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The evidence in evidence-based policy:
The case of *No Child Left Behind*

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1. Introduction

Twenty years after No Child Left Behind (NCLB) took effect in the United States as the paradigmatic accountability policy in 2001, its core construction of schooling remains embedded in current discussions about the future of public education, within education policy and the field of education alike. The paradigm of accountability as the ultimate rationale of schooling has prompted criticism since its earliest days (e.g. Levin, 1974). Yet, it has prevailed in the past four decades of the age of accountability (e.g. Hopmann, 2008), transforming the longstanding idea of accountability in education into a linear attribution of responsibility for so-called academic achievement indicators to teachers, or schools, or districts. This narrow understanding of accountability has its roots in the school standards movement of the 1980s (e.g. Labaree, 2010, pp. 3-5; Cuban, 2007, p. 7) that continued system reform approaches by theorizing that the quality of schooling would be advanced by elevating content standards, requiring assessments that matched these new standards, improving teacher quality and directing accountability measures toward teachers and schools so to incentivize actors and to prompt their compliance (e.g. Desimone, 2013, pp. 2). Over time, state-level guidance tightened into local directives when the age of accountability culminated in NCLB (Mehta, 2013a, p. 287) that codified high-stakes testing as a basis for federal funding and added public pressure through publicizing school-level test results across the nation as a first-ever federal mandate (Dee/Jacob, 2011, p. 318).

Education was and continues to be a state matter, and when NCLB required states to implement a system of test score accountability by the end of 2002, each state was left to its own devices to create and run accountability within a calendar year. Some states merely adapted existing structures while the majority of states found themselves challenged in building a new accountability system. This variety in itself prevented any representative national inquiry into the effects on NCLB other than its failure to reach its major goal, which was to ensure that every student reaches 100% proficiency in Math and Reading by 2014. Research on the effects NCLB was still nascent by its intended ending in 2014 (Reback et al., 2014, p. 1), partly because of diminished scholarly interest after its failed reauthorization in 2007, but mostly due to the law's heterogeneous implementation across the states. Early conceptual criticism of NCLB's structure proved warranted: Scholarship of the past decades documents the many ways in which NCLB could not and did not reach its proclaimed results and thereby expectedly failed by its own measures. Little to no improvement of test scores was found and the so-called achievement gap persist (e.g. Polikoff, 2012; Figlio/Loeb, 2011; Dee/Jacob, 2010; Ladd/Lauen, 2010). Against this background, it is puzzling to find the paradigm of narrow accountability fairly intact today, for example in the current U.S. federal education policy of ESSA or in efforts within the field of education to develop more precise indicators as better measures for so-called student achievement. Indeed, the initial high stakes and their punitive impetus have receded

federally, and while ESSA may be "a paper tiger with no new funds or accountability for results" (Schoales, 2019), it is a structural replica of NCLB (Cuban, 2020).

In view of narrow accountability's sustained impact, this thesis contributes to widening accountability's scope to otherwise obviated perspectives and actors (Gunzenhauser/Hyde, 2014). In particular, I pursued two aims: First, I distilled the construction of narrow accountability directly from the NCLB legal language so to explicate its inscribed problem definitions (Mehta, 2013a). These form the discursive boundaries that shape the debate about accountability today. Making those transparent allows for rigorous scrutiny and potential counteraction. Second, I took NCLB's goals at face value, i.e. suspended their evaluation and inquired into narrow accountability's potential manifestations of the goals and to learn how specific people in an example place, i.e. Alabama, experienced schooling under accountability. These two example cases relate the discussion to policy and practice, serving as the primary paradigmatic accountability policy that continues to affect policy today and providing the case in point for the lasting and continued effects of histories and contexts on the conditions of schooling. It was the longstanding relationship between the University of Alabama and the University of Vienna that decided my choice of state, because it granted me access to the field and practical support for my research. In doing so, I responded to calls for wider frameworks for standards and accountability and broader academic and non-academic indicators (e.g. Ladd/Jacob, 2017, p. 483; Polikoff/Huffmann/Greene, 2017; Ladd/Lauen, 2010; Sunderman, 2008). I also addressed calls to debate public schooling beyond the accountability rationale (e.g. Hallett/Meanwell, 2016; Mehta, 2013a; Mehta, 2013b) and to conduct research that emphasizes schooling as a place (Labaree, 2014).

My approach to this study originated from traditional Curriculum Studies, the longstanding body of scholarship engaged with "matters pertaining to the life and program of the school" (Wraga/Hlebowitsh, 2003, p. 430) that holds the advancement of schooling as its immediate end-in-view and leads "enquiry into schooling, designed to support deliberative action" (Westbury, 2013, p. 646). It conceptualizes schooling as the professional practice that serves specific students of specific communities that carry particular histories and contexts. As such, schooling is intertwined with its immediate conditions formed by its place. Abstractions cannot capture the intricacies and depths of concrete practice (Hlebowitsh, 2005, p. 79); hence inquiry into phenomena of schooling needs grounding in a specific practice and the conditions of that practice. Toward this goal, the field of Curriculum Studies utilizes a wide variety of theories and methods for its work on schooling that makes it eclectic, critical and creative (Deng, 2018, p. 701). This thesis understands teaching and schooling through the framework formed from the Bildung-centered, German *Didaktik* tradition and the U.S. *Curriculum* traditions of liberal education. It comprises fundamental ideas about the purposes of schooling that both traditions represent, including education as self-formation, being in

command of one's own faculties that are directed to a self-determined, open future that schooling represents through its school life that is life in itself rather than a preparation for it (Sivesind/Luimes, 2017, p. 227). Students' experiences and capabilities direct teachers' choice of content and to create educative experiences through teacher-student interaction on the basis of chosen content that is merely of exemplary value to the students in learning about various views of the world, the *Modi des Weltverstehens* (Sivesind/Luimes, 2017, p. 221). In doing so, teachers relate students' lifeworlds, their histories and contexts, to content and make schooling relevant for the specific students in their specific places. Rather than specific content, education characterizes "what students should become" (Sivesind/Luimes, 2017, p. 224). As a result, this framework is normative in the sense that it is built on the pillars of *Bildung* and the aim to have subject matter become meaning through interactions between students and teacher. Teaching is restrained in the sense that it keeps the students and their holistic advancement at the forefront of any considerations. (Hopmann, 2007) Equally, it acknowledges the immediate relevance of schooling's specific embeddedness into its respective community and the educative experience it provides through continuously amended ends-in-view of learning. (Hlebowitsh, 2005)

Given my approach, this study stands intentionally separate from evaluation or implementation or best practice endeavors that inevitably presuppose a degree of linearity in and sameness of the experience of schooling that I cannot reconcile. Similarly, the study claims no causality in the quantitative sense because whether things happened as a reaction to any reform or in spite of it is anyone's guess. It appears meaningful to stipulate that individuals act on what they understand to be good reasons. Their actions make sense against their horizons and in the context of their intentionality and it was my research task to elicit their mindsets and lines of reasoning in order to learn about their constructions. I sought to see the world as it presents itself to them and to leave it to them to assign meaning and relevance to their experiences. Whatever I found about Alabama would have been at risk of mischaracterization and misinterpretation; what I may have seen as problematic or successful might have proven to be entirely irrelevant to the interviewees' practice and their understanding of their profession. To understand a place means understanding it from the metaphorical inside, i.e. the way that those involved in it see it, and as such it was never my approach to uncover truth of any kind in the spirit of, for example, investigative journalism. This was a worry voiced by an interviewee whose concerns I was able to put to rest and win their trust for speaking to me.

My study and its approach advocate for embracing human diversity and the multiplicity of purposes of schooling, thereby affirming multiple realities and accepting conflicting notions that result in dissonance as the constitutive tensions to education (Labaree, 2017). Rather than seeking to find any schooling universals, my work joined efforts to move the accountability conversation forward, i.e.

beyond its narrow construction, by utilizing a wider understanding of schooling that is derived from longstanding existing scholarship that predates the age of accountability.

This study proceeded in three stages: Reviewing existing literature yielded summaries of NCLB but no actual analysis of the language that explicated what it wanted, from whom and why. Hence, the first stage subjected the original legal language of NCLB's goals to a Critical Discourse Analysis instrument along which to identify the law's addressees and possible connotations as well as any rationale it provided for achieving its goals. The second stage explored Alabama as a place through historical work and various secondary context data, including demographic data on population characteristics, income distribution patterns and educational attainment. To reconstruct the state's genealogy of accountability policy, I utilized state reports, newspaper articles, press releases, public statements, white papers such as submissions to the Department of Education and various work products of the Alabama State Board of Education. This mosaic served as a collection of complementary data that represented different angles, i.e. constructions, encapsulated by the multiple realities of Alabama schooling and the multiplicity of ideas that exist (Mehta, 2013a, p. 316). When poverty emerged as central to the state's social geography and policy debate, it became a pivot through which I chose the potential interviewees. Stage three included nine recorded, in-person conversations I had with superintendents, principals and academic counselors from high-poverty indicated and low-poverty indicated schools and districts during a research trip to Alabama in September 2018. I collected the interview material along the domains of phenomenological interviewing (Bevan, 2014), i.e. contextualization, apprehension and clarification, to obtain lived experience accounts through conversations that remained explorative in nature. Full transcripts were coded in multiple rounds of full-transcript close readings, initially along the *Didaktik* and *Curriculum* framework of schooling and in the following rounds the individual codes were sharpened and differentiated through between-transcript comparisons.

The broad range of the collected material provided for a rich and in-depth description of Alabama schooling and its complex interactions with the contexts onto which this reform fell. The interviewee soundboard resonated a unified story about how schooling in Alabama was affected by accountability and how little NCLB or ESSA matter to the interviewees' practice today. State plans and their professional accountability and standards reverberate in their commitment to the communities and students they serve in doing the best they can to advance students and families in the conditions they find themselves in. Those are characterized by generational poverty and wealth, reflecting historic disparities that shape the state. The aim was to learn and document how the interviewees construct the phenomenon of accountability against their horizons and in the context of their intentionality so to understand what they qualify as a problem, as relevant to their experience and practice, as those gatekeepers who negotiate policy and community. In this sense, the

interviews are not representative in a quantitative sense that they speak to all possible interviews in the state but they represent a saturated narrative that is emblematic in reaching beyond the individual specific interviews. The study arrives at complementary constructions of accountability that challenge its narrow form and widen it for policy and practice and for the field of education.

By way of its design, this dissertation contributes a multi-faceted alternative for holding policy accountable for its intentions and the ways they manifested in schooling by including those who are addressed by and burdened with reform endeavors. This approach differs from prevalent approaches along narrow indicators or in the spirit of best practice or implementation or evaluation. It refocuses inquiry on schooling as specific to its place and its people in a way that highlights the conditions of schooling and the way those involved in it construct their practice.

