned to the school year after year and sustained the toxic dynamic despite retirement buyouts, administrative turnover, and the annual influx of new students. No matter what their behavior, students were not responsible for the antagonistic interactions that occurred among adults or for the systemic problems that consumed and divided the Centerville staff. Like staff members, students were caught up in a larger dynamic that they did not create but that daily interactions helped to sustain. Without an examination on the part of adults of the assumptions, perceptions, and belief systems that produced their toxic interactions, staff members consigned themselves to replay toxic patterns year after year as their students and their school continued to fail.

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Though I did not know it at the time, when I asked people to talk about school culture, I opened the door for individuals to speak vulnerably about personal conflicts and struggles, to air views of students and colleagues that they might not have otherwise chosen to share, and to reveal feelings of anger, resentment, and sometimes despair.<sup>143</sup> I

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<sup>143</sup> Whenever staff members used discourse markers such as “I’ll be honest with you,” “This is not for everybody’s ears,” or “I don’t want to say [insert potentially unpopular viewpoint]”—which almost a third

felt a great weight of responsibility as I accumulated people's individual stories from day to day and year to year. Some days I would sit in my car in the parking lot of a local grocery store for a full hour after I left school, trying to recreate conversations accurately in my fieldnotes and make sense of interactions that challenged me emotionally. As I slowly moved from data analysis toward writing up this story, I struggled with questions of ethics. How could I write honestly about the problems at this site and at the same time respect staff members' dignity and integrity? How could I write vividly in ways that would bring the story to life and at the same time protect staff members' privacy and anonymity?

I never completely solved these problems of research ethics and narrative representation. Though I have omitted some identifying information and exercised discretion with the examples presented here, I have also written in extensive detail about a very small school where individual identities will not be hard for insiders to figure out.<sup>144</sup> I have done so at some risk to my relationships with valued participants and perhaps at risk to their relationships with one another. In some ways it helps that a series of resignations and transfers under a new superintendent, as well as the appointment of new administrators at the high school, has shifted the composition of the staff and the landscape of the school in the two years since I completed my fieldwork: fully one-third of the staff members who worked at Centerville High School during 2006-07 are no

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of all participants did during their interviews—I knew they were flagging a point that they sensed others might find objectionable. While I don't pretend to have won the trust and confidence of all participants in this study, I read those phrases as indications of moments in which participants paused to consider the risks of speaking candidly with me, and then chose to take the risk. The disclosures that followed create a "warts and all" effect that greatly enriched my data, even as participants expressed opinions that rendered them vulnerable to criticism or judgment. My work is more sophisticated and textured because of their honesty.

<sup>144</sup> See Van Den Hoonaard (2003) for a discussion of the impossibility of anonymity in qualitative research.

longer there.<sup>145</sup> But many of the original participants remain in Centerville, and a number of them have expressed interest in reading this study. I cannot know how they will respond to what I have written here.

As a result of their honesty and candor, Centerville staff members have exposed themselves to a form of public visibility and scrutiny that they neither wanted nor asked for. Some participants agreed to interviews with me only after I made repeated requests and despite their obvious feelings of wariness. Others felt sufficiently concerned about the risks associated with being interviewed that they denied me permission to tape record our conversation. But in the end, just about everyone in the building talked with me in some form or another before my fieldwork was complete. In doing so, the Centerville staff has performed a great service to their school district and to educators in countless other urban and under-resourced communities.

By telling their stories, the people of Centerville have enabled educators in similar schools—as well as teacher educators and educational researchers—to gain insight into the complex process by which a well-intentioned group of adults could ritually fail to serve their students even as individual staff members earnestly looked for ways to change negative patterns and contribute to a shared school reform effort. Publicizing so many individual interpretations of toxic school culture in Centerville presents the possibility that Centerville staff members will understand their problems in a new light and hear perspectives they had not heard before. Providing a platform for their voices also offers readers who face related challenges in their own settings the possibility of finding validation and recognition in the problems of others.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> For an accounting of which staff members left and which remain, see Appendix D.

<sup>146</sup> Merriam (1988) discusses the value of the case study in educational research.

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In organizing my account of what happened in Centerville around references to the Charleston group's work over time, and by including references to my own shifting understandings of dynamics at the site during the three years I spent there, I have imposed a narrative structure on a set of events whose significance was far less clear to me as I engaged in fieldwork. A narrative approach can draw out patterns, connections, and themes that are hard to see when one is living them. In doing so, it has the potential to provide people with a sense of clarity that is often lacking in the midst of daily experience.

But narrative also has the power to oversimplify, distort, and misrepresent, or to reduce a group of complex individuals into a cast of familiar characters or stock types. I have chosen to include certain events and leave out others for the sake of the narrative; to focus on certain themes, issues, and people at the expense of others; and to present some participants as merely representatives of a particular viewpoint, even when I knew them to be much more than that. The limits of time, space, and form require these choices and the compromises they entail, but at the same time, I worry deeply about the elements I have missed or overlooked, the hurtful messages I may unwittingly send to some participants, and the harm that may come from including the occasional disturbing scene or unflattering portrait. Another ethnographer might have made a different set of choices and might have told a different story. I will always wonder about the things I got wrong in this account; I will always recognize the inadequacies of narrative representation.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> As Bruner (1986) notes, "Stories give meaning to the present and enable us to see that present as part of a set of relationships involving a constituted past and a future. But narratives change, all stories are partial, all meanings incomplete" (p. 153). Bruner further complicates notions of "truthful" storytelling when he adds that ethnographers *arrive* in the field with narratives already in their heads that structure initial

And yet narrative also has the power to render settings, situations, storylines, and individuals as familiar and knowable to people in other places who are grappling with similar problems. I have written this dissertation with the Centerville staff in mind, consciously striving to avoid telling an “ain’t it awful” story and instead point out elements of hope and possibility in the personal and professional work staff members were engaged in. My study alone cannot solve the school’s problems, but I hope it can help staff members to see those problems in a new way. For people in schools elsewhere, reading about the patterned nature of the conflicts in Centerville, about the power of discourse to shape staff members’ beliefs about students and the school, and about the role that race played in staff members’ thinking about students and each other may provide moments of insight and new understanding. After I presented a version of this project in a research talk at another university, one faculty member came up to me afterward and lingered as I chatted with other members of the audience. I figured she was waiting to ask me questions, to challenge my analysis, or to push back on some aspect of my argument. Instead she praised my work, even as she struggled to articulate her thoughts. “I worked at that school,” she said, finally. “I *worked* at that school” (fieldnotes, 1-22-09).

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observations in the field (p.146). I know that this was true of my early experience in Centerville. All I have to do is look at the number of times I noted that the school was “orderly” or “was not out of control” to see the tropes of urban education that informed my expectations of what I would find there (fieldnotes, 6-2-04, 6-9-04). Bruner goes on to note that narrative also structures our relationships with key informants: “The concept of ‘my favorite informant’ may be less a question of personal compatibility than of shared narrative structure. We choose those informants whose narratives are most compatible with our own” (p. 151). As I explained in Chapter Four, this bias certainly shaped my initial relationships with informants in Centerville. I needed a lengthy stay in the field in order to come to terms with that bias and challenge myself to seek interactions with informants of all kinds, not just those who were most comfortable for me to be around. Thus, the story I tell here reflects the limitations of narrative representation, but it also reflects my efforts to push back on those limits through heightened consciousness of the choice I made and through grave respect for the responsibility that comes with being the storyteller.



I understood exactly what this former teacher was trying to say. Though she had never been to Centerville, hearing stories and voices from that site seemed to have created flashbacks in her mind to forms of talk and patterns of interaction that she had experienced in her own time as an urban schoolteacher. I had some of those flashbacks myself as I reflected on my fieldwork. The talk I heard in Centerville could have just as easily occurred in the teacher's lounge at Jefferson House, the all-ninth-grade building where I taught for the first two years of my career in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Centerville's hall sweeps were the same as those in Jefferson House (although at Jeff, students caught in hall sweeps were immediately suspended); its reputation was the same (a clerk in a furniture store in Elizabeth, upon hearing that I would be teaching at Jefferson House, looked at me knowingly. "It's rough over there," he said); even its racial dynamics were the same, with white teachers talking openly and disparagingly about "those kids" and their lives of poverty and neglect (although in Elizabeth there were more Latino students than African Americans, the majority-white teaching staff drew upon the same deficit discourses).

Conducting fieldwork in Centerville gave me a crucial opportunity to go back and *reread* my experiences in Elizabeth. Were I to teach at Jefferson House again tomorrow, I might not be any more or less successful in the classroom, but I would have a much stronger grasp of the dynamics I was caught up in—and my own role in them—than I did at the time. I would think more carefully about the perceptions I was forming of the school and its students, and I would look more closely at the sources that fed my perceptions, questioning their accuracy and the ideological positions they represented. I would seek out colleagues who might help me construct a richer understanding of

students' lives and potential, and I would ask them to join me in conversation about toxic dynamics in the school and ways to disrupt them. I would consider the messages I conveyed in my own talk to students, and I would seek to move beyond superficial understandings of their lives and histories. I would search for ways to visit students in their homes, neighborhoods, and churches, and I would devise assignments intended to build on the knowledge and strengths students brought from their home communities.<sup>148</sup>

These resolutions are easy to write, but they are a great deal harder to put into practice. I locked myself in the bathroom and cried on some Monday mornings during my first year in Elizabeth. I cried on Sunday nights that year, too. On other Mondays, I got dressed and then lay on my bed until it was time to leave, feeling a pit of dread in my stomach. Despite an extremely supportive mentor teacher and a supervisor who saw my potential, I was overwhelmed, homesick, and lonely. I knew I would quit my job by the spring of my second year when I stopped recording lesson plans and began counting down the days until school ended.

But that year I also lived in an apartment building that bordered one of the city parks and that was adjacent to the building where one of my students lived. I sometimes ran into Shavon and her friends on the street when I walked to the video store or rode my bike in the park. Though I later learned that the managers of my apartment building would not rent to black families like Shavon's, the proximity I had to her and to students like her made a tremendous difference in my ability to feel connected in the school and community. I cannot know how I might have improved or faltered as a teacher, had I

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<sup>148</sup> My thinking on these approaches is informed by the ideas about community ethnography in education (Frank, 1999, 2004), "funds of knowledge" in the homes of low-income and minority families (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzales, 1992), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2001) and out-of-school literacy research (Compton-Lilly, 2003, 2007; Mahiri, 2004; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

stayed in Elizabeth. Though I grew in my ability to adapt to its context, the toxic culture in Jefferson House was too much for me. When I eventually returned to teaching, I taught in the suburbs.<sup>149</sup>

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Studies of school culture provide teachers with the opportunity to step back from their daily work and consider the system-wide dynamics between teachers and students that shape and constrain teaching and learning in their classrooms. When I was a teacher, I lacked this perspective, reasoning instead that successes and failures were primarily linked to my individual efforts and mistakes. While to a certain extent this was true, I also worked in an educational system shaped by racial, economic, social, and political forces that were beyond my control. In two different school districts, I had two very different experiences as a teacher, and I cannot believe that the distinction between them lay solely with the population of students each district served, although that is the conclusion that many people would draw.<sup>150</sup> It is more than personal shortcomings on

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<sup>149</sup> The story of my early career experience in Elizabeth mirrors that of many beginning teachers who leave the profession after only a few years in the classroom. Halford (1998) calls teaching “the profession that eats its young.” Renard (2003) maintains that seasoned veterans recalling their awful first years in the classroom “will tell you about getting the worst teaching assignments, the worst students, and the worst classes. They will tell you about teaching from a cart with no classrooms of their own; being given unwanted duties; and being expected to cheerfully put up with the situation because they were the lowest on the totem pole” (p. 63). This description is a perfect account of the challenges of my first two years, right down to the cart—only in Elizabeth, nobody bothered to provide me one, so I had to carry all the materials I needed for teaching in a large bag instead. Ingersoll (2001, 2003) characterizes turnover in the teaching profession as a “revolving door syndrome.” According to his analysis of education statistics provided by the U.S. Department of Education, “the data suggest that after just five years, between 40 and 50 percent of all beginning teachers leave teaching all together” (2003, p. 148). According to Quartz (2003), “Teachers from high poverty urban schools are more likely than the average teacher to cite students’ lack of motivation and discipline problems as reasons for their dissatisfaction,” and thus she argues that helping teachers to develop “nondeficit conceptions may be a crucial factor in retaining good teachers” (p. 106).

<sup>150</sup> A comparative discussion of these two districts and the quality of education provided in each one is beyond the scope of this study, but I can say that when I left Elizabeth, New Jersey and took a job in the Eastham school district in Michigan, a professional mentor of mine congratulated me by saying, “Now you’ll *really* be able to teach!” Not only did my mentor imply that what I had done in New Jersey was something other than teaching; he implied that a qualitative difference in my performance as a teacher was

the part of teachers and so-called deficiencies on the part of students that are to blame in urban schools where chronic failure is endemic. No matter how effective any individual teacher, as long as he or she is situated in a system where adults have competing ideas about students' needs, motivations, goals, and potential, staff members will work at odds with one another, and the quality of the education provided to students will suffer (cf. Pardo, 2006).

By conceptualizing school culture as a product of discourse, staff members can see themselves as participants in the production of culture through the comments they make, the beliefs they forward through their talk, and the positions they take up and assign in their interactions with others. Few staff members consider the implications of their discourse other than to reflect on the sting of a sarcastic comment in the classroom or to regret the confrontation that a critical remark may have provoked with a student or a colleague. But language does much more than create charged moments like these. Through language, school staff members establish identities for themselves and others; they construct shared understandings of their students, their school site, and the surrounding community; they perpetuate or disrupt assumptions and stereotypes; and they talk worlds into being. Studies of school culture that focus on language can help staff members to think more carefully about how their words create the context they are a part of; how language interactions give rise to familiar and patterned practices; and how belief systems get conveyed through language choices, whether the speaker realizes it or not.

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to be expected, based on school context. He also gave me the message that talented teachers are right to search for settings where their work will be less encumbered by systemic dysfunction. That message assuaged my guilty feelings at the time, but it ignored the fate of the students who were left behind in a dysfunctional system that I had the mobility and the resources to escape. Just as parents pull their students from urban school districts and enroll them in suburban schools, many early career teachers make the same move.

A focus on language can also help school staff members to see the role that race plays in their beliefs, experiences, and interactions, particularly in schools where staff members deny that race is a factor in their thinking. Studying the ways in which staff members talk about race indirectly by claiming to be colorblind, by making judging references to “hip hop culture,” and by joking about race and racism can help to expose the powerful influence of race on people’s perceptions. Taking race into account in work on school culture can help staff members to better understand why different individuals might develop radically different interpretations of school events and school problems, and why those same staff members might experience enduring tension in their work together. Examining staff members’ discourse moves around race can also illustrate just how risky and threatening they perceive race talk to be, even as their talk repeatedly exposes the ways in which they construct racialized readings of students, colleagues, and school situations.

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Much of the professional literature on school culture focuses on the role of the school principal in setting priorities, establishing vision, and shaping policies that will produce a desired form of school change (Deal and Peterson, 1999). The experience of staff members in Centerville indicates that while the principal may contribute to school culture, the individual who occupies this role has less influence than the literature suggests. Over the six years that I have been following the district, Centerville High School has gone through three principals and three superintendents. Neither school culture nor student achievement has changed measurably under any of these leaders. In contrast to the research literature, this study shows the powerful shaping effect of daily

conversations among staff members and assumptions that circulate both inside and outside the building on people's perceptions of school culture and on their practices. Apart from the work of the principal, individual staff members were creating and sustaining culture each day in the ways they talked to students and each other about the kind of place Centerville was and what they could and couldn't achieve there. This study suggests that a focus on leadership alone is inadequate in the work of improving schools.<sup>151</sup> Staff members must be given the time and space to grapple with the assumptions that inform their work, to interrogate the sources of those assumptions, and to examine the ways in which assumptions shape instructional decisions, school policies, and daily interactions.

The problems in Centerville were context-specific, and yet they were not unique in the larger landscape of urban education. A whole industry has developed around school reform, with paid consultants like those from High Schools That Work promising to help teacher-leaders and building administrators to change their school's culture as they work to raise student achievement. At the end of its three-year contract with the Centerville school district, High Schools That Work sent consultant Dodie Partington to evaluate the school's progress and to advise staff members on next steps for their school reform work. After spending the day supervising a group of volunteers in a "technical assistance visit" consisting of drop-in observations of classrooms throughout the

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<sup>151</sup> When I returned to Centerville to reconnect with study participants near the end of the 2008-09 school year, I learned through conversations with more than 20 different staff members that conditions in the high school had grown worse, despite the fact that the current principal is far less visible and has far less to say about the attitudes and values of Centerville students than Dr. Warner did. Passivity on the part of the current principal, coupled with further declines in student enrollment and large numbers of resignations and layoffs, has left many staff members in freefall, fearing not only for their jobs, but for the continued life of the school district (fieldnotes, 5-4-09). This study shows that toxic culture can fester under a variety of leadership styles. What it does not show is how toxic culture might change under a more dynamic, constructive, and forward-thinking leader.

building, Dodie presented a PowerPoint slide show during an after-school meeting with the high school staff, only eight of whom showed up to hear what she had to say. Dodie began her remarks by arguing that the staff needed to “make instruction the focus” of their reform efforts. Without explaining just what teachers should do to increase the effectiveness of classroom instruction, she added that staff members should work to ensure “equity for all students” and to improve “rigor, relevance, and relationships” in order to create “a culture of continuous improvement” (fieldnotes, 4-26-07). When she addressed the Centerville school board the following week, she reiterated her message that the staff needed to focus on instruction and student achievement, adding the caveat that the staff should *not* focus on racial issues. “We need a school where everyone’s on the same page,” she said. “Teachers need to say, ‘It’s my responsibility to make sure that *all* students are academically successful’” (fieldnotes, 5-3-07).