This dissertation is organized in six chapters. Following the introduction, chapter 2 opens the narrative by sketching some of narrow accountability's cornerstones and tracing its construction historically along a timeline that plots landmark Supreme Court cases and education policy along U.S. presidencies to emphasize the ways in which education policies have been interwoven with political and social contexts. Chapter 3 presents NCLB as the paradigmatic example of narrow accountability before distilling its construction of goals from the legal language itself. It finds that the historic balance of equity and excellence is offset in favor of the latter. The literature review that follows then summarizes findings from conceptual, empirical and methodological work on NCLB and highlights its persistent presence as embedded in scholarly and policy discussions about the future of public schooling. Chapter 4 explores possible manifestations of NCLB's goals in the example state of Alabama and it discusses interview results that present another construction of accountability by gatekeepers in Alabama schooling. Chapter 5 reviews the status quo of present debates about public schooling, including the search for better large-scale indicators for schooling quality and the matter of federal oversight vis-à-vis localized schooling. I discuss fundamental, enduring questions about the purpose and quality of public schooling that may present an alternative to the narrow accountability paradigm. Chapter 6 concludes the narrative by condensing its contribution to revisiting the overarching aim of broadening the conversations about accountability and the quality and purposes of public schooling by offering alternative visions (Labaree 2017) through reviving and building on longstanding ideas from the scholarship provided by Curriculum Studies.

2. Schooling in the age of accountability

This chapter starts from the understanding of accountability in education as one example of the observable transition of social institutions from a *management of placement* toward the *management of expectations* that constitutes a reversal of social services for constituencies now tasked with translating individual characteristics into recognizable achievements within the narrow rationale of accountability. The example of my multilingual student is one such observable manifestation and an instance of how diverging problem definitions lead to irreconcilable constructions and opposite sides of the argument. I then reconstruct the narrow construct of accountability as a result of three narrowings and the erroneous claim of meritocracy before turning to reconstructing some of the historical influences that helped shape the socio-political contexts in which education policy – and accountability – could prosper. The historical roots of curricular control through federal funding appear as do reform principles of excellence and equity that found a supportive climate in the 1960s. I recount milestone Supreme Court desegregation cases to exemplify the legal construction of equity issues in education; their argumentative structures characterize discussions to this day, for example in the context of the resegregation dynamics and school finance. Against this complex, rich history of accountability in education I then proceed to discuss the case of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Decades into its emergence, the age of accountability has taken firm hold of the present, dominating discussions about schooling and schooling policy. The expressions of this transformation are different in different places and vary over time, yet a core forms around patterns of changed distribution and legitimization of resources, risks and responsibilities alongside legitimation and control (Hopmann, 2008, p. 420). That way, accountability intrudes into the social fabric of schooling (Hopmann, 2008, p. 418) and other social institutions and their professions that were initially created to mitigate the risks of life and now transfer their responsibilities onto the individual:

(...) something which changes, at least in principle, the social fabric of Western societies. (...) a fundamental transformation on-going in at least the Western world which centers on how societies deal with welfare problems like security, health, resurrection, and education. (Hopmann, 2008, pp. 418)

Muting questions of *why*, Hopmann's analysis delineates the *how* of the age of accountability, finding a major shift in treating social welfare problems from a *management of placements* to a *management of expectation* that result in turning personal characteristics into individual benefits or liabilities, respectively, (Hopmann, 2008, p. 422) through sharpening 'ill-defined problems' into "better-defined expectations" (Hopmann, 2008, p. 424) that are increasingly narrowed, simplistic suppositions of causes and effects in complex social systems such as schooling that resist this linear logic. Accountability by default then only encompasses aspects prone to measurement and comparison against the expectation – any other effects disappear from that specific view. In the context of public schooling, this rationale of *managing expectations* therefore limits the schools and teachers

responsibility and flexibility in serving their constituencies and effectively tasks families with bridging the gap between the institutional expectations and parents' and students' ability to meet them.

Accountability in schooling is constructed around the postulate that evidence-based, streamlined processes generate higher quality schooling independent of the particulars of a given school and its constituencies. This construct of standardization prompts the accountability rationale's guarantee of so-called *learning outcome* that are allegedly context-free, non-local and comparable so to assess the degree to which standards are met (Mayer et al., 2014). That effort has been a pillar of the accountability rationale since its earliest beginnings in the U.S. (Hutt, 2014) and at the core of international organizations' efforts to influence and streamline education internationally (Meyer et al., 2014; Tröhler, 2008, 2015). Rationalizing schooling in this way limits variation and discretion through top-down control (Mehta, 2013b, p. 2) and impedes schools in utilizing their constituents' diversity for education. For example, families' multilingualism can be constructed as a simple fact of life in a school that, for instance, communicates information multilingually and flies the flags of the nations represented, matches the teachers' language skill set with that of students and families of the cohort. Multilingualism can also be conceptualized as a problem of students and parents that the school attempts to correct through language instruction and parenting evenings or sending readings on the benefits of exposing children to the target language at home, for example. Individual characteristics can be constructed as assets that benefit constituents or they can be construed as liabilities that need mitigation to minimize the perceived lack: Being multi- or monolingual in itself is certainly not an issue; it only becomes an issue against the expectation of the respective other. The ability to meet a set expectation depends on a variety of resources that include the setting: The degree to which a school and its teachers are free and able to create their role to be one of acceptance and support, thereby creating a school environment in which student characteristics become an advantage rather than a liability. Through their knowledge of the system's rationales and their professional standard of doing no harm, educators are in a position of responsibility to act in the best interest of their students and therefore find ways of circumventing systemic obstacles by reframing the system's rules in ways constructed as valid.

I remember a case in point from years ago when I taught secondary school. I was tasked with assessing an 11th grade extra-ordinary student¹ whose Turkish diplomat father had temporarily been assigned to Vienna. A year before graduation, she was eager to obtain ordinary student status so that she could graduate either in Vienna or in Turkey upon their return. Raised and schooled

¹ Section 4 of the School Education Act (SchUG §4) sets forth the qualification criteria for ordinary and extra-ordinary student status. The latter are typically non-German speaking diplomats' or refugees' children who are placed in a grade based on their age. They have up to two years to partake without assessment. During that time, teachers can make a recommendation when they feel the student is ready and either determine their knowledge based on a separate exam or they are included in the class' assessment structures.

multilingually, she was fluent in English and soon obtained ordinary student status² in my English class as well as Math, Biology and Geography because she could comprehend the contents and produce them in the ways it was assessed despite her not being functional in German. As is customary in Austria, I taught two subjects and in both English and Psychology she was able to produce her contributions in English, earning high grades. To my mind, she met the set requirement for that grade: She fully and completely commanded the content, more broadly and deeply than her German-speaking peers. So I proctored her psychology exam in English based on the law³ not specifying the use of language outside of second-language instruction; only the teacher needs to understand the student to properly assess. The student passed with the highest grade. It sure was unusual but clearly within the law. Contrary to my expectation of collegial support, my colleagues expressed intense frustration, arguing that the school rightfully demanded using German as the only language for class and for assessment, given that our student population was in desperate need to advance their German skills. Passing a student onto senior year who did not command German was understood to go against the school vision. Colleagues felt that our Viennese-born Turkish-heritage students who struggled with German would now have to be given the right to take their exams in Turkish. Given that 90% of students and teachers were of Turkish heritage, that was a potentially impactful argument that failed on lack of standing: Virtually no other of our students was functional in the Turkish language to the degree necessary to discuss class contents, no less at passable quality. The students' case is one of diverging problem definitions that led to opposing understandings of the case itself. Resolved to the benefit of the student, it became a case of contention and an instrument to construct new lines of difference along teacher ethnicity and pedagogical principle: Any pedagogical action is situational in serving a specific person in a specific situation with a specific end-in-view; that view was at odds with the majority's standardized one-rule-for-all approach that was further legitimized through ethnicity: I was no longer viewed as a colleague but as an Austrian opposing Turkish colleagues. The success of this particular student lost relevance in the conversation when class was added: The obligation was to help the students of our school before supporting a diplomat's child. The difference was drawn between *our students* and the diplomat, the *Austrian* and the Turkish teachers. Standardization and process logic prevailed against the fact that no legal language suggests a rule of the same for all students. In fact, Austrian schooling laws specify that individual pedagogical considerations take precedence. The case illustrates that everyone benefitting with no rule broken still shifted the construction of difference; I believe because a

² In German-speaking Austria, English classes are English As A Second Language (ESL) classes that are based on advancing writing, reading, speaking and listening skills and include cultural English and American cultural studies and the reading of literature, mostly Young Adult Literature.

³ Assessment Decree (LBVO), the Austrian law setting forth rules of assessment and grade progression.

remedy for one student to meet expectations was inaccessible to the remaining students still struggling to do just that.

Meeting expectations

Meeting institutional expectations in schooling is decidedly more difficult for some students than for others, and losing this aspect in accountability discussions risks further disenfranchising those students as the accountability rationale constructs the inability to meet expectations as a personal failing to be overcome by effort alone. As the example showed, the student was hindered in advancing based on procedural form, i.e. language, superseding pedagogical substance, i.e. commanding content. Against that one student's story sound all others' whose abilities and contexts are not recognized as achievements by the set institutional expectation but sidelined and discredited by the meritocratic narration of fairness through sameness. Making individual characteristics count as benefits and potential rather than a burden to be mitigated has shifted from being the prime professional responsibility of schools and educators to students and families. That creates serious pressures for those who do not command the necessary resources and students who depend on public education are especially vulnerable. Missing support and navigating conditions constructed as impediments, they carry double the burden as they are personally made responsible for doing well. If they cannot, the Management of Expectations rationale concludes that their lack of achievement is a lack of effort and hence their personal failing:

It is this one-sided focus that allows the transformation of the apparent problems with equity and equality, minority, special needs, gender, etc. into individualized liabilities whose impact on achievement has to be minimized, if not eradicated. (Hopmann, 2008, p. 441)

Attributing problems and their solution to the individual's responsibility is often claimed to be fair because it supposedly treats everyone the same in expecting the same. For education, a popular figure of argument is that students come in all the same, without preferential treatment or previous knowledge of their strengths or weaknesses. For schooling, that argument contends that only students' own hard work will make them achieve and do well, hence achievement determines students' education pathways that result only from their effort. This narrative of student achievement travels well; it is the story told by many who claim to be deserving of their successes because these successes allegedly evidence their superior achievement in view of others. The argument is circular and hence void, but it allows them to draw a clear distinction between themselves and those presumed less worthy, making their own success a tangible promise of a brighter, more prosperous future for anyone who works hard.

Upon closer examination, however, these meritocracy narratives usually fall apart. They are either socially accepted perpetuations of the myth of meritocracy (e.g. Robinson, 2019; Labaree, 2010; Stevens, 2007) or popular ways of framing stories of people who were lucky, endowed in some way

by circumstance, usually not by their own doing, and mostly unforeseeably so. That is what the most accomplished individuals confirm when they reject being called just that; not because they are not, but because they know of many others who were equally deserving, equally talented and just as hard-working. As much as it would be embarrassingly banal to assume that one's accomplishments are purely coincidental, it is equally simplistic to contend the opposite: to think that they resulted only from one's hard work. Notwithstanding this common-sense wisdom, the accountability rationale of earned individual student achievement is firmly planted.