With this advice, Dodie ignored the complexity of staff members’ racialized beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, histories, and relationships with students and each other in Centerville. Instead she relied on buzz words from HSTW’s professional development repertoire to produce a canned presentation of common-sense ideas for school improvement. I learned just how superficial Dodie’s assessment of the high school was when I chatted with a volunteer who helped with classroom observations during the technical assistance visit. During a meeting after lunch in which individual observers shared their findings with Dodie in preparation for the after-school presentation, the volunteer watched as Dodie opened her laptop and pulled up an already-prepared PowerPoint file, into which she inserted brief bullet-point examples of teaching and learning activities recorded in Centerville that day under pre-established HSTW

school improvement maxims such as “make instruction the focus” and “equity for all students” (fieldnotes, 4-26-07).

No one would argue that it’s a bad thing to focus on instruction and equity in school improvement work. Many staff members agreed that these two areas were significant weaknesses in Centerville’s overall performance as a school. But staff members’ approaches to instruction and their beliefs about equity were powerfully shaped by race- and class-based discourses that told them who students were and what it was possible for them to achieve in the Centerville site. When discourses reinforced the widespread assumption that students did not want to learn, did not value education, and did not aspire to lives any different than the ones they had, staff members were limited in their ability to imagine approaches to instruction that maximized students’ potential or that presented equal opportunities to all learners. By advising staff members not to focus on racial issues, Dodie kept in place a well-established pattern in Centerville of talking about race by *not* talking about it.<sup>152</sup> Though few would say so publicly, Centerville staff members were already focused on racial issues. Dodie’s recommendation to avoid race dodged the very issue that staff members most needed to confront if they were to work toward equity and changes in school culture.

At the same time, Dodie’s advice contradicted the message provided by fellow school reform consultant Glenn Singleton earlier the same year. Singleton argued that equity could *only* be achieved by having explicit conversations about race (fieldnotes, 8-

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<sup>152</sup> As Mica Pollock (2004) showed in her study of race talk dilemmas in an urban high school, calls to attend to the needs of “all” students are actually coded references to race that bury race in a “de-raced” word. “To some,” she writes, “talk of education for ‘all’ specifically demands the active pursuit of racial equality; to others, the word demands that educational policy actively ignore race. Either way ... race is deeply buried in the word—and as a policy word that is colormute and race-loaded simultaneously, ‘all’ can be both a useful and a dangerous word for equality efforts” (p. 74).



30-06). Though many staff members resisted his message, others not only read his book, but thought about and wrestled with the issues he raised. Staff members were not well-served by these conflicting messages about how to proceed in school reform work, nor were they well-served by complaints from school board members about the cost of outside consultants and the limited ability of a district to “measure” the effects of their work (fieldnotes, 8-17-06). Staff members in Centerville demonstrated that outside consultants had significant potential to introduce new perspectives and to get people talking in new ways. But staff members needed time to interrogate the ideas these consultants introduced and to participate in sustained work with those ideas, reading them against specific issues and problems in the Centerville site. Instead of being granted this time, staff members were bombarded with one professional development approach after another.

The problem with consultants in Centerville was not how much they cost, but how little sustained attention was given to what they had to say, and how little consistency there was in messages brought by representatives from different organizations. Not only did Glenn Singleton’s message to engage directly with race contradict Dodie Partington’s advice to avoid it; Glenn’s racial framework confused and disoriented staff members who had been conditioned to think about Centerville students and the Centerville district solely through Ruby Payne’s framework on poverty. Never during my time in Centerville was any attention given to the need to *reconcile* perspectives on race with perspectives on class. Instead staff members were left on their own to accept or reject those different perspectives as they sought to make sense of their work with students. And in another moment of inconsistency, central office administrators opted to hire Ron

Clark, a former Disney teacher of the year, as a district-wide professional development speaker—and to purchase over a hundred of copies of his book enumerating 55 “essential” rules for work with urban students (Clark, 2003)—only when Ruby Payne was unavailable on the designated date for staff-wide professional development in the spring of 2006 (fieldnotes 1-12-06).<sup>153</sup> This calendar-based, slotting-in approach to selecting consultants for professional development created a schizophrenic effect for staff members who had to make sense of competing messages, and it wasted resources that could have been better spent on sustained work with a single set of concepts and ideas.

Dodie Partington was right to argue that Centerville needed to be a school “where everyone [was] on the same page.” But without a willingness to investigate just what issues and ideologies divided people, her advice to staff members to get on the same page was hollow. By advising the staff not to focus on racial issues, Dodie ignored one of the most polarizing elements of the cultural landscape in Centerville. If staff members had known how to get on the same page, they would have. Identifying divisiveness as a problem does little good if staff members are unaware of the ways in which their words reinforce and recreate divisions through ordinary interactions each day. School culture *can* change, but only if staff members come to some shared understanding of why they are divided and how daily choices intensify or diminish their toxic patterns and divisions.

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Beginning teachers who enter into careers in urban and under-resourced schools will come to their jobs carrying their *own* beliefs and assumptions about low-income and minority students. While they may not be conscious of the class- and race-based

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<sup>153</sup> Staff members cynically surmised that the only reason central office administrator Cora Nicholas selected Ron Clark as a speaker was because she had seen him on Oprah (fieldnotes 9-8-06).

ideologies that shape their thinking, those ideologies will influence how they interact with students, how they make sense of their successes or failures in the classroom, and how they participate in conversations with other staff members. Most beginning teachers will have no idea that they are drawing on or espousing ideologies in the course of their daily interactions. Ideologies are transmitted in discourses, and discourses speak through us, often in ways we don't recognize.

Once beginning teachers get started in a new school context, they will be further inundated with discourse-based messages about who the students are, what the community is like, and what it takes to survive and succeed in a particular school environment. As they get to know their students and their colleagues, beginning teachers will also be presented with a series of choices, including whom to eat lunch with, when to speak up and when to remain silent, and which classroom practices to adopt or avoid. Each of these choices has consequences, not just for the individual beginning teacher, but for the culture of a school. Will beginning teachers contribute to staff divisiveness, or will they become bridge builders who can break down walls between different departments and camps? Will they blame the material conditions and so-called cultural values of the local community for any problems they face, or will they search for ways to integrate themselves into the community, drawing on its many tangible and intangible resources to build success in the classroom? And finally, will they be willing to make themselves vulnerable by asking for help when they struggle with questions about class and race—because such struggles *are* inevitable (Birrell, 1995; Delpit, 1995; Obidah and Teel, 2001; Rushton, 2001; Worthy, 2005)—or will they sublimate their questions and

draw essentialist conclusions about the performance of students who come from backgrounds different from their own?

For many teachers, the fraughtness of race and class—that is, the anxieties, dilemmas, and uncertainties attached to two of the most primary categories of social difference in our society—makes not talking about those subjects their default position. Instead they talk about how students won't work and won't behave, or how parents won't come to school conferences, or how colleagues won't enforce basic rules and academic standards. These complaints, all of which represent real frustrations, *mask* deeper confusion about why it's sometimes so hard to be successful in classrooms full of diverse learners. Complaints might provide a momentary outlet for frustration, and they might periodically bind teachers together with other struggling colleagues, but in the long run, divorced from questions and reflection, complaints—like deficit discourses—only serve to keep existing problems in place.

In Centerville, *not talking* about race and class, which I argue are the categories that mattered most in the staff's reform efforts, kept teachers—and the school itself—immobilized. Not talking left teachers feeling demoralized and left students adrift in an environment of ongoing academic disengagement. Not talking contributed to feelings of helplessness on the part of beginning and veteran teachers alike as they grappled with uncomfortable but *fundamental* questions about the complexities of teaching across social difference. In the absence of answers to those questions, many teachers developed theories about their students which were based on essentialist assumptions about the habits and abilities of low-income and minority people. In turn, they developed “place-specific” expectations that locked students into identities as low achievers, sustained

patterns of mediocrity and failure, and justified educational inequality between Centerville and other area school districts.

I didn't go into Centerville expecting to study race- and class-based discourses. But as an outsider, I was struck from my very first visit by the ways in which staff members talked about Centerville students. Their descriptions of students' lives and limitations were so categorical and absolute, I wondered if I needed to develop a different way of thinking about classroom instruction in order to work effectively in the Centerville setting. Though the advice I gave to newly-hired teachers who sought my help drew on the same pedagogical approaches I had always used, I did have doubts about whether my teaching advice was relevant in Centerville. Deficit discourses gave me the idea that Centerville students needed less choice, less freedom, and less of a challenge. Absent these things, Centerville students needed more structure, more remediation, and more preparation for standardized tests.

All the while I wondered about this established wisdom, I was conscious of the fact that I was not a teacher in Centerville, so I never had to make a decision about how to enact or revise my pedagogical beliefs in response to school conditions and culture. In contrast, beginning teachers must act in *spite* of any dilemmas they have about the population they serve, and they need support in figuring out how to proceed. That means teacher educators cannot continue to focus exclusively on disciplinary content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and theories of adolescent development if they hope to prepare beginning teachers for the complexities of school culture and school context. Specifically, beginning teachers and the teacher educators who work with them need to become *students of context* in order to better make sense of the worlds students

come from and the culture that is created in school when students and staff members interact (cf. Brown, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Cornbleth, 2008; Lazar, 2004; Michie, 1999, 2005; Teel and Obidah, 2008).

In order to replace the beliefs and assumptions provided to them by deficit discourses, beginning teachers need to accumulate firsthand knowledge of students' lives outside of school, including knowledge of students' families, neighborhoods, interests, linguistic and literacy practices, talents, and goals (cf. Heath, 1983; Moll et. al, 1992; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). This knowledge will help beginning teachers to both recognize the stereotypes on which deficit discourses are founded and respond with alternative discourses that present a more accurate picture of students' experiences and abilities. Ethnographic approaches will give beginning teachers a method for exploring the community and learning from community residents (Frank, 1999), while perspective-taking assignments will press them to consider school- and community-related issues and experiences through the eyes of people who live differently (Gere et. al, forthcoming; Haviland, Gere, Buehler, and Dallavis, 2009).

Beginning teachers also need tools for making sense of the social and cultural dynamics in their school buildings. They need to arrive in their schools with a critical perspective on discourse and with an understanding of how staff members' talk will reveal aspects of their attitudes, values, and belief systems (Morrell, 2005). They need to consider the ways in which their choices about whom to associate with will shape the perspectives they develop on their students and the school. They also need to become aware of how their own language choices will position them as advocates of particular viewpoints. Spending time analyzing transcripts of school and classroom discourse

interactions in context-sensitive teacher education classes will help beginning teachers to gain greater consciousness of the process by which different views, positions, and ideologies are established through language (Rex and Schiller, 2009). In the course of that analysis, beginning teachers will also benefit from discussions of how they might expose and disrupt deficit discourses without destroying their relationships with colleagues.

At the same time, beginning teachers need support in investigating the *origins* of staff members' viewpoints in the discourses that circulate about particular school districts within the wider community. Studying the ways in which specific schools are represented by the local media will expose the role that journalists play in establishing schools' reputations.<sup>154</sup> Similarly, conducting interviews with community residents will further help beginning teachers to understand peoples' perceptions of specific schools and where those perceptions come from. When these activities are embedded within a larger school-university partnership experience—in which staff members from a specific school visit teacher education classes and provide mentorship at their specific school site—beginning teachers will learn how to develop a deep and textured understanding of a particular school context and culture. Here the contributions of veteran teachers will be essential. While these teachers may have little experience studying discourse, media representation, or school culture, they and their university colleagues can learn *together* from a shared exploration of these subjects.

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<sup>154</sup> My six-year archive of newspaper articles on the Centerville school district and community positions me to do a critical examination of how Centerville has been represented and how those representations have shaped staff members' viewpoints. Some participants addressed the topic of media representations of Centerville in interviews, but exploring the influence of those representations proved to be beyond the scope of this study.

Finally, beginning teachers need the opportunity to engage in personal identity work that will equip them to interrogate their own views about race, class, and schooling.<sup>155</sup> Teachers have not traditionally been socialized to see the things that happen in their classrooms as a product of their own raced and classed understandings of teaching, learning, and cultural others (Fecho, 2004; Green and Abt-Perkins, 2003). In order to meet the needs of learners in an increasingly multicultural world, beginning teachers need tools with which to reflect critically on their beliefs, biases, and limitations. They need the opportunity to explore their experiences of racial identity formation (Tatum, 1992) and the raced and classed dimensions of their own school experiences. They also need to be encouraged to articulate the things they don't know about the process of teaching across cultural differences (Howard, 2006; Thompson, 2004). Because beginning teachers who work in urban and under-resourced schools may also experience conflicts and tensions as they travel between their home communities and the communities where they teach, they need support in examining the viewpoints expressed by their friends and family members, and in particular, discussing ways they can manage the conflicts that might arise when they recognize explicit or implicit racism in those views.

None of this work will be easy. Many beginning teachers may see exercises in ethnography, discourse analysis, and identity work as superfluous when set against the pressing need to become skilled in curriculum design, lesson planning, and classroom management. But teachers are bound to experience periods of uncertainty and to encounter dilemmas in the course of their work, no matter what their school site (Buehler,

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<sup>155</sup> My TFT colleagues and I found the “Circles of My Multicultural Self” activity—taken from a website called Multicultural Pavilion—to be a particularly productive starting point for this identity work (<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/activities/circlesofself.html>, accessed 4-12-09).



2005). Rather than pretend that teacher education programs can equip beginning teachers for every contingency, it is both more honest and more productive to encourage beginning teachers to *expect* uncertainty and dilemmas. If beginning teachers agree to articulate what they don't know and then follow up by adopting an inquiry stance in their classrooms (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009), they will be better prepared to grow and change with their site and with their profession. Instead of perceiving not knowing as a liability or a position of weakness, teacher educators need to convince themselves and their students that not knowing is a position that affords productive learning and vital long-term growth.

\*

In 2005, the Conference on English Education held a summit focused on reconstructing English education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As part of the summit, participants developed a set of position papers, one of which addressed the subject of supporting linguistically and culturally diverse learners in English classrooms. Of the eight beliefs listed in that particular paper, I want to focus on one that I find especially relevant for beginning teachers who choose careers in urban and under-resourced schools: “Socially responsive and responsible teaching and learning requires an *anthropologically* and *ethnographically* informed teaching stance; teachers and teacher educators must be introduced to and routinely use the tools of practitioner/teacher research in order to ask difficult questions about their practice” (Conference on English Education, 2005).

Though the authors of the CEE position paper were focused specifically on ways of meeting the needs of diverse students in English classrooms, their belief statement is important for educators in general, particularly those who work in schools like

Centerville High School. To take an anthropologically and ethnographically informed stance in education means to see oneself as always both a participant *and* an observer in the life of a school. This requires teachers to accept that they are equal contributors with their students in classroom dynamics, and it obligates staff members to step back and reflect on the *causes* of patterns in school culture rather than simply blame administrators, students, or parents for any problems their school may face. An ethnographically informed stance also requires teachers to ask how who they are shapes what they see, and in turn, to entertain the notion that there is always more than one perspective on an issue or event. Although teachers in Centerville did not tend to think in these ways, the culture of their school could change significantly if they began to explore the implications of such a stance.

The CEE position paper further calls on educators to use the tools of teacher research to ask difficult questions about their practice. There is a long tradition of practitioner/teacher research in education (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1992; Fleischer, 1995; Mohr, Rogers, Sanford, Nocerino, MacLean, and Clawson, 2004), but the majority of that work has focused on classroom inquiry projects. This study shows how the culture in a school building affects the belief systems and practices of individual teachers, and how classroom cultures cannot be separated from school culture. In the same way that teacher research has always emphasized the agency of individual teachers and the Freirean notion of praxis, engaging teacher-researchers in a study of school culture through ethnography can help educators to see that they play a role in creating school culture, and that in turn, their daily choices have the power to change culture.

\*

This study raises several questions for future inquiry, particularly as I chart out next steps in my continuing program of research on school context and school culture. First, the size and scope of my study precluded an in-depth look at the ways parents and students made sense of school culture in Centerville, but over the course of my fieldwork, I spoke to many students and a number of parents. Our conversations made it clear to me that people in both groups were highly conscious of their school's reputation and of the effect that teachers' attitudes and beliefs had on students' ability to learn. Further research in school culture would first benefit from an examination of how *students'* discourses and self-positioning contribute to the culture of a school. For example, how do students discursively construct identities for themselves, their peers, their school, and their community, and how do those identities shape school culture? Similarly, how do *parents'* discourses about the school and forms of self-positioning in their interactions with staff members contribute to school culture?

While this study did not look in depth at the experience of beginning teachers, I was highly conscious of the ways in which beginners like Amber Sandstrom and Linda Spencer were making sense of Centerville's culture and making choices in relation to what they learned about the school. Case study research in teacher education is fairly common, but I have not come across case study research in the literature on school culture. School culture research would benefit from longitudinal studies of the ways beginning teachers adapt to and/or seek to change the culture of a particular school over time (cf. Flores, 2006; Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, and Liu, 2001; Kelchtermans and Ballet, 2002; McGinnis, Parker, and Graeber, 2004). To what extent do beginning teachers or groups of teachers create new discourses in a school or succumb to those that

already exist? How do beginning teachers' understandings of school culture change over time?