I take issue with this framing of *accountability* and *student achievement* and first deconstruct some of the fundamental assumptions inherent in the current narrow framing of accountability of schooling. I then challenge the accountability notion of student achievement as narrow and misleading, and I draw on the concept of Education Debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) to reinterpret and broaden both accountability and student achievement to make them fruitful for current discussions about accountability in schooling. A preliminary clarification of two recurring fallacies precedes the analysis: The fallacy of composition is the error of assuming that something is true for the whole while it is only true for a part of the whole. So while it is uncontested that schooling is accountable for its actions to prompt student advancement, it is not exclusively about either accountability or student achievement. Both are relevant aspects, but they are not solely what education and schooling are about. Any discussion about the quality of schooling, therefore, needs to extend beyond these two aspects to include all functions of schooling. The economic fallacy (Becks, 2019) captures the faulty contention that education follows economic principles that make cause and effect in complex social systems linearly assignable. The suggestion that any given purpose of schooling will manifest as one corresponding aspect, i.e. in one form, is not characteristic of complex social systems in which discernable variables are very difficult to define and the direction of influence, if traceable at all, is often counter-intuitive. That realization alone could rest all endeavors to find the one set of indicators that will finally operationalize quality schooling in a way that makes it accessible to accountability procedures. My argument supposes that one such standardized set of indicators cannot exist, because schooling's purposes and their practical manifestations vary based on existing contexts and histories, which makes them, hence, a local affair. That supposition, however, is in conflict with current narrow constructions of accountability.

The idea of accountability in education is likely as old as education itself, yet the idea of accountability as the ultimate rationale of education reform is barely 20 years old (e.g. Meyer et al., 2014). For much longer than that, the individual U.S. states educated in their own ways, resulting in a vastly eclectic education landscape to the point where calling it an education system rings incorrect (Labaree, 2010; Tröhler, 2015) because there are more differences than commonalities and not one united effort that would justify the term *system*. The historical reservations of states toward federal

rule and the absence of education in the U.S. Constitution have created that variety of state systems that some lament to be – and others celebrate for being – locally specific answers of schooling to the challenges of the specific contexts of a given place. This variety complicates standardization efforts because any such effort needs to be broad enough to account for the ways in which schooling responds to its contexts, and at the same time find enough commonalities in order to create a reliable instrument, abstract from the individual case. Looking through the metaphorical glasses of standardization, that diverse variety presents a problem. Taking them off, however, makes diversity nothing more than a fact of life, and locally varied schooling a rich pool of examples of how to make schooling about the people involved in it. This thesis takes the latter view, not arguing against accountability, or standardization, or student achievement per se but placing their value second to the values of public schooling that is pedagogically grounded, serving its actual constituents.

The irritation with the narrow interpretation of accountability in education is far from being new. A fascinating example of many is Henry Levin's delineation (1974) of the common meanings of accountability in education as being misleading and unfounded, maintaining wrong assumptions about the way schooling functions: His analysis explicates those "relatively distinct concepts of accountability" (Levin, 1974, p. 364) that only appear as valid on their surface: Accountability as tracking school performance fails in the same manner that accountability as a technical process does: The lack of agreement on the objectives that should be tracked makes a clear process impossible. Even if those objectives were set, he continues, tracking and reporting in itself is not action: "The mere provision of information (...) on poor education outcomes has not altered the plight of such children" (Levin, 1974, p. 365). In this analysis, Levin thereby anticipated contemporary discussions about the evidentiary value of data and the difference between data points, their range of interpretations and recommendations for specific action.

Similarly, he contends that accountability as a political and as an institutional process must fail because of skewed political representation that favors some groups while disenfranchising others based on historically grown disparities:

Each of these constituencies has certain expectations, which it would like the schools to fulfill. The problem is that the schools cannot fulfill all of them. There are limited resources (...), conflicts among the goals of the various groups. (Levin, 1974, p. 369)

Given these conflicts, Levin argues, accountability in schooling is difficult and a matter of position in focusing on "accountability to whom, for what" (Levin, 1974, p. 370). If the goal were to alleviate the situation of the poor, then that would take away from the entirety of the effort to the detriment of others:

Greater accountability will require shifting resources from richer students to poorer ones, while altering the goals of schools. Greater accountability to poorer students may mean lesser accountability to rich ones. (Levin, 1974, p. 370)

Here, Levin anticipated current discussions about the problematic equity paradox that acknowledges the counter-intuitively unequal distribution of resources to grant equitable access (Hopmann/Bauer-Hofmann, 2015). As expectations rise and pressures form, so do the requests for the means to meet those expectations, both toward the entities that fund and govern education as well as toward those involved in education. While James S. Coleman's work (1966) and those following made clear how money is neither the only issue nor the solution for inequitable schooling, questions of how to counter, for example, demographic and spatial segregation, or the inequitable distribution of resources in a state that are as pressing today as they were then (Frankenberg et al., 2019). The white population majority is in the past and dynamics of race are no longer binary but multifaceted. This development changes the conversations about resource distribution, both for policy as well as for research because traditional assumptions about the distribution of disadvantage and patterns of majority-minority phenomena no longer hold.

What strikes me in Levin's article is his construction of the problem: Even though his article is permeated with managerial language that describes *education services, products and managers, their input and output, performance levels and efficiency incentives*, Levin attributes the difficulty of accountability in schooling to the complex relationship of schooling and its society, the discrepancies in equity, and the politics of negotiating agreement by writing:

Each conceptual model of accountability is heavily grounded in the values and experiences of its designers. (...) One's perception of social reality goes a long way toward defining what is a relevant question as well as the answer. (Levin, 1974, p. 372)

Levin concludes that education is an entirely different animal that simply does not fit with what accountability can do: "Virtually none of the assumptions that apply to competitive firms holds for the schools." (Levin, 1974, p. 383) Levin's position is remarkable for a time only briefly before managerial language and principles such as shareholder gains, employee surveillance, incentive programs etc. began to characterize the economy and the financial sector in a way referred to as Financialization (Cohen, 2020; Epstein, 2005). Financialization's influence on public school reform has its historical traces of business influence (Cuban, 2004) and identifies contemporary privatization efforts in the shape of portfolio school districts. Those districts are in effect private businesses, both in their conceptual and their financial structures (Saltman, 2010), selling for-profit measures such as large-scale blended learning as education innovation and individualized instruction (Staker, 2011).

I recounted Levin's argument in such detail to exemplify how a managerial position expressed in economic language is still able to make a solid argument against narrow accountability in education and for public schooling. This is a rare find in education, yet it is not surprising from the point of view of finance and accounting where farseeing experts, too, are able to maintain the complex structures that underlie what to the untrained eye is a vast collection of numbers. Financial reporting

in Annual Reports, for example, are no more than a schematic simplification of complex fiscal relations within a company that are supposed to provide quick insight and general overview to shareholders and the public. It is never, however, read as comprehensive representation of a company. Experts read these reports very succinctly and extract specific key performance indicators (KPIs) for their calculations. They apply their extensive conceptual knowledge of what underlies those numbers rather than taking them at face value. Goodwill is a case in point: An intangible asset listed in the balance sheet, particularly relevant in case of merging with or acquiring a company, the KPI Goodwill is calculated based on the company's purchasing price minus all its assets and liabilities⁴. So when the Austrian market leader of pharmaceutical generics bought a small Austrian pharmaceutical company for 12 million euros even though their assets and liabilities evaluation came in at 6 million euros, Goodwill equaled 6 million euros. Those 6 million do not tangibly exist anywhere. They are a reflection of the non-material, ideational value that company holds for the market leader: eliminating competition and acquiring another production site for their own products. Interpreting seemingly straightforward numbers by way of applying context knowledge is the core of financial assessment and projection and it is, too, a skill needed to interpret education data.

Data themselves do not carry meaning but are assigned such meaning. They are made evidence through the reader's contextualization within a narrative in which they end up meaning something. Only reading data against specific contexts makes them a problem, its solution, an irritation, proof, grounds for contestation, or literally anything else. These multiple meanings would not be possible if numbers were immediate and unambiguous representations of truth. As a result, data themselves cannot be directive either. Yet, it has been observed in the literature how contrasting conclusions are drawn from the same data for various strategic purposes and also in good faith. Many meaningful interpretations are valid precisely because data are not evidence. It does not follow, however, that any interpretation is as good as the other: Argument is needed to establish what counts as a meaningful interpretation against, in the case of education, the knowledge of that very field. Evidence-based education policy-making has long and strong historical roots that exemplify how what constitutes a problem and what may count as its solution are subject to construction and negotiation.

Student achievement

Embedded at the core of the age of accountability in schooling is a specific construction of evidence that follows from a narrow understanding of so-called student achievement. I delineated elsewhere (Salmen, 2019) how at least three narrowings form accountability's misunderstandings of *student achievement* and as a result, invert the direction of pedagogical responsibility for students and their

⁴ for the formula, see for example <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/goodwill.asp>

well-being into a limited, seemingly linear process that disregards the conditions in which students and schools operate: Narrowing the purposes of schooling to qualification excludes purposes of enculturation, socialization and subjectification from discussions and suggests that only successes in qualifying students can indicate quality schooling. Equally, such qualification is narrowly conceptualized as test scores and graduation rates, in any case large-scale measures that sideline the variety of other academic and non-academic achievements of students. Finally, the very narrow achievements that accountability does recognize are taken away from the students and attributed to the doings of schools who can, allegedly, make all students achieve, independent of their histories and contexts that form the conditions of schooling that they navigate.

Policy and research that premises the quality of schooling on student achievement and student achievement gaps is, therefore, discriminatory practice that denies the relevance of histories and contexts as determinates of the differences between the ways student groups experience schooling. The structural problem is the narrow construct of student achievement that expects students and schools to only deliver specific kinds of achievements in recognizable ways: That which is not part of the accountability measure is, by default, lost as a byproduct of schooling that finds no representation of tangible value for students or the schools:

The core of accountability is narrowly focused on student achievement measures by 'academic standards'. Other functions of schooling (...) are hardly mentioned. At the same time academic achievement is reduced to that which can be reported (...), leaving out any educational or social achievements. (Hopmann, 2008, p. 429)

Test scores, graduation rates, GPAs and other measures are easy to communicate publicly but it is easier for some than for others to present their accomplishments in a way recognized by accountability. As a result, students who excel in testing and manage to strategically acquire college-relevant extra-curricular activities carry tangible advantage compared to their equally engaged peers.

I use *strategic* in its literal sense, i.e. purposefully directed toward a goal, with the goal here being safe passage to the next level of schooling and students who navigate schooling successfully understand that grade progression rules school's logic. However, accountability's Management of Expectation rationale exacerbates those pressures of progression. Students who are able to self-organize and resource their time and their effort toward their specific goals are much more likely to pass through the stages of schooling than others. It does not follow, however, that those students are any more or less academically or socially capable. Being strategic becomes more relevant for schools too because their ability to acquire students and funding hinges on being able to communicate their work and their successes directly to the community and the board members. In the best of cases, schools manage to separate what they represent to the public as achievements and credit all of their students' contributions within the school community as well as in ways that affords students the credit they need to develop their education pathway. This is an intricate balance to strike because schools need

to meet accountability criteria for funding and other formal necessities, yet they also need to foster and prompt students within their school community to find and maintain a spot for them, something to contribute and some place to be relevant as a person.