I approached my work in Centerville with a strong understanding of the material and cultural distinctions between urban and suburban school sites, given my experiences as a teacher in Elizabeth, New Jersey and Eastham, Michigan. Future research in school culture needs to include cross-case comparison studies that address the ways in which differences in school culture from one district to the next are created and sustained. In what ways are discourse patterns, discursive conflicts, and ideological dilemmas consistent from site to site? In what ways are they different? Do staff members and students position themselves in noticeably different ways, given the culture of their schools? How do media representations and community reputation play into the cultures that form at different school sites?

\*

When educators begin to ask difficult questions not just about their classrooms, but about their *schools*, practices that seem natural and patterns that seem inevitable may begin to look far more socially and culturally constructed. My freedom from daily teaching duties in Centerville gave me the space to listen and observe, and what I heard were discourses that seemed shocking at first, but that became increasingly ordinary to me as time went by. I needed ethnography to *force* me to make the familiar strange. Without ethnography, it might not have occurred to me to ask why practices such as hall sweeps that would have seemed wrong in suburban schools seemed natural in Centerville.<sup>156</sup> In the midst of everyday patterns and interactions, one doesn't always

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<sup>156</sup> Note that in the eight years I worked at Eastham, there was never a hall sweep.

think to ask questions, but questioning is an essential strategy for those who seek to intervene in educational problems.

Working in Centerville taught Kate Seabrook to think in new ways about school culture, but also about inequities in the American education system. “I thought every kid had an equal education when I first started,” she said near the end of our interview. “I was like, public school, you’re able to get an education, why aren’t they doing it? And then it’s like, well, I don’t know. I learned that not all education is equal. And I see the reasons why” (interview, 1-24-07). Though Kate did not identify exactly *how* she understood education to be unequal based on her experiences in Centerville, her work with the Charleston group indicates that she had begun to consider the degree to which adult beliefs about race and class played a role in the relationships they formed with students and each other, and she had also grown more aware of the consequences of those beliefs for school culture.

Talking explicitly with teachers about the discursive basis of school culture, about the belief systems that are always circulating in forms of everyday talk, and about the implications of everyday talk for student learning is one way to make the more elusive aspects of unequal education visible. Words cannot change structural and material inequalities in education, but they can serve as resources for thinking, believing, and interacting in more equitable ways. If staff members in Centerville had recognized the power and the effects of their language choices, they might have also recognized the work language was doing to divide and defeat them, and how changes in language use could have helped them to establish a different tone and outlook for their school.

Toxic school culture in Centerville was not inevitable, nor was changing school culture simply a matter of bringing in a new principal, establishing a new mission statement, or enrolling a different population of students. The words staff members used each day created shared understandings within the school that gave rise to its culture. Words mattered in Centerville not just because of the patterns they established and the ideologies they revealed, but because of the understandings and identities they kept in place. Through culture, students in Centerville formed ideas about who they were and what they could or could not become. Adults also formed ideas about what they could accomplish as educators. With changes in school culture, students and staff members had the potential to imagine a different set of possibilities.

APPENDIX A  
SAMPLE FIELDWORK LOG

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Fieldnotes</b>	<b>Events</b>
R 9.21.06	11:15-2:15	3 hours	7 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Told Reggie in cafeteria about teacher-research</li> <li>• Consent talks: Morton, Gallagher, Ligget, Hitchens</li> <li>• Neal Morton talks about staff culture and SC team: we don't have as many "thugs" walking around</li> </ul>
R 9.21.06	School Board Mtg 7:30-9:30	2 hours	18 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens' comments @ leaving district</li> <li>• AA News covered discussion of count &amp; finances</li> <li>• Brd debate @ members as liaisons to district depts.</li> </ul>
F 9.22.06	9:30-11:30	2 hours	17 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saundra asks me to proctor MEAP in October</li> <li>• Consent talks: Henderson, Meissner</li> <li>• Ms. Shillington will ask union @ after-sch tutoring</li> </ul>
M 9.25.06	11:00-3:00	4 hours	11 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dr. W: "But do they read the paper?"</li> <li>• Ms. Tolbert: "We found SC meant diff things to diff people."</li> <li>• Consent talks: Tolbert, Pattinson, Ellis, Greiner, Henney, Cahoon, Plumley</li> </ul>
T 9.26.06	1:30-4:00	2.5 hours	23 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First major fight of the year</li> <li>• Staff mtg moderated by Simpson: Homecoming schedule; decide date for parent conferences; decide time for SSR and break contract w/Channel One</li> <li>• Consent talks: Jones, Pike</li> <li>• Brainstormed LA activities with Pike</li> <li>• Shaun: "They've never been asked to think critically @ the institutions that define their lives."</li> <li>• Ms. Nelson: "Never seen it this bad here before."</li> </ul>
W 9.27.06	7:30-noon	4.5 hours	13 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Count Day</li> <li>• Saundra worried @ new tchr's "mgmt style"</li> <li>• Lynn Nation: cause of fight was a juice box</li> <li>• Consent talks: Bridges, Granville, Hayward, Anderson</li> </ul>
R 9.28.06	9:50-3:10	5.5 hours	15 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consent talks: Cowan; Riley; Wolfe</li> <li>• Observed Gratsch's 5<sup>th</sup> hour in library</li> <li>• Ms. Tolbert rallies 9<sup>th</sup> gd for float bldg in cafeteria</li> </ul>
F 9.29.06	9:30-1:00	3.5 hours	13 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussed pep rally/drumline competition w/Wade Anderson</li> <li>• Sat w/Neal Morton @ homecoming assembly</li> <li>• Bio T quit today</li> </ul>
F 9.29.06	Homecoming Game 7:00-9:00	2 hours		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saw Reggie and Lynn Nation</li> </ul>
<b>Monthly total September</b>		<b>68.5 hours</b>	<b>298 pages</b>	

APPENDIX B  
PHASES OF FIELDWORK

September-November 2003	Initial visits to Centerville for Teachers for Tomorrow planning meetings and university-sponsored professional development workshops
June 2004	Re-established contact with Sandra Altman; site visits to reintroduce myself as TFT's university liaison to Centerville
July-August 2004	Curriculum meetings
August 2004-June 2005	Year one of fieldwork: regular visits to Centerville three times per week
August 2005-June 2006	Year two of fieldwork: regular visits to Centerville three times per week
August 2006-June 2007	Year three of fieldwork: daily visits to Centerville, weekly attendance at staff meetings, bimonthly attendance at school board meetings
August 2007-June 2008	Dissertation data analysis; intermittent school visits and attendance at school board meetings
August 2008-April 2009	Dissertation drafting and defense
May-June 2009	Final visits to Centerville



APPENDIX C  
SAMPLE FIELDNOTES

People don't buy it anymore. They used to have a new T orientation where they wd tell people e that. / why don't they have it any more? D asked. / just stopped doing it. / who? / when Kadonup, R said. / but these are the people we elected. / you still don't have a contract, D said. / Nope, R replied. / so people don't have short term dis. they want to borrow sick days. / well, when you don't get paid when you're sick, D said. 3

Kids walk around saying they hate this school.

"This school is wack," I hear that again and again.

Don't exactly know what it means, but it means something,

just look around at the place.

I have yet to have anybody ask what happened to my missing ceiling tile.

my heating unit is falling apart. (a strip of metal was hanging down)

They look at this place and they don't care about it.

They have no pride in it.

They look at the middle school and say why did they get a new building and we didn't? they see themselves as this appendage on a beautiful new building. Basically as the wart on the face of the place.

we have a culture of failure here.

They don't take responsibility because we don't hold them responsible for anything.

They are expert manipulators.

So I decided to take a couple weeks and just listen. I started looking around.

They have no pride in themselves. They see themselves as failures. This is a culture of failure.

And - The only option they see for themselves is the military recruiter. Joining the military is the only way they can get out of W.R.

Excerpt from private conversation recorded between Ellen Garrity and me; Elaborated into opening scene for Introduction (recorded 2-13-07)

SAMPLE FIELDNOTES

like yesterday -

I call it that Tuesday bullshit.

I hear [redacted] saying, we ought to try this -

I almost raised my hand, and then I said, naahh...

I <sup>like to</sup> come over <sup>here</sup> to check in, see how things are going. This morning, (he points across the hall), everybody in there said, I want to quit my job. I don't wanna be here!

me: I heard the same thing upstairs this morning. The same thing!

DS: everybody here with their heads down.

\* Just listen to what they say! Listen, listen to what they're saying!

DS: They <sup>say</sup> faces have spirits, that you can feel the spirit of a place.

Otherwise, what explains the difference between one place & another?