This double-representation – inwardly toward their own school community and outwardly toward the accountability expectations of community and policy – strains schools and uses needed resources:

And so what it did is we had to take time and energy and resources for what we felt like we were doing well and apply them to something that was really just a hoop that we had to jump through. And so the way we looked at it, and this is just my language (erm) nothing official from where the school districts- was that we wanted to continue doing what we did and we were going to minimally comply with the accountability standards as they were, (erm) make sure that our students didn't run into any logistical hurdles as far as accountability goes and school looked as it should with state report cards. (B, p. 3)

The capacities needed to maintain this double-representation are lost for other aspects of schooling. That is easier for schools who have personnel and reporting structures in place that are able to, for example, pull existing data and prepare it for the community, its families and businesses, to show and explain to them facts on their websites, etc. Other schools do not have the capacities and they are stretched thin as it is, missing knowledge and skills and the time. To think that these complex and lengthy tasks are easily taken in any school's stride is a troubling testament to the remoteness of these expectations from the day-to-day of schooling:

The prime implication of this research, the importance of capacity-building in local schooling with special regard to the unique mix of challenges at hand, is contrary to any belief that the same high-stakes are for everyone and distributing blame and shame in large portions is a reasonable approach to making accountability work. (Hopmann, 2008, p. 441)

Capacity-building needs resources and time and an idea of "a place called school" (Goodlad, 1984) where local and social contexts are a constitutive, valued part of any school. By not taking into account those contexts, the sameness of the expectation turns the individual differences and specificities of a place into its liabilities. Instead of accepting conditions as constitutive, they are framed as something that has to be overcome by the very same people whose action frames are defined by these conditions. In effect, then, the uniqueness and the "comprehensive understanding of schooling as a social and local institution" (Hopmann, 2008, p. 430) is continuously hollowed. In view of the difficulties of capacity-building, as well as in light of the strong current that pulls toward privatization of public schooling, there is value in remembering that schooling is indeed a public institution created for children and youth who have a right to education. As is held in Article 28 of the Convention of the Right of the Child:

States Parties recognize the right of the child to education (...) on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular: (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all; (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child (United Nations, p. 11)

Note how the Convention recognizes children rather than their parents, simply because a child's right to education is not that of its parents. While they are tasked to act in its behalf and its best interest, the difference is of stark relevance to educators who have an obligation to educate the individual child. The purpose of the education is developmental:

Article 29 States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to: (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. (United Nations, p. 12)

The Convention directs our attention to humanistic visions of education that recognizes the child as a whole, to its uniqueness, its abilities beyond academics and without limitation, to their fullest potential – not to outside expectations. Students are children in command of their abilities because they are theirs, as well as it is their potential – not the teacher's, not the school's, and not the parents'. As a result, educators do not claim students' successes as an effect of their work, because they could have very well succeeded in spite of their teachers or their schooling environment. I propose reaffirming this inherently pedagogical stance, for example by taking up Ladson-Billing's framework of Education Debt (2006) as a basis for discussions about schooling and policies. State and federal agencies have an obligation to create conditions in which schooling for children becomes possible, measured against education's and educators' professional standards.

The following chapters - the case of NCLB and the case of Alabama as a place – follow from the realization that questions of *why* tend to arrange facts in a way that benefits the production of specific, narrow answers because those why-questions rest on the presumption of causality of events in history. The richness of perspectives and the debates about their differences get lost that way. Questions of *how* embrace discrepancies, diverse and non-fitting facts and coincidences. Rather than it being assigned or claimed to be naturally there, conclusiveness is established through argument. In the following, I delineate some of the history constitutive to accountability policy in its current form. Even though the chapter's progression is generally chronological, it presents a concisely analytical rather than a comprehensive narrative about the various forces that shaped education and its policy over time.

A history of U.S. accountability policy

Plotted on the timeline in Table 1, it becomes tangible how U.S. education policy is immediately intertwined with its socio-political context. I use U.S. presidencies as the timeline that separates milestone desegregation Supreme Court cases from education policy acts and seminal white papers. The Secretaries of Education head this timeline and complete the frame of this chapter's narrative on the interwovenness of factors in the history of accountability policy.

Timeline of Secretaries of Education, federal education acts, U.S. Presidents and key Supreme Court Cases

20

The federal education law of the land is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) that regulates state-level schooling policy mostly through its funding of Title I schools. They may use the allocated federal funds to support school-wide programs if at least 40% of students are from low-income families; otherwise funds are dedicated to targeted programs for children from low-income families, at risk of not meeting academic standards (U.S. Department of Education, n.d. a). There are a vast number of modifications and additional specifications to this basic rule in every state and over time. Title I allocation and distribution vary because education policy is the individual state's responsibility. As a result, the United States effectively has as many school systems as there are states, with the role of the federal government being limited by design: Through Title I funding the Secretary of Education grants or rejects accountability state plans and provides policy guidance to each state. A state rejecting federal guidance may result in the withdrawal of funding. According to the U.S. Department of Education, it contributes merely 8% of the total cost of schooling while states, local communities and private sources provide the lion's share (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Based on these structures, recurring debates about states intentionally forfeiting Title I funding in order to break free of federal rule has been heavily discussed recently. This is clearly within the law yet it may yield serious consequences for those in need of Title I funding:

Although only a small percentage of schools' budgets come from the U.S. federal government, this small percentage is still a significant amount. Without a supply of federal funding, most schools would not be able to operate because they would fall short of their budgetary requirement. (Wiseman, 2010, p. 9)

Indeed 54.4 % of all public schools received Title I funded services during the 2003-04 school year (U.S. Department of Education, n.d. a), for example. The availability of Title I funding is, therefore, especially relevant to students and schools in need.

While technically all students from low-income families are eligible, it is less clear how many students are, in fact, from low-income families. The indicator used for Title I considerations has been the eligibility for free-and-reduced-price lunch (FRPL) filed annually and individually per student. Under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (2010), however, whole schools and communities qualify for extensive food programs that make it no longer necessary for individuals to file. Not only does that obscure the reported numbers of students in need but it also changes the way states identify schools that are eligible for Title I funding. The matter continues to raise concerns both with regard to research as well as in the administration and its bodies, so much so that a full report about the matter was commissioned and published by then Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The report elaborates on an alarming range of issues with the FRPL measure as a proxy for low-income both for funding decisions as well

as for research. The Civil Rights Project's most recent report on equity affirms the difficulty of the measure:

A conflict between information needs and efficiency in administering free lunch programs has produced a serious obstacle in understanding school poverty and its impacts on learning and segregation. (Frankenberg et al., 2019, p. 11)

Even though states have other options to determine how many of their students live in low-income families and in poverty, the overwhelming majority does not use other indicators and measures (Neuberger/Riddle, 2015) that are within their discretion in determining economic status. The matter is also present in recent scholarship: Domina et al. (2018) compared IRS reported household income data – one of the alternatives referred to by the U.S. Department of Education - with FRPL data for California and Oregon and found that indeed FRPL was able to predict academic achievement more strongly and consistently, even when controlling for household income (Domina et. al, 2018, p. 547). While the authors stress that these results may be specific to the two states, they make the much more relevant, conceptual point that whatever concept lies behind the use of the term *disadvantaged* matters significantly to the question of what data are used. Specifically, they suggest that there are different reasons and processes that lead to students filing for FRPL that complicate simplistic assumptions about FRPL status and resources:

We believe that education researchers and policymakers need to reflect on what they mean by *disadvantage* and what they intend to measure when they use FRPL data. (...) the nature of the disadvantage that FRPL captures is amorphous and may not be a simple function of family resources. (Domina et al., 2018, p. 550)

The questions raised here are not technical ones about indicator development or validity of measurement but conceptual ones that question what it is that is supposed to be measured. Shifting the conversation from technical assessment aspects to the actual construct of interest (Wiliam, 2010, p. 255) means asking about the purpose of a measure, its relevance in schooling and for the people in schools. Such a conversation carries the potential for widening the narrow conception of accountability toward a broad discussion of its intended purposes and functions, and their respective reasons. Separating purposes and instruments is a necessary prerequisite:

The extent to which particular assessment procedures support particular kinds of inferences involve the integration of empirical evidence and theoretical rationales is, therefore, principally, a technical matter. Whether the kinds of inferences that the assessment supports are the right inferences to be drawn is, to a much greater extent, a matter of value. (Wiliam, 2010, p. 278)

Wiliam's use of the term *value* risks misinterpretation and it is important not to misread it to mean personal preference or ideology. Rather, he argues for discussing the employed constructs to "allow greater public engagement in the debate about what should be assessed" (Wiliam, 2010, p. 256). Fostering public deliberation as the backbone of democracy appears to be the ground on which social institutions stand and advancing equity needs equitable discussion as its tool. Having a voice

alone does not constitute equity; yet, having no voice at all eradicates equity at its roots. The mission of equity brought about Title I funding, and it has been the federal backbone of accountability policy since the 1960s. It is the construction and usage of indicators that prove highly relevant not only to matters of eligibility and distribution but to the question of how student groups in need are identified, because they have been the addressees from the policy's very beginnings.

Those beginnings date back to the National Defense Education Act (1958) of President Eisenhower's administration. After Russia launched their space satellite Sputnik and leveled U.S. hopes of winning the space race, President Eisenhower gave his State of the Union address to Congress and the American people on 9 January 1958 (Eisenhower, 1958) to respond to what he characterized as: "the Soviets (...) waging total cold war." He reminded the American people of their ability to utilize education against the Russian threat:

In much the same way, we have tremendous potential resources on other non-military fronts to help in countering the Soviet threat: education, science, research, and, not least, the ideas and principles by which we live. And in all these cases the task ahead is to bring these resources more sharply to bear upon the new tasks of security and peace in a swiftly-changing world. (Eisenhower, 1958)

His overall message emphasized peace and security in the face of the Russian threat and the Cold War, secured by an investment into the American people's intellectual resources. Education and research was to receive a billion dollars over a four-year period dedicated to "improved teaching quality and student opportunities in the interest of national security" (Eisenhower, 1958). Education, therefore, was explicitly and immediately intertwined with the politics of the time, and this relationship continued on.

The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) represents a historical landmark as the first federal involvement in the states' individual education policymaking in two ways: It specified relevant content - science, math, modern languages and technology – and it legitimized federal interference through incentivizing excellence (Tröhler, 2010, p. 6). This marriage of curriculum control through federal funding based on markers of excellence continues to form the core of accountability policy today. Testing is alleged to be the best instrument to assess excellence as the one half of quality schooling; the other half is equity (Wiseman, 2010, p. 6). Excellence and equity as the major goals of schooling formed the core of education policy throughout the following decades.

The 1960s provided the socio-political climate for equity to grow deeply into the structures of education discussions and policy. Poverty and civil rights missions had become the social and political focus, with the NAACP⁵ and the Urban League providing leadership to enact what would redefine and reshape African Americans' civil rights and political participation. It was that climate in which President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration declared their War on Poverty, enacting the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965). The Food Stamp

⁵ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded in 1909, <https://www.naacp.org/>

Act (1964) was made a permanent program in all states and the Economic Opportunity Act (1964) established a wide array of programs such as work-study and VISTA, the Volunteers in Service to America. Social Security amendments (1965) created Medicare and Medicaid, among many other benefit programs, which provide basic health care services to this day. While there is evidence to show that Johnson's policies met their goal of reducing poverty and racial discrimination at least in part, there is a long-standing narrative that discredits the War on Poverty for being ineffective and costly (Bailey/Duquette, 2014). The difference between scholarly assessment and collective memory is well-researched and applies to a variety of other historical instances too, for example the New Deal:

Although the New Deal's effectiveness as a set of policies has been contested in scholarship, its policies – even without a large or immediate rebound in private sector employment – were regarded as successful at the time and today are remembered as successes. This collective memory of the New Deal's success transcends party lines. (Bailey/Duquette, 2014, p. 382)

Both examples show how the evaluation of success or failure of a policy is a matter of historical and political construction at a specific point in time. Based on the same set of facts, contrary interpretations coexist and aim to shape the historical narrative in their favor.