Go to class!  
Where's your pass!  
Go to lunch!  
Get back to class!

look around, aint nothing on the walls.

me: pull up your pants!

DS: Pull up your pants.

This place isn't a school!  
It's a reformatory!  
It's a prison!

Wed 10-25-06

Excerpt from private conversation recorded between Kevin Shulty and me; Elaborated into an illustrative example for Chapter One (recorded 10-25-06)

SAMPLE FIELDNOTES

on task conversation. Did you know that? You can say that to teachers? /

Nah, they won't believe you. They think it's their room, they can tell you what to do. It's a power thing.

I think it should be a democracy, not a dictatorship. /

They are bunched up by several inches on top of his spottless white sneakers. As he rearranges them, Eseehe has a rubber band around the cuff under the bunches of denim. That's what he's straightening white cotton sweatjacket, zip up front. Two patch pockets.

\_\_\_\_\_ says, \_\_\_\_\_, I like you. I want you to go back in there and learn. She doesn't know you. Well, she knows you, but she doesn't KNOW you. let her get to know you. He comes over to me, looks at me. Do you have a minute? Looks down the hall where \_\_\_\_\_ is hanging out. He is brilliant. They have communication styles, and these teachers... they think they're being disrespected. He sees what's going on. And unlike most of our sts, he's articulate enough that he can express it. \_\_\_\_\_ shakes his head. why don't we talk our neediest sts and put them all in the same class.

bends denim to adjust his pants at the ankles.

you need to take off the headphones.

put them in his pocket.

The cord stretches from the patch pocket to the CD player in the other.

His radio comes on. "do you copy?"

Yes I do. I got delayed. I'm having a conference w/ a student. I'm on my way.

Excerpt from hallway conversation recorded between Reggie Bridges and Armel; Elaborated into an ethnographic scene for footnote 122 in Chapter Four (recorded 1-25-07)

APPENDIX D  
 CENTERVILLE HIGH SCHOOL STAFF MEMBERS†  
 ALL NAMES ARE PSEUDONYMS

NAME	ROLE	ASCIBED RACIAL IDENTITY
Bill Akers*	Teacher	White
Saundra Altman	Support staff	White
Wade Anderson	Teacher	White
Reggie Bridges	Teacher	Black
Marty Cahoon	Teacher	White
Shaun Coleman	Teacher	Black
Gary Cowan	Support staff member	White
Rudy Darnell*	Teacher	Black
Elijah Davis*	Administrator	Black
Antoine Duncan	Teacher (in another building)	Black
Belinda Edwards	Teacher (in another building)	Black
Andy Ellis	Teacher	White
Loren Faulkner	Support staff member	White
Trina Gallagher	Teacher	Black
Ellen Garrity*	Teacher	White
Helen Granville	Teacher	White
Allison Gratsch	Teacher	White
Harry Greiner	Teacher	White
Debby Harrington	Support staff member	White
Doug Henderson	Teacher	White
Beth Henney*	Support staff member	White
Ralph Hitchens	Teacher	White
Mary Jo Horne	Support staff member	White
Sonia Huddleston*	Student teacher	Black
Joyce Jones	Teacher	White
Brenda Kastner*	Teacher	White
Roseanne LaChance	Support staff	Black
Al Ligget	Support staff	Black
Erika Lindberg*	Support staff	White
Dorothy Loveland	Support staff	Black
Andrea Lyons*	Support staff	White
Lisa Marshall*	Support staff	White
Danny McGhee	Support staff	White
Randy Milford*	Support staff	White
Mr. McMillan	Substitute teacher	White
Matthew Meissner	Teacher	White
James Merrick	Teacher	White
Emma Middleton	Teacher	White
Neal Morton	Teacher	White
Rachel Moses*	Teacher	White
Lynn Nation	Support staff	Black
Roz Nelson	Teacher	White
Tina Olsen	Teacher	White
Shelley Pattinson	Teacher	White
Tammy Pike*	Teacher	White
Sheila Pitcher	Teacher	White
Camille Plumley	Teacher	Black
Robin Riley*	Teacher	Black

Eugene Rowe*	Teacher	White
“Roughhouse”*	Support staff	White
Amber Sandstrom*	Student teacher	White
Kate Seabrook*	Teacher	White
Henry Schultz*	Teacher	White
Eleanor Shillington	Teacher	White
Kevin Shulty	Teacher	Black
Frank Simpson*	Administrator	White
Linda Spencer*	Student teacher	White
Wendy Swensen	Teacher	White
Sylvia Thacker	Support staff	Black
Grace Thomas	Teacher	Black
Louise Tolbert*	Teacher	White
Darryl Trueman*	Support staff	Black
Stan Varney	Teacher	White
Barry Vincent*	Teacher	White
Pat Waddell*	Teacher	White
Herb Warner*	Administrator	Black
Kendra Wheatley*	Support staff	White
Jimmy Wolfe	Teacher	White
Roberta Worthy	Teacher	Black
Evelyn Yancey*	Administrator	Black

#### CENTERVILLE CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATORS

NAME	ROLE	ASCRIBED RACIAL IDENTITY
Alice Hayward*	Central office administrator	Black
Paul Lipinski*	Superintendent	White
Cora Nicholas*	Central office administrator	White
Estella Woodson*	Central office administrator	Black

#### CENTERVILLE SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

NAME	ROLE	ASCRIBED RACIAL IDENTITY
Jacqui Ford	School board member	Black
Cynthia Irons	School board member	Black
Russ Kimbrough	School board member	White
Leroy Meeks	School board member	Black
Steve Mortimer	Former school board member	White

#### CONSULTANTS WHO WORKED IN CENTERVILLE

NAME	ROLE	ASCRIBED RACIAL IDENTITY
Hilda Collins	HSTW Consultant	White
Joan Dunmore	HSTW Consultant	White
Cindy Hayes	National Consultant	White
Nancy MacArthur	Local Consultant	White
Dodie Partington	HSTW Consultant	White
Glenn Singleton (not a pseudonym)	National Consultant	Black

†List includes all staff members mentioned in this study. Names also include staff members who left the school at some point during my three-year stay, some after many years in the district, others after less than one semester. I have not identified staff members more specifically in terms of department affiliation, role, or length of stay in the attempt to protect anonymity.

\*Staff member no longer works at Centerville High School as of 2008-09 due to retirement, internal transfer, resignation, or contract not being renewed. Over one-third of the staff I worked with during the 2006-07 school year is no longer employed at Centerville High School.

APPENDIX E  
INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

NAME	ROLE	DATE
Eugene Rowe	Teacher	Thursday 11.2.06
Shaun Coleman	Teacher	Friday 11.3.06
Harry Greiner	Teacher	Wednesday 11.8.06
Debby Harrington	Support staff member	Wednesday 11.8.06
Parents xxx and xxx	Community residents	Friday 11.10.06
Herb Warner	Administrator	Tuesday 11.14.06
Dorothy Loveland	Support staff member	Tuesday 11.28.06
Reggie Bridges	Teacher	Wednesday 11.29.06
James Merrick	Teacher	Wednesday 11.29.06
Darryl Trueman	Support staff member	Thursday 11.30.06
Tina Olsen	Teacher	Friday 12.1.06
Eleanor Shillington	Teacher	Monday 12.4.06
Sheila Pitcher	Teacher	Monday 12.4.06
Neal Morton	Teacher	Wednesday 12.6.06
Wade Anderson	Teacher	Wednesday 12.6.06
Tammy Pike	Teacher	Thursday 12.7.06
Al Ligget	Support staff member	Friday 12.8.06
Henry Schultz	Teacher	Friday 12.8.06
Ellen Garrity	Teacher	Monday 12.11.06
Ralph Hitchens	Teacher	Monday 12.11.06
Matthew Meissner	Teacher	Wednesday 12.13.06
Marty Cahoon	Teacher	Thursday 12.14.06
Andy Ellis	Teacher	Tuesday 12.19.06
Community Resident xxx	Community resident	Friday 1.19.07
Erika Lindberg	Support staff member	Monday 1.22.07
Randy Milford	Support staff member	Tuesday 1.23.07
Kate Seabrook	Teacher	Wednesday 1.24.07
Stan Varney	Teacher	Wednesday 1.31.07
Gary Cowan	Support staff member	Wednesday 1.31.07
Doug Henderson	Teacher	Thursday 2.1.07
Louise Tolbert	Teacher	Thursday 2.1.07
Rudy Darnell	Teacher	Monday 2.12.07
Lynn Nation	Support staff member	Tuesday 2.13.07
Allison Gratsch	Teacher	Thursday 2.15.07
Pat Waddell	Teacher	Friday 2.23.07
Roberta Worthy	Teacher	Monday 2.26.07
Kendra Wheatley	Support staff member	Tuesday 3.13.07
Frank Simpson	Administrator	Thursday 3.22.07
Wendy Swensen	Teacher	Thursday 3.29.07
Emma Middleton	Teacher	Thursday 3.29.07
Camille Plumley	Teacher	Wednesday 4.4.07
Amber Sandstrom	Student teacher	Wednesday 4.18.07
Linda Spencer	Student teacher	Thursday 4.19.07
Sonia Huddleston	Student teacher	Thursday 4.19.07
Roz Nelson	Teacher	Friday 4.20.07
Lisa Marshall	Support staff member	Monday 4.23.07
Jimmy Wolfe	Teacher	Wednesday 4.25.07
Robin Riley	Teacher	Wednesday 5.2.07