Another case in point is the Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966) which received heavy criticism for having been a waste of federal monies by James Coleman who was commissioned by Congress to inquire into the influence of school funding and instead presented conclusions not based on resources needed for education but equity results of education that were allegedly based on incomplete data and faulty calculations⁶. For the majority of others in the field, however, Coleman's work was a milestone of equity research that marks the beginnings of large-scale empirical equity research that has been replicated over decades, reaching the same conclusion repeatedly: Rather than funding, it is family background and peer effects within the school's socioeconomic makeup that predict student achievement most robustly.

In fact, James Coleman (Coleman, 1968a) concretely addressed concerns of the leading critique that Hanushek and Kain (1972) first put forth in a paper before its full publication as a book four years later. In his response, Coleman meticulously delineates alternative research designs that were contemplated, the theoretical framework based on which the choice was ultimately made (see also Coleman, 1968b) as well as his intention to shift the conversation from discussing the distribution of government resources to analyzing how these inputs, as he calls them, are individually received by students. His purpose lacks no clarity:

To order things the other way around is reminiscent of the busy activity of southern school systems in constructing new buildings for Negro schools, increasing salaries of Negro school teachers, and buying new textbooks for Negro students in the period preceding the Supreme Court decision of

⁶ Dr. Kern Alexander, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL, in his presentation at the Education Research Symposium in Oxford, UK, March 2019.

1954, to obtain an apparent equality of educational opportunity while leaving unexamined the question of whether these inputs were the important ones. (Coleman, 1968b, p. 15)

This statement is exemplary of James Coleman's conciseness of language in the main report as well as the multiple publications following it. As a seasoned sociologist, he had been approached by Commissioner Francis Keppel in 1964 to inquire into the missing equal education opportunities (Wong/Nicotera, 2004, p. 127) because the U.S. Office of Education at the time was merely collecting administrative data and saw itself incapable of conducting a national study, let alone the large-scale testing. As such, the Coleman report was not only the first large-scale research work of its kind, but it also impacted the interpretation of legal precedent (Wong/Nicotera, 2004, p. 129) and was used – alongside James Coleman's personal testimony – as evidence in extensive litigation, including Supreme Court rulings.

A year prior to the release of James Coleman's report, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was enacted to regulate federal funding especially geared toward poverty and its relation to race. All following federal education policy amended and specified the ESEA language, yet its core has remained the same: It provides additional resources to vulnerable students, specifically those in low-income families, and it includes a variety of provisions for material resources, infrastructure, scholarships etc. Pathways are provided for units within a state system to apply and obtain such funds. This access question is the contentious issue because in the 1960s it was predominantly African American families who would likely be represented in the low-income spectrum of families. So whereas income status was the eligibility criterion on paper, the dividing line ran along race.

Barely a decade prior to the ESEA, the U.S. Supreme Court had formally ended segregation in schooling by holding in *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) that the 'separate, yet equal' doctrine established in *Plessy v Ferguson* (1896) did not apply to public schooling. *Plessy* had found that racially segregated American life did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that provides equal protection under the law. In the court's considered opinion, the ruling responds to the claim that separate treatment would cause inferiority, stating, "said inferiority was only in the mind of the Negro." (Kluger, 1976, p. 706) So when that doctrine fell with the first *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) decision, it did not overrule *Plessy* as such but merely struck down on its applicability to public schooling (Wong/Nicotera, 2004, p. 123): It was held that segregated school systems were inherently unequal, because separate by default could never be equal. Segregation in public education was therefore in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. The *Brown v Board of Education II* (1955) decision resulted from the general confusion about how to implement the first ruling since it mandated the not only largely complex but vastly opposed process of desegregation in the nation. The court ordered immediate desegregation "with all deliberate speed" in *Brown II* (1955) that many criticized as having contributed to ignoring and resisting desegregation orders.

The resistance to desegregate schools was strong and appeared in many shapes and forms, often argued as a freedom of choice measure taken by residents and hence unapproachable by school districts. The *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968) case originated from such a situation in rural Virginia where the Board of Education operated two segregated schools despite the previous Supreme Court rulings to desegregate. Argued as free parental choice, the argument lost, and the court enforced both Brown decisions once more, referencing the time passed since then:

It was such dual systems that, 14 years ago, Brown I held unconstitutional, and, a year later, Brown II held must be abolished; school boards operating such school systems were required by Brown II 'to effectuate a transition to a racially nondiscriminatory school system.' (*Green v. County School Board*, 1968, p. 435)

The court discusses the board's argument of free choice at great length and refutes it on the grounds that it disregards the intention of Brown I and Brown II. In doing so, the court dismantles the board's policy as being lip service and commands the board accordingly:

School boards such as the respondent then operating state-compelled dual systems were nevertheless clearly charged with the affirmative duty to take whatever steps might be necessary to convert to a unitary system in which racial discrimination would be eliminated root and branch. The constitutional rights of Negro school children articulated in Brown I permit no less than this, and it was to this end that Brown II commanded school boards to bend their efforts. (*Green v. County School Board*, 1968, pp. 437-438)

I intentionally quote the justices' voice at length even though most authors limit themselves to the respectively relevant key phrase of a finding, which would be the 'eliminate root and branch' phrase in this case. It is relevant, however, to read and use the original language, carefully worded by the justices in full awareness of the impact it would have on aspects that go far beyond schooling and its organization. In its ruling, the court details the board's presented reasoning first to then address the faulty assumptions that amount to the board's negligence in not implementing *Brown I* and *Brown II*. The case is one of the landmark cases for desegregation for at least two reasons: It struck down token compliance structures that circumvented desegregation and it introduced the six so-called Green factors that became utilized as criteria of desegregation: student assignments, faculty, staff, transportation, extra-curricular activities and facilities (Amsterdam, 2017, p. 468).

With desegregation being firmly set as the legal requirement for school districts, the arena was open for interest groups to litigate the details and the thresholds of that requirement. The desegregation Supreme Court cases of the 1970s presented in this thesis are landmark cases that are not inclusive or representative, but certainly indicative of a turn toward school finance litigation based on the social geography of U.S. metropolitan areas. The *Green* decision had established a board of education's duty to dismantle the segregated dual system of schooling, and the Supreme Court was asked to uphold this standard for Charlotte, North Carolina, in *Swann v Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1970). It set precedent by granting oversight to courts for school districts in violation of desegregation rules. The district courts were tasked with evaluating desegregation plans by their

effectiveness, paying special attention to schools serving a majority of black students. Busing within the district, therefore, would be mandated regardless of whether the racial imbalance was brought about by intentional segregation or housing patterns. The case became the basis for busing policies across the nation for the following decades.

Funding and demographics

The issue of desegregation had transformed into issues of financing and spatial segregation. In *San Antonio Independent School District v Rodriguez* (1973), the Supreme Court held that the U.S. Constitution does not address education and as a result, there is no constitutional right to education. The court thereby validated Texas practice, as continues to be the practice in many states, that provided funds for schooling are supplemented by local authorities, sometimes significantly so, resulting in vast differences of schools and schooling throughout a district and the state. Existing differences in funding that affect schooling are therefore not in violation of constitutional rights:

Though education is one of the most important services performed by the State, it is not within the limited category of rights recognized by this Court as guaranteed by the Constitution. Even if some identifiable quantum of education is arguably entitled to constitutional protection to make meaningful the exercise of other constitutional rights, here there is no showing that the Texas system fails to provide the basic minimal skills necessary for that purpose. (*San Antonio Independent School District v Rodriguez*, 1973, p. 2)

This court ruling stands on the difference of minimum versus above-minimum conditions of schooling, affirming this difference in *Lau v Nichols* (1974) where non-English speaking Chinese students were granted English classes through their class-action claim. The decision was argued based on the applicability of Title VI of the 1965 Civil Rights Act, prohibiting discrimination in funded programs based on race, color or national origin. Similar in kind yet much later, *Plyler v Doe* (1982) held that school funds must be made available to undocumented children as well because their status was beyond their control and because withholding education would not serve the interest of a state. So even though education does not have constitutional rank, it is recognized as a central, non-neglectable aspect to prosperous human life and as such, has been continuously protected.

By the 1980s, it became clear that the difference between desegregation and integration of school districts was great and divisive. Frey and Wilson (2009) state: "The Supreme Court's trend of promoting school integration was reversed with *Milliken v Bradley* (1974)" (Frey/Wilson, 2009, p. 80) and Fiel (2013) agrees: "Of much-maligned court decisions, the major culprit in persisting school segregation is *Milliken v Bradley* (1974), which limited inter-district desegregation" (Fiel, 2013, p. 844). Both *Milliken v Bradley I* (1974) and *Milliken v Bradley II* (1977) rulings came down against desegregation claims and argued that segregation based on housing patterns is not within the responsibility of a school district or a board. The case came from Detroit, a metropolitan area

characterized by vast differences between urban and suburban living conditions, the former then mostly black low-income and the latter majority white and affluent. The court rejected the desegregation plan that included Detroit and its surrounding districts in two parts: Some districts were not responsible for segregation of the others, and they were not segregated themselves, so they could therefore not be included in the remedy that only pertained to other districts. Instead, the court found in *Milliken II* (1977) that the state was liable for half of the needed funding to implement the new plan for segregated districts that included a variety of remediation actions for schooling. This direction of impact continued in *Missouri v Jenkins* (1995) where the Supreme Court affirmed the separation of responsibility introduced in *Milliken* and denied a tax raise for multiple districts in order to remedy segregation in one district.

These cases' findings opened the door to states simply throwing money at urban school districts' highly complex situations while leaving suburban areas uninvolved. A Supreme Court case ruling that protected integration efforts is *Washington v Seattle School District No. 1* (1982) that halted the Initiative 350 seeking to stop mandatory busing for integration. The court sided with a lower court's finding in reading the initiative as busing for non-racial reasons yet not for racial ones - an argument that is unconstitutional. However, the line of argument along race as a criterion for schooling decisions gained more momentum as the end of the century approached. A number of cases in the 1990s dealt with the threshold of declaring unitary status, a determination of a district having feasibly eliminated discrimination (Frey/Wilson, 2009, p. 80). A case in point for this process is *Freeman v Pitts* (1992) in which the six Green criteria were used in stark contrast to their original intention: Rather than comprehensive desegregation criteria, they became individual checkmarks in the question whether the DeKalb County School System in Georgia could be released from its 1969 court supervision. Rather than understand them comprehensively, the Supreme Court held that court supervision only extends to the individual criteria not yet met and it permitted for incremental release of court-ordered supervision of desegregation. The widely held interpretation of this order is that rather than mandating desegregation, the threshold had now become to not discriminate. That lowered the bar significantly for two reasons. First, losing the comprehensive nature of desegregation to the idea of a list of criteria to be met independently changes the understanding of the purpose of desegregation at its core. Second, it is a far easier burden to meet for districts to rid themselves of supervision without actually having to prove successful desegregation and integration. A further landmark case advancing the separation of desegregation efforts and racial composition is *Parents Involved in Community Schools v Seattle School District No. 1* (2007). It comprises cases in which parents sued on the basis of their children not gaining admittance to the schools closest and most fitting to their child's needs. Both the Jefferson County as well as Seattle School District case used race to reassign students from oversubscribed schools to others, contending that maintaining racial

balance was necessary for desegregation, narrowly tailored to the context of the school districts and in the compelling interest of diversity. The Supreme Court found this practice to be unconstitutional.