Helen Granville	Teacher	Thursday 5.3.07
Joyce Jones	Teacher	Wednesday 5.9.07
Bill Akers	Teacher	Monday 5.14.07
Roseanne LaChance, Mary Jo Horne	Support staff members	Wednesday 5.23.07
Shelley Pattinson	Teacher	Thursday 5.24.07
Danny McGhee	Support staff member	Monday 6.4.07
Rachel Moses	Teacher	Wednesday 6.6.07
Grace Thomas	Teacher	Tuesday 6.12.07
Saundra Altman	Teacher	Wednesday 6.13.07
Loren Faulkner	Support staff member	Thursday 6.14.07



## APPENDIX F FIELDNOTE INDEX

### January 2007

1/22

- Simpson reference to black student's mom "screaming profanity and hanging up"
- Depty Milford says school culture starts w/ admin and they should be more visible
- **Ethno moment:** Parent asks me, "So what do you think of this place?" ... I said I don't think you can blame problems on the children, or say it's solely the teachers or administrators. "The community," she said.
- Meissner complains about semester exam failures, then: "I know what it is to not have much"; he thinks Ruby Payne should be required reading in colleges
- Parent: "I'm here to search my son's locker"

1/23

- Depty Milford tells me about theft of LCD projectors
- **Ethno moment:** Merrick introduces me to new teacher, calling me "a very important person around our school"
- Noticing amount of joking and bantering at staff mtg (who's silent, and what do the jokes cover up?), esp jokes about jail (Eleanor "get 'em out of lockup [for MEAP]"; Louise "called his name 6<sup>th</sup> hour and sts started laughing"; Louise "I hear the court has a couple [sts we could get back for enrollment]")

1/24

- Ms. Worthy wants xxx in st asst job; Dorothy wants to know why he can't take a math class
- **Ethno moment:** Middle school tchr asks, "None of the natives have grunted at you yet?"
- Mr. Shulty refers to the profanity Dr. Warner uses with the kids

1/25

- Hall sweep: "There's just no sense of urgency," Al says
- Mr. Cowan replacing lock on Henderson's door after theft of LCD projector
- Reggie and Armel in the hallway
- Simpson on PA with threats about hall sweeps and suspensions: "If you're out in the hallway, you can be written up on the spot"
- Saundra indicts sub's lack of English background
- Staff members discuss other staff members at lunch
- Helen defines "advocates" at lunch with a critical tone
- Roseanne tells me the new math tchr quit after two days; we discuss white tchrs; Darryl, "The problem is at home" vs. Roseanne, "No, the problem is not at home. The problem is that all these kids failed math"
- **Ethno moment:** Harry: "We need to get Jennifer her own office"
- Staff member personal issues: xxx doesn't have money to fill up his gas tank; xxx's husband and son were both involved in drugs
- Security called three times in one day (room 110, Ms. Thomas, Ms. Granville)

1/29

- Lunch teachers discuss hall walkers and new policy of writing kids up on the spot
- Student gets kicked out of Granville: "I'm tired of people thinking I can't do better. I know I can!"

APPENDIX G  
 AREA SCHOOL DISTRICTS  
 ALL NAMES ARE PSEUDONYMS

SCHOOL DISTRICT	HIGH SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION*
Anchorage	96% white, <1% black; 7% free and reduced lunch
Ann Arbor (not a pseudonym)	<i>Weston High School</i> 57% white, 18% black, 17% Asian; 16% free and reduced lunch  <i>Northcrest High School</i> 69% white, 13% black, 11% Asian; 14% free and reduced lunch
Brockway	54% white, 42% black; 30% free and reduced lunch
Centerville	59% black, 38% white; 62% free and reduced lunch
Decker	61% white, 34% black; 9% free and reduced lunch
Eastham	78% white, 9% black, 11% Asian; 10% free and reduced lunch
Fern Creek	99% black, <1% white; 65% free and reduced lunch
Gladwin	96% white, <1% black; 7% free and reduced lunch
Henderson	86% white, 9% black; 14% free and reduced lunch
Middletown	96% white, <1% black; 8% free and reduced lunch
Prospect	92% white, 2% black; 4% free and reduced lunch
Rosedale	96% white, 1% black; 40% free and reduced lunch
Wilmont	64% black, 32% white; 49% free and reduced lunch

\*Demographic data taken from GreatSchools.net ([www.greatschools.net](http://www.greatschools.net), accessed 5-14-09).

APPENDIX H  
PARTIAL LIST OF INTERVIEW CODES

Administration	Students
Challenges working in a district like this	Academic ability/engagement
Class consciousness	Attitudes and values
Classroom management/discipline	Behavior
Colorblindness	Dress
Comparisons to other districts	Economic status
Culture of the building	Families
Defining the school and community	Having “issues” or being “at risk”
Discourse markers	Perceptions (of the school, of themselves)
Enrollment	Personal traits
Expectations	Valuing education or not
Forms of talk (the way people talk)	Where they’ll go in life
Glenn Singleton	Teachers
Historical changes in the district	Teacher agency
Jokes	Having it
Media representations	Lacking it
Metaphors	Teacher background
Morale	Teachers being new
Perception/Reputation (of the district)	Teachers caring/loving the kids
Practices	Teacher connectedness to the community
Professionalism	Teacher messages to the kids
Race consciousness	Teacher self-positioning
Racially-coded language	Theory-building
Ruby Payne	Union
Segregation	What we need to do
Staff	
Staff beliefs (or differences in beliefs)	
Staff communications/relations	
Staff division	
Staff resistance	
Staff social groups	

APPENDIX I  
SAMPLE INDEX FOR “COLORBLINDNESS” INTERVIEW CODE  
VETERAN TEACHERS  
(INITIALS REPRESENT PSEUDONYMS)

- AE (I try not to, try not to turn into it, because I think I know, I think I know where they're coming from, and I think it's because, because of what they perceive, but unless they're in my, I mean I, you know, I have, in terms of good relationships, and conflicts with students, I think it, ***I don't see any racial trends in them.*** I mean I have just as many good relationships with ***African American students*** as, you know, ***Caucasian students***, and vice versa, just as many personality conflicts .... I don't really, ***ever really see a racial trend***, it's more of a behavior trend, know, you know. So I, I usually don't get too involved with it, and it's never been taken too far, but; It's just, you know, but again. Even though it's there, it never seems to be, like, you walk around the hallways feeling like there's any tension. You know, we have our incidents, but ***I never think it's usually along racial lines***)
- MM (I mean I think that, that racially we are a very unique place. And, you know, the, the kids that are here, I mean it's, within the classroom, ***unless you make it an issue, race is not an issue.*** I mean I have the same expectations from, you know, my girls as I do my boys. My black kids as I do my Mexicans, my Russians, and my Americans. Or my, my Caucasians. Europeans, whatever the term is, the PC term is of the day. Um, I mean I expect them to do the same things. And, you know, I don't sit here and go home and, and grade a paper and think, ***I'm grading this black kid's paper.*** I'm grading whoever's it is. I'm grading Jazminn's paper (2 second pause). Jazminn's Jazminn. That's who she is, and ***I'm not going to treat her differently*** because she's a color.... I mean if you're good in math, I have a different expectation in you in physics than I do Raymond. Who struggles in math. I, I mean I don't expect him to get as far as other people. But I expect him to work as hard, and that ***doesn't matter if he's black or white***)
- RN (***Everybody gets along.*** Not only just with race, but also with, um, homosexuality issues, there's just an embracing of everyone in the group, and ***everybody kind of just gets along*** really well; Whereas I would say the class of '07, um, the, probably the coolest thing ... is just how .... they've ***come together.*** And just by them all ***coming together, not caring what race*** anyone is, and ***working together*** they've achieved so much .... they just ***work so well together.*** And ***I don't notice it so much with them.*** I just notice that sort of ***sense of community***, where they are ***like family*** together; I would say most of the staff is cohesive and seems to really care about the students. And ***I haven't noticed any racism amongst the staff at all.*** As far as someone trying to say I only like this group of students or that group of students)
- HS (I see teachers trying very hard, and ***I don't see race amongst teachers***, I haven't seen it, you know, they just care about kids; I just think there's a, there's a barrier out

there. I mean, you've been around enough kids, they're just kids. *They're not black, they're not white, they're just kids.* Uh, and that, that is, uh, that's the way I saw it, as I look at teachers, I don't, *I don't ever hear anything* that to me sounds like that race is a factor in holding these kids back. I don't, I don't, *I don't hear that. I don't sense that.* I just see people trying to, trying to do their job, trying to teach. Like I tell these kids, I don't care who you are. If you, if you have a good attitude, pfff, man, you got an army on your team; *I don't see that,* I don't know, maybe you have, *I haven't seen anybody that,* and yet now and then you hear it from the kids)