Chief Justice Roberts delivered the opinion of the court, separating the two cases by their history: Whereas Jefferson County had operated under a desegregation decree until 2000, Seattle School District No. 1 has no history of segregated schooling. As a result, the cases are not the same in kind. The legal question in both of them, however, is race:

It is well established that when the government distributes burdens or benefits on the basis of individual racial classifications, that action is reviewed under strict scrutiny. (...) As the Court recently reaffirmed, 'racial classifications are simply too pernicious to permit any but the most exact connection between justification and classification.' In order to satisfy this searching standard of review, the school districts must demonstrate that the use of individual racial classifications in the assignment plans here under review is narrowly tailored to achieve a compelling government interest. (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007, pp. 11f)

Two compelling interests are recognized in the decision: The first is eliminating desegregation, which does not apply to either school district, one never having segregated and the other having been declared unitary. *Milliken II* (1977) is cited as a reminder that racial imbalance in schools itself does not violate the constitution. The second is diversity specific to admissions in the context of higher education, and hence it is not applicable to either case. And even if it were, Justice Roberts argued, both districts use binary marking systems of white/non-white and black/other, respectively. That makes the notion of diversity too limited to bring about schools reflective of even the diversity that exists in these school districts.

The opinion then discards both parties' briefs that present argument to the effects of racial diversity on how students do in school:

The parties and their amici dispute whether racial diversity in schools in fact has a marked impact on test scores and other objective yardsticks or achieves intangible socialization benefits. The debate is not one we need to resolve, however, because it is clear that the racial classifications employed by the districts are not narrowly tailored to the goal of achieving the educational and social benefits asserted to flow from racial diversity. In design and operation, the plans are directed only to racial balance, pure and simple, an objective this Court has repeatedly condemned as illegitimate. (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007, pp. 17f)

Justice Roberts makes clear that schooling as such is not the issue. Rather, he identifies and rejects the notion of racial balance on familiar legal grounds and makes clear that only in the hypothetical case that this dispute were not down to racial imbalance, the narrow tailoring of this policy towards equitable conditions for all students would become relevant. In that case, both districts would fall short of the burden as they do not aim to reflect the racial composition of their surrounding communities and could not accomplish that goal with the binary marking system in place. This level of relevant detail gets lost in much of the literature that recounts this decision's implication for education.

The opinion addresses current issues in education policy and research: If racial balance in school meant representing the community structure, it would be a continuously changing requirement, hard if not impossible to meet. The larger issue at hand, however, is the question of the meaning of diversity. The court in its opinion summarizes the statements of both parties that reflect their negligence of having a functional definition of diversity, and yet more challenging, of how racial proportionality in itself would constitute diversity. Questions of diversity of a school's student body are at the core of education discussions post-desegregation. Frankenberg and Taylor (2018) locate this structural shift in the difference between de jure and de facto segregation, the former having been largely resolved by litigation and Supreme Court decisions such as the ones presented in this work. De facto segregation, however, has been deemed to be beyond the courts (Frankenberg/Taylor, 2018, p. 228) as the cases above show. Regardless, it continues to shape American life. The difference in segregation then and today, the authors state, lies in it being multiracial. The latest report on the status of civil rights (Frankenberg et al., 2019) is dedicated to precisely that fact and the implications it bears on policymaking and research. The core has remained the same throughout the years: "(...) separation of students in schools by race and economic status" (Frankenberg et al., 2019, p. 229) as prominent and endemic (Frankenberg et al., 2019, p. 233) as it was decades ago in the middle of the 20th century.

Milner et al. (2016) present similar conclusions based on their review of *Milliken's* status quo vis á vis interviews with Dr. Irvine, Dr. Brown II and Dr. Siddie Walker, the current AERA President. In the interviews, the authors explore criticism about focusing too much on desegregation and its surface appearance rather than looking into deeply rooted, engrained structures – the fabric that carries continuing dynamics of segregation, be it through tracking within schools (Milner et al., 2016, p. 16) or the overrepresentation in special education placement, suspensions and expulsions for example (Milner et al., 2016, p. 6). The focus on litigation and policy measures has let attention drift away from the question of public schooling, its purpose and its basic function, the authors conclude:

The point is that schools never addressed how to make schools work for all students and teachers, with such dramatic change fundamentally linked to place and race. (Milner et al., 2016, p. 17)

Their conclusion makes clear that Supreme Court decisions and other relevant litigation have shaped education policy history in a way that steered it from segregation and to desegregation. It is just as clear, however, that today's observable phenomena are such of resegregation and the growing tendencies of groups within contemporary American society to separate, cluster and isolate (Frankenberg et al., 2019; Frey/Wilson, 2009). This is to the detriment of all students, and it reaches the very core of public schooling and its declared mission of excellence and equity.

Legal decisions on desegregation on the highest levels halted around 1980 as the focus turned onto litigation of financing desegregation and implementing it through policies such as busing, for

example. Just around the same time, the Carter Administration made the Department of Education into a stand-alone cabinet-level department and faced vicious Republican resistance on the basis of its constitutionality. The argument was that education was a state matter, not even part of the Constitution and as a result, having a cabinet-level Department of Education was unconstitutional (Bauman/Read 2018). The department persisted through the political storm and vastly expanded its initial responsibilities from merely collecting and recording education information to leading education policy through federal financing. The expansion of standardized testing for monitoring in the 1980s received further impetus from *A Nation at Risk* report (1983):

This report argued that the weaknesses of the educational system placed the entire nation at risk. The report cited 13 indicators to support this dire conclusion, of which all but three were based on test scores. (...) This dissatisfaction focuses on both overall performance and large inequities across groups, in particular (...) non-Asian ethnic and racial minorities, students from impoverished households, disabled students and students whose native language is not English. (Koretz, 2011, p. 11)

To this day, the accountability policy focus remains on these four student groups and while testing has a long tradition within U.S. education, the narrative of the decreasing and lacking quality of schooling gave way to at least three major changes in testing: The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) was expanded from providing data on the nation and regions to doing so for individual states. The administration and scoring of testing was standardized, and sanctions and rewards systems were introduced on the basis of test scores (Koretz, 2011, p. 11). The progression down from monitoring nationally and regionally to state-specific and school-specific accountability has reached its next stage of teacher assessments – a foreseeable consequence that follows the implicit logic of assigning responsibility.

The 1990s were busy in education, even though no federal policy can be plotted on the timeline: A multitude of other high school reforms existed that were broad in scope and comparatively small in reach but no less a response to what was retrospectively named the standards movement (Smith et al. 2016). It followed again logically that the set standards, whatever their substance, would bring about a structure tasked to monitor and maintain those standards. Bill Clinton led the National Governors' Conference that carried the standards movement in a bipartisan fashion, producing the *America 2000* report with its "six goals, most of which were easily measurable, but also unreachable" (Katsinas/Urban/Hardy, 2007, p. 1). The progression from there to accountability policy of the 21st century was thereby set:

Begun in the 1980s with an emphasis on setting goals, by the 1990s state reformers had largely adopted a more 'systemic' vision of educational reform (...) took the decline in standards argument from *A Nation at Risk* and the measurement emphasis from *America 2000*, combined them (...) and gave state officials the power to sanction teachers, schools, and systems. (Katsinas/Urban/Hardy, 2007, p. 2)

It gave way to the George W. Bush administration to bring in 'Texas' long-standing experience with standardized testing and accountability that led to the reauthorization of the ESEA as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002). From its beginnings, the mere structure of the policy raised a number of conceptual issues that continued to be debated until the Senate did not confirm its reauthorization in 2007. The core of the policy was again to reduce the so-called achievement gap in order to reach excellence and equity. However, as was the case before it as well as it has been since then, the question of how to reign in the forces that shape those alleged gaps remained absent in the discussions (Katsinas/Urban/Hardy, 2007, p. 3).

The arguments above prepared the case in taking a look back at the history of federal education policy. I explained and exemplified how education has been intertwined with socio-political context, reauthorized with the same core goals and challenges that existed in the past. The timeline captures how the mission of equity has a long legal history of scholarship on segregation and resegregation in their various manifestations. As questions of implementation evaded legal direction, more schooling policy appeared with the expectation to address and to mitigate the effects of existing disparities and inequalities in education. This phenomenon of educationalizing social problems has a persisting history in U.S. education as it is inscribed in its policy structure from the very beginning (Labaree, 2008; Tröhler, 2008).

It is against this complex, rich history of the emergence of education policy and the influences that bear on it that this study now inquires about the paradigmatic U.S. accountability school reform that is NCLB. Its sustained relevance in scholarship and policy discussions alike originates from its continued if alleviated present form as ESSA. NCLB's originally embedded assumptions and attributions towards actors in schooling remain: Research on the NCLB waivers (Polikoff et al., 2014) shows that states did not utilize the flexibility to create their own indicator. Grounded in similar ideas of attributing responsibility, new visions outside the narrow accountability rationale are missing while reiterations of known problems persist. Thus, inquiring into the specific goals of the policy further delineates and illuminates the *bons* of policy in the age of accountability.

3. The case of No Child Left Behind

This chapter begins with a brief synopsis of NCLB's conceptual cornerstones before turning to the analysis of the legal language of the law's goals. Through a sequence of Critical Discourse Analysis tools, the analysis elicits the law's addressees and the attributions made as well as the structure of arguments presented in support of the law's goals. The result shows that NCLB shifted the longstanding balance of excellence and equity in excellence's favor, reducing equity to a means to excellence's end. The following literature review traces strands of conversations from early criticism of the law's construction to two decades of empirical results that document the law failing on its own account. Given NCLB's persistent presence in policy and scholarship, it stands to reason that its embedded constructs of schooling's purposes and actors still affect, at least in part, scholarly and policy discussions about the future of ensuring quality in public schooling.

In 2001, the *No Child Left Behind Act* was signed into law as a reauthorization of the 1965 *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, including relevant conceptual novelties: It was the first national program that required schools to reach the same mid-term as well as long-term goals, assessed by disaggregated reporting for student subgroups (Koretz 2011, 12). To this day, NCLB remains the point of reference for current debates about how to make accountability work because its core idea and structure, if alleviated, remained: to track various student group's academic indicator as the major proxy for education quality in schooling. The federal policy of NCLB mandated all states to ensure that every student reaches 100% proficiency in Math and Reading by 2014. In addition to creating assessment tests, the states publicly reported schools' and districts' Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) following states' respective progression plans. Consequences for not making AYP, even for a subgroup, included losing Title I funding, increased financial burden by the duty to provide transportation to choice schools and tutoring, for example. Another consequence was organizational reshaping through replacing individuals or whole school teams, complete school closings, etc. In 2005, the Secretary of Education announced NCLB waiver options, and after the first were granted in 2007⁷, nearly all states, i.e. 43, had obtained one by 2013 (e.g. Polikoff et al., 2014a).