- ES (*I didn't think so* [that we had a race problem] until they brought in that speaker at the beginning of the year, so obviously somebody perceives that there is, that race plays a role, *I never felt that way* here at Centerville, *I've never felt* like it's played a role here at Centerville, but I hear more and more comments of late; like we need a black admin, we need a white admin, we need a black T, we need a white T, no, we need a good teacher, black white, purple, yellow, green, or gold, we need a good teacher, it *doesn't make any difference*, but you hear more and more that we need some black students in this organization, we need some white students)
- GT (Teach them what it's about, it's not about a white organization, it's not about a black organization, *these are for all of Centerville students*, but they've never been taught)
- LT (They don't, they're very, very vocal, in their, um, *low socioeconomic. Black or white.* Because I think we get, sometimes mixed up with, what's, *what's black culture and what's white culture.* And it's not either one, *it's low socioeconomic.* I thi-, in, in many cases; I've heard the kids talk about, um, affirmative action. Black kids talking about how bad it is, white kids talking about how good it is, and vice versa. It's not, things are not divided here black and white. Like they are in other places. Uh, I remember ... the O.J. Simpson case. You know, that was an interesting time ... I mean even then, you know, it, there was, *it was the socioeconomic thing.* They associated with, you know, a guy being screwed. I mean that's what they thought. *Black and white, it didn't matter.* That, that just, and that was the first thing that struck me, I was like, this is not, black kids think he's innocent, and white kids think he's guilty. It wasn't like that at all. And I was like, wow. Because everywhere else, it pretty much was. You know. Not here. That was my first, *this is different* (laughs)! But it's been like that ever since then, you know? And I like that. That *things are not so black and white here.* I mean, black kids and white kids date each other all the time, take each other, they don't think anything of it.)
- SV (we had people hanging out together and *it didn't make any difference what color* their skin was until *the outside told us* it made, it made a difference, and it was the outside that came in and said you can't do that, and it was the people that moved in that said, you can't do that, and I think we were ahead of our time and we had to go back, but I heard some of the stories and well, why, those kids played football together and now they're beating each other up w/ two by fours, it was a strange time, strange to hear about, too, b/c I had friends on both sides of that line, that *I didn't*

*know there was a line; I think it's becoming an issue* now more than it's been in the past, though *it's not really a black/white issue*, it's a poor and poorer issue, and people aren't seeing that it's poor and poorer, we start looking at skin colors, and then we start saying well you're trailer trash, but I think it is *more an economic situation than a racial situation*, but *we don't know how to call it anything other than racial*; I tend to look at it as *economic things more than a color thing*; I don't think we have, which it's hard to say, after starting to read that, *I don't think we have those problems*, but I didn't think we had those problems [then] either, and then we did have, two years of them, I think sometimes when *people from the outside* come in and say, okay, you have these problems, you just don't know it, well if you don't, if it's not a problem, b/c you don't know it, then maybe it's *not* a problem; I have tell my students, I am a prejudiced person, I don't like lazy people, and *lazy people come in all shapes, sizes, colors, and religions*, if you're in my classroom, don't be lazy, and we'll get along)

- PW (*I don't think like that...*)
- JW (*I don't really see a big, I don't know*. Some people have told me that they think *there's a racial thing going on* in our school, separated blacks, whites. *I don't see it too much*. I see the kids interact with each other, black or white.... I think kids here that interact well are ones that play sports together maybe, that are on a team together or, you know. I think the sports help out with that area. Because you're on a team with somebody, and you become, you're a team together. That's not, you know, that, sports have always been a good thing for that. Uh (pause) but as far as, *I don't really see a race, racial* (pause) uh, between the kids, uh (pause). I would separate our kids *not so much by race* but by, uh, the ones that know, kind of, that they're going to move on and the ones that don't know what they're doing.)

APPENDIX J  
DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Data source	Analysis procedure	Product of analysis
58 interview transcripts	<p>Open coding (Strauss &amp; Corbin, 1998) resulting in 81 codes</p> <p>Axial coding (Strauss &amp; Corbin, 1998) resulting in thematizing across codes</p> <p>Generating and testing assertions, seeking confirming and disconfirming evidence for patterns of generalization (Erickson, 1986)</p>	<p>Master list of interview patterns presented in the form of a 272-page alphabetical index of staff beliefs on a range of topics, with an itemized list of participant views under each topic</p> <p>5 integrative memos (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995) containing warranted assertions (Erickson, 1986) describing generalized patterns of talk, interaction, and belief in Centerville</p>
4000 pages of fieldnotes	<p>Selective coding (Strauss &amp; Corbin, 1998) for events and interactions that <i>illustrate</i> patterns identified through interviews</p>	<p>Partial index of significant fieldwork moments; significant moments flagged throughout fieldnote corpus using post-it notes</p> <p>Set of 30 elaborated scenes creating an archive of significant events ready for integration into chapters and analysis in relation to chapter themes</p>

APPENDIX K  
ASSERTIONS LINKING FORMS OF TALK TO  
RACE- AND CLASS-BASED BELIEF SYSTEMS

TALK TO AND ABOUT KIDS

The prevailing way we talk to students

- Examples of lack of respect for students
- Examples of students' abilities being maligned or undermined

The prevailing way we talk about students

- Examples of negative talk in the lounge
- Examples of negative talk in the front office
- Example of a negative "grapevine" of talk

ENGAGING OR NOT ENGAGING WITH THE ISSUES THROUGH TALK

What we do and don't talk about

- Not talking about "the real issue" or "the root problem"
- Not agreeing with the focus of talk
- Deliberately dodging certain subjects

Why we don't talk

- There are no good answers
- People are resistant to discussing issues of race and racism
- People are afraid to talk about race

RACE ISSUES AT THE ROOT OF THE SCHOOL'S PROBLEMS

Naming race (and class) as salient factors in interactions between teachers and students

- Teachers accepting that race is playing a role in their interactions
- Teachers resisting that race is playing a role in their interactions (see also category below on anxiety)
- Teachers invoking race without realizing the implicit racism in their stance
- Teachers suggesting that it *is* race, but tentative in their assertions

Race (and class) as an implied subtext in interactions between teachers and students

- Race differences as salient to a teacher's identity and adjustment
- Naming race as an early factor in acclimating to the task of working with students in this building
- Anxiety about race as factor in acclimating to the task of working with students in this building
- Naming race as an early factor in acclimating to the task of working with staff in this building
- Race differences implicit in communication problems across a linguistic divide

Racial tension as an unarticulated subtext in the building

Race as something they wish would go away



## THE ROLE OF CLASS IN PEOPLE'S THINKING

### Class as explanatory for issues at the institutional level

- Invoking class instead of race as most salient to the school's challenges
- Invoking class as most salient to the TEACHERS' struggles
  - Teachers lack the tools to understand lower-class students' views of education
  - Teachers have classist views of students
- Invoking race instead of class as most salient to the school's challenges
- Race issues hiding within discussion of class issues
- Invoking class as an excuse for low achievement and poor teaching

### Class as explanatory for behaviors and values we see in this school/community

- Not valuing education
- They DO value education
- Parents' class status linked to students' inability to imagine a better future
- Critique (what's wrong with what the students want for themselves?)
- Students' self-concept linked in general to inability to imagine a better future
- District's reputation linked to inability to envision a better future
- Noting students saying the school is poor w/o linking it to self-concept

### Teachers managing the district's reputation and perception

- Reacting defensively
- Helplessness and lack of agency
- Beginning teachers learning about the district's reputation
- Reasons for the bad reputation
  - Race-based reasons
  - Class-based reasons
  - Perpetuating negativity internally
- School culture linked to acceptance of failure

### Teacher ideas about class

- Lower-class people as a drain on the quality of education in the building
- Lower-class people not exhibiting self-control in conversation
- Lower-class students not being "wired" correctly
- Critique: Unearthing implicit racism in complaints about loud student talk
- Lower-class people not valuing hard work
- Lower-class people not taking care of property
- Lower-class people inordinately valuing material possessions: the sneakers cliché
- Judgment of students based on low-income status

### Class as a factor in teacher-student interactions

- Class as salient to the teacher's identity and mission
- Class differences as salient to a teacher's adjustment

Class differences as salient to teachers' ability to work with and understand students (related to what teachers do and don't understand about the community)

People who align with students in terms of class

Class differences as salient to what a teacher chooses to teach

Class differences as salient to choice of teacher attire

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