Detailing this vastly differentiated and complex law would go beyond this study's purpose; the NCLB goals, however, are centrally relevant to this inquiry as they specify expectations toward the actors involved in schooling and illuminate the assertions on which the law was constructed. Eliciting those assertions illustrates the policy's construction of accountability and the ways in which it assigns responsibilities and specifies expectations. I approach the legal language's analysis with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) lens that is less a method than a school of thought, sharing

⁷ U.S. Department of Education's respective reports to the U.S. Congress, collected here: <http://bit.ly/2tslb4v>

common ground neither with one particular theory nor with a research design. Instead, CDA represents a paradigm that encompasses "problem-oriented approaches (that are) interdisciplinary and eclectic (...) interested in deconstructing ideologies and power through systematic and reproducible investigation of semiotic data" (Wodak/Meyer, 2016, p. 4). As such, its program is not linguistically focused but seeks to "explain social phenomena that are complex and require multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approaches" (Wodak/Meyer, 2016, p. 3). For this study, the guiding impetus is one of extracting embedded meanings from the way in which text was formed to achieve its communicative purpose of setting a legal, directive frame. While regulatory nature and public in form, it effectively functions as an internal document that is relevant only to state leaders who craft education policy in direct exchange with NCLB's specifications. Hence reading NCLB's goals closely in view of multiple interpretations appears responsive to this text's context, its intentions and purposes (Gee, 2011) and the understanding of language as social practice that encapsulates "hidden and latent everyday beliefs that appear through metaphors and analogies" (Wodak/Meyer, 2016, p. 8). Those carry manifestations of power and unmasking them means pulling them into the critical light of debate to scrutinize the ways in which inequity is embedded in expressions, thereby "constituted and legitimized by language use" (Wodak/Meyer, 2016, p. 12).⁸ For the analysis at hand, I comprised my instrument's tools based on this study's conceptual framework to learn how the law constructs school and schooling in the context of its goals and the actors it addresses.

Conceptual framework: Didaktik and Curriculum

This study conceptualizes school and schooling along the two longstanding traditions of European *Didaktik* and Anglo-American *Curriculum* that together form its conceptual framework visualized in Figure 1. This separation is analytical to the degree that there are "several similarities (...) which are relevant beyond the contexts in which each originally developed" (Sievers/Luimes, 2017) and equally numerous differences within *Curriculum* than can be elaborated here (e.g. in Deng, 2018; Hlebowitsh, 2005). For the purposes of this inquiry, it suffices to relate the approach to the comparative transatlantic exchange of thought between scholars from these two traditions that originated in the late 1990s (Deng, 2018, Westbury/Hopmann/Riquarts, 2000) and continue to this day. This comparative effort is particularly promising in light of significant transformations of schooling in both traditions. Against these dynamics, the *Didaktik/Curriculum* project becomes

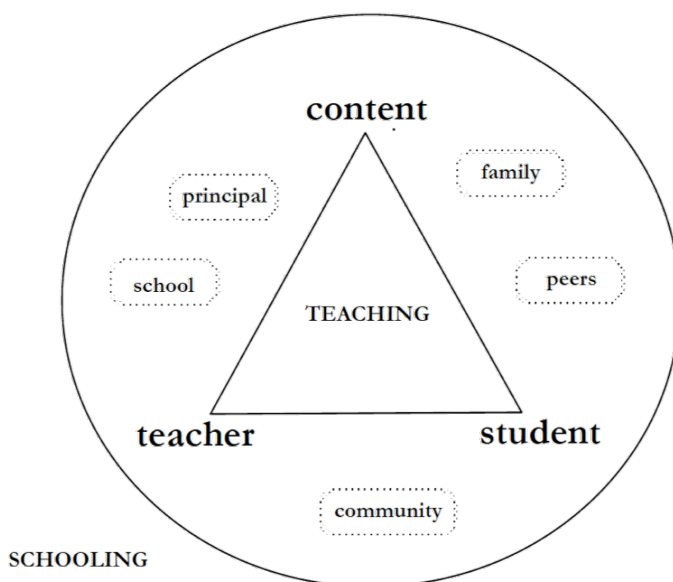
⁸ The application of a general understanding of critical discourse analysis has made headway in the legal profession, too, as Hoffman (2011) delineates. At Georgetown University Law School, all first-year students attend his course on United States Legal Discourse in order to learn about linguistic intricacies and the ways in which language achieves its effects.

relevant as a meaningful way of identifying constructions and the grounds of reasoning on which they rest:

Seeing the curriculum and *Didaktik* as products of socio-historic circumstances is modern in the sense that there is no ultimate device or absolute wisdom that informs the aims and content of schooling. Additionally, there is no definitive answer to the question of what pupils should learn. On the contrary, these are matters of choice, and the determination of this choice must be legitimized as a deliberative and democratic pursuit. (Sievesind, 2017, p. 218)

In brief, the conceptual framework of these two traditions illuminates European *Didaktik* as a research tradition and a reflective practice (Sievesind/Luimes, 2017; Hopmann, 2015, Westbury/Hopmann/Riquarts, 2000) alongside *Curriculum* as the U.S. tradition of local, decentralized forms of schooling decided by each state.

Figure 1



Conceptual framework of school and schooling: Didaktik and Curriculum

As such, *Didaktik* contributes the conceptualization of the core of schooling to be teaching: a profession that purposefully guides the interplay of exemplary content with specific students to the end of *Bildung*.

The U.S. tradition of *Curriculum* adds the embeddedness of school in a

specific community that itself is nested in its histories and context of its specific place. In that way, the student in both traditions is not a generalized student that could be any, but already a specific person from a specific place with specific characteristics that determine the ends-in-view that guide learning and *Bildung*, the self-formation and self-determination of the subject. In addition to *Bildung*, to autonomy of teaching and the educative difference between matter and meaning (Sievesind/Luimes, 2017; Hopmann, 2007) form the cornerstones of *Didaktik* that in turn add the profession that is teaching to *Curriculum*. Much different than the idea of instruction is the idea of teaching as a profession: exemplarily choosing educative materials and arranging them in a way that a specific student be entangled with it in a way that amounts to education. Autonomy in teaching presupposes knowing students well and adjusting content – in progression and sequence - so that it may become meaningful to their horizons. With this, *Didaktik* offers a broader and deeper

understanding of teaching than is referenced by instruction, something that bears resemblance to other professions' traditions and pedagogical content knowledge that can inform and guide such self-reflexive, restrained practice. This framework of schooling thereby illuminates and emphasizes the conditions of schooling and teaching, which I employ as a frame through which to analyze NCLB's goals. The following passage delineates that process in detail.

Commencing my analysis, I downloaded the legal text from the U.S. Department of Education's website⁹ and after a full reading, I dismissed procedural and financial regulations. Table 2 summarizes the relevant passages: the goals and the respective statements of purpose of the law.

Table 2

Material for analysis: NCLB goals

Title I: Improving The Academic Achievement Of The Disadvantaged Part C — Education of Migratory Children Part D — Prevention and Intervention Programs for Children and Youth who are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk
Title II: Preparing, training and recruiting high quality teachers and principals Part A — Teacher and Principal training and recruiting fund
Title III: Language instruction for limited English proficient and immigrant students Part A — English language acquisition, language enhancement, and academic achievement act
Title IV: 21 st century schools Part A — Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Part C — Homeless Education

I shall refer to these chosen passages as *material* from here onward. Moved into a new document, I then proceeded to apply my analysis instrument – tools found in J. P. Gee's work (2011) and some of Reisigl and Wodak's (2016) discursive strategies – to the material. Table 3 outlines my analysis in its four steps and their respective processes.

Table 3

Analysis instrument for NCLB's goals

step 1: nominations (Who is mentioned?) and predications (What is attributed to whom?) process: deductive with MAXQDA 18 lexical search for text and co-text
step 2: argumentation strategies for goals (What should be done?) and intentions (To what end?) process: close reading, reduction
step 3: intensification process: augmentatives, vague expressions
step 4: options tool (What or who could have been included but was not?) process: Who is part of the discussion in the literature and omitted in text?

⁹ <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>

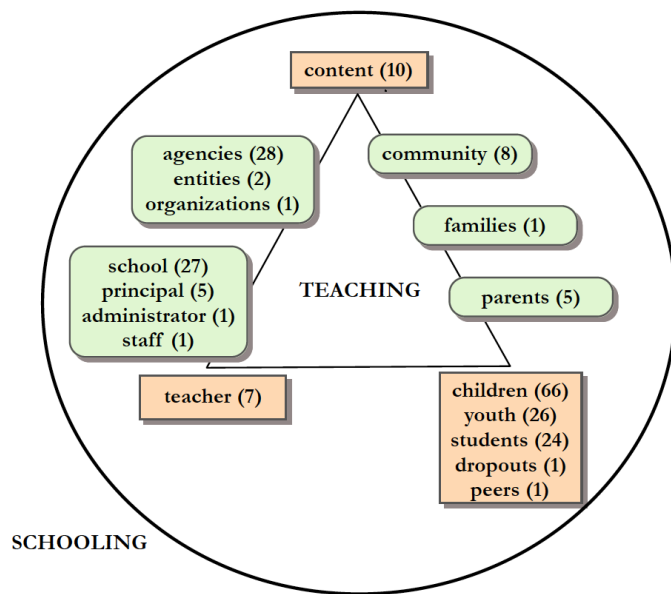


Figure 2

Results for step 1: Nominations of actors

To identify nominations and predications and thereby elicit actors and attributions, I ran lexical analyses for each of the actors represented in my conceptual framework. I utilized MAXQDA 18 for this task. From repeated readings of the material I knew that the law uses synonyms for the actors (e.g. child and youth,

parents and families), and it also includes additional nominations that represent the context of schooling (e.g. entities, agencies, organizations). I added those to my lexical analysis and visualized their mentions within my framework in Figure 2.

Nominations are plotted onto the original visualization and marked in color to visualize which aspect of the conceptual framework they reference. To complete step 1 with the analysis of predications, I ran another lexical analysis of all the nominations in MAXQDA 18, this time extracting the co-text, i.e. words before and after the nomination, to identify predications of the actors.

Table 4

Results for step 1: Predications of actors

Actors	Mentions	Co-text
student	24	all, limited English-proficient and immigrant, minority and non-minority
child	66	all, low-achieving, limited English proficient, migratory, with disabilities, Indian, neglected or delinquent, young and in need of reading assistance, high and low-performing, disadvantaged returning from correctional facilities or institutions for neglected or delinquent children and youth
youth	26	at-risk, neglected or delinquent, immigrant, homeless
peers	1	more advantaged
dropouts	1	---
families	1	---
parents	5	(parent)al participation
communities	8	(community) based organization, participation, (community) wide drug and violence
agencies	28	state, local, educational, other

The co-text speaks to attributes and characteristics the policy ascribes to the actors and those are generally negative. In those instances where the law references the seemingly positive opposite such

as *high performing* or *non-minority*, the categorization is binary and not inclusive of all students because most are likely not high or low performing but place somewhere in between. More relevant, however, is that the law conceptualizes negatively the students and children it addresses even though it formally as a policy addresses all learners, claiming to leave no child behind. Further discussion of who does not find mention in the law follows in analysis step 4.

Another result is the broader list of addressees: NCLB is mostly described to focus on four student groups only: minority, students in poverty, English learners and learners with disability. The legal language specifies many more student groups beyond those, sometimes referencing umbrella terms such as *at-risk* and *immigrant* while at other times referring to more concrete groups such as *homeless* or *returning from correctional facilities*. It remains unclear who is actually addressed by terms such as *migrant* and *migratory* children, or those *young and in need of reading assistance*. Similarly, no other specific ethnic group aside from *Indian* is named in the text. There are no definitions provided for any of the categorizational references made.

The peculiar usage of *student*, *child* and *youth* is striking as well. The terms are used interchangeably and as such seem arbitrary, with no attention to their different connotations. These are, however, fairly significant as *children* connotes a non-institutional family setting and *student* is a concept only meaningful in relation to institutionalized schooling, as children become students only once they enter it. A pedagogical term that would connote children in school is *learner*, yet that is missing entirely from the language even though that term has become standard in the teaching field and its research. A similar observation applies to the role of parents: The law seems to limit them to a participatory role rather than one based in partnership in the education of their children. Families find one mention and carry no predication, whereas they arguably represent a significant resource to learners and their education trajectories.

Analysis step 2 identifies argumentation strategies and goals. To that end, I applied close reading to the material, scanning the text for specifically the way it constructs its arguments for set purposes. To answer the questions of *What should be done?* and *To what end?*, I moved the respective language into a table shown in part in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Step 2: Screenshot of original version of goals for close reading

original copy-paste passages

do what?	argument: to what end
(1) ensure that high-quality academic assessments, accountability systems, teacher preparation and training, curriculum, and instructional materials are aligned with challenging State academic standards	students, teachers, parents, administrators can measure progress against common expectations for student academic achievement
(4) hold schools, local educational agencies, States accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students identifying and turning around low-performing schools	while providing alternatives to students in such schools to enable the students to receive a high-quality education
(5) distributing and targeting resources sufficiently	to make a difference to local educational agencies and schools where needs are greatest
(6) improving and strengthening accountability, teaching, and learning	by using State assessment systems designed to ensure that students are meeting challenging State academic achievement and content standards and increasing achievement overall, but especially for the disadvantaged
(7) providing greater decisionmaking authority and	in exchange for greater responsibility for student

I then proceeded to underline the essence of each passage, thereby creating the reduced version shown in part in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Step 2: Screenshot of reduced version of goals

REDUCED VERSION

do what?	argument: to what end
(1) ensure that high-quality academic assessments, <u>accountability systems</u> , teacher <u>preparation and training</u> , curriculum, and instructional <u>materials are aligned</u> with challenging State academic standards	students, teachers, parents, administrators can <u>measure progress</u> against common expectations for student academic achievement
(4) hold schools, local educational agencies, States <u>accountable</u> for improving <u>the academic achievement</u> of all students <u>identifying and turning around low-performing schools</u>	while <u>providing alternatives</u> to enable the students to receive a high-quality education
(5) distributing and targeting resources sufficiently	to make a difference to local educational agencies and

Finally, I eliminated repetitions throughout the material, deleted paragraph numbers and rearranged the sequence of the provisions to represent the policy's chain of reasoning as a paraphrase. What I avoided, markedly, was switching the semantic logic of the legal text: I moved text passages vertically in the table, thereby leaving the semantic relation between a stated goal and its argument intact so to maintain the material's integrity and to show how the material connects a goal to its argument. Finally, I marked policy goals in bold in Table 5.

Table 5*Step 2: Paraphrase of goals and arguments*

do what?	argument: to what end
align assessment, teacher preparation and training, curriculum, teaching materials with State standards	measure progress
accountability for student achievement	providing alternatives for students to receive a high-quality education
distributing and targeting resources	to make a difference where needs are greatest
strong accountability, teaching, and learning	student achievement especially for the disadvantaged
improving teacher and principal quality	increase student achievement
professional development	elevating the quality of instruction
authority and flexibility for schools, teachers, agencies	greater responsibility for student performance
enriched and accelerated educational program	increase the amount and quality of instructional time
ensuring the access of children	
parent participation in education of their children	
programs for migratory children, streamlined language instruction for limited E proficient, immigrant	not penalizing migratory children, address their special needs, prepare to enter all-English instruction settings
high level attainment in English for English limited proficient	meet the same content and achievement standards
educational services for neglected or delinquent children and youth	opportunity to content and standards; successful transition from institutionalization to further schooling or employment
support systems	to prevent dropping out of at-risk youth
school drug and violence prevention, early intervention	safe and drug-free learning environment
review barriers	free, appropriate public education for homeless children and youths

At this stage, it is critical to view the complete paraphrase to appropriately evaluate its result: With the semantic relationship of goal and its argument intact, it becomes visible that the end of all the policy expectations is student achievement, and that all the other goals lead back to that end.

Analysis step 3 focuses on intensifications and identifies diminutives and augmentatives, as well as discussing ambiguous formulations. One of the ways to do that is to ask what other formulations might fulfill the same communicative purpose, and to contrast those potential meanings with the chosen one. Considering that the text is a federal law, my analysis is based on the assumption that a fair amount of intention and a long formulation process has led to the textual result at hand. What is said and how it is said has undergone rigorous vetting and can, therefore, be taken equally seriously in the analysis.

Intensifiers represent one category of augmentatives that are used to say more than would be linguistically needed to make the same point. The following extracts are taken from the material for analysis, with the augmentatives marked in bold, the phrases grouped together and given identifiers for each line:

- (a) **all** children, challenging standards, **significantly** elevating, **substantial** opportunities
- (b) distributing and targeting resources **sufficiently** to make a difference to local educational agencies and schools **where needs are greatest**;
- (c) and increasing achievement overall, **but especially for the disadvantaged**;
- (d) to help ensure that children who are limited English proficient, **including immigrant children and youth**, attain English proficiency
- (e) based on **scientifically based** research on teaching limited English proficient children
- (f) ensure that migratory children are provided with **appropriate** educational services (including supportive services) that address their special needs in a coordinated and efficient manner

The approach to all of the above cases is to ask what the bold portion of text adds to its meaning, and then ask in what ways the nomination is specified, limited, or otherwise changed by the augmentative. Applied to (a), I ask what the difference between *opportunities* and *substantial opportunities* is, or how *elevating* is different from *significantly elevating* opportunities. Equally, *children* signifies *all children* by default unless specified otherwise. The basic idea here could have been to strengthen the inclusion of everyone, every child, hence all children. That is in itself not problematic. What does have implications is the specification in (e) that renders not all research scientific. The wording distinguishes between *scientifically based research* and by implication then, there must be other research. What would that be? More importantly to the field: There is a barrier built into this phrasing that allows for the distinction of research into work that is based on science and work that is not. This passes certain knowledges and forms of knowledges while eliminating and silencing others, which has come to be significant to state leaders operating under ESSA today. They are mandated to classify so-called evidence into one of four categories of rigor. That serves as the basis on which to allocate funds for suggested interventions and programs (Center on Education Policy, 2019). This discussion will be taken up later in the conclusion of this chapter.

Examples (b) and (f) are more critical: Built into the legal obligation to provide resources is the word *sufficiently* that opens up additional interpretation space to argue sufficiency. The same additional space is created by the specifier *where needs are greatest* in (b). In (f), the same negotiation space is established by using *appropriate* to qualify educational services. Similarly, the specification *but especially for the disadvantaged* in (c) seems not only redundant, but it also shifts attention to the achievement of the disadvantaged, making them the focus and not *overall achievement* as the beginning of the phrase

suggests. The insertion *including immigrant children and youth* in (d) begs the same questions: What is the purpose of stating that immigrant children and youth are a sub-group of limited English proficient children? The phrasing seems to suggest that immigrants by default have language issues that in the case of many might not necessarily apply. More importantly, many other student groups may also struggle with English. The legal language, however, creates an immediate and thereby implicitly attributes characteristics to one group that may apply to many just the same.

Another augmentative strategy is to choose strongly-connotated words in a way that adds a layer of meaning to what seems straight forward initially. Let us recall (f) as an example:

(f) ensure that migratory children are provided with appropriate educational services (including supportive services) that address their special needs in a coordinated and efficient manner

The phrasing *special needs* in education carries the meaning of disability, and using it here to describe migratory children attaches more meaning to them than merely being from somewhere else. The argument could be made that indeed all learners have their individual set of characteristics that lead to different classroom needs. Phrasing that as *special needs*, however, suggests carrying a disability, thereby connoting a limitation inherently separate from whoever everyone else supposedly is.

Intensifiers can also come in the form of normative claims that are made without argument, as the following examples show:

(g) Homelessness **alone** is not sufficient reason to separate students from the **mainstream school environment**.

(h) (...) ensure that **migratory children** benefit from State and local systemic reforms.

(i) (...) **hold local educational agencies and schools accountable** for improvements in student academic achievement.

The intensifiers used in (g) create a normatively strong yet factually vague claim because it remains unclear what other factor in addition to homelessness would warrant separation of students. The formulation, though, suggests that such factors exist. What would constitute a *mainstream school environment* is not specified either. A similarly unreasoned claim lacking is expressed in (h): Instead of formulating that all children should benefit from reforms, there is a focus on migratory children as they are the only group referenced. It appears to be a strange intensifier since all children, surely, should benefit from reforms in a way that is meaningful to them. It is yet another way to single out a student group that is perceived to be in more need than another.

Just as intensifiers and augmentatives shed light on implicit judgment, so do omissions as the one in (i): The call for accountability of *local educational agencies and schools* does not account for all the other factors that affect student academic achievement. This issue is endemic in the policy, as it seems to suggest that the makeup of education institutions, the people in them, and contexts under which they function do not matter. These omissions can be found throughout the policy language, and

while some may be due to the general nature of the law's direction, it is that particular language – with all its inclusions and exclusions – that implementing actors and following policies build on. Considering how strongly some of the normative stances are articulated, the occasional timid formulations seem all the more surprising. This example concerns homeless learners yet again:

Homeless children and youths **should** have access to the education and other services that such children and youths need to ensure that such children and youths **have an opportunity to meet** the same challenging State student academic achievement standards **to which all students are held**.

I use two markings for this passage to signify two separate readings of it: First, the analysis of the word *such* connects back to the word choice analysis of *special needs* above. The word *such* provides a formal semantic reference back to the adjective *homeless*, yet for this sentence, *these* would have presented a more neutral word choice. Equally, opting for different sentence constructions (e.g. *other services needed to ensure ...*) would have solved the reference problem altogether. In reading the text, it appears that the difference between *homeless* and *other children and youth* was important to stress. The bold marking provides a second insight close to the readings before. Using *should* is not in line with the normative, emphasizing tone of the rest of the law. It does not claim access for homeless children and youth, but it merely expresses a possibility. It also states *opportunity* without the usual adjective of *significant*. Finally, if all students were held to the same standards, it would not be necessary to point out that this is also the case for homeless learners. This argument drives the same point as it did previously in looking at formulations made for limited English proficient and at-risk learners.

Step 4 of this analysis represents the Options Tool (Gee, 2011) that traces the information choices that were made in including or omitting information in the text. It answers the question of who or what could have been included yet was not. In some cases, that may also be beneficial, as previous examples show how policy focus can result in separations of student groups and negative attributions, followed by damaging policy and implementation attention.

One way to identify meaningful omissions is to compare the mentions in the law to the learner groups that past research has consistently underrepresented: Black and Latino, learners in poverty, male learners (in specific contexts), female learners (in other specific contexts), learners from the various LGBTQI communities, incarcerated learners, future first generation college students, etc. The list is clearly incomplete, and there is a pressing need for work on the education trajectories for these and many other learner groups – and specifically those individuals who belong to more than one. With that in mind, taking another look at the nominations and predictions makes the omission visible.

Table 6*Predications of actors*

actors	times	co-text
student	24	all, limited English-proficient and immigrant, minority and non-minority
child	66	all, low-achieving, limited English proficient, migratory, with disabilities, Indian, neglected or delinquent, young and in need of reading assistance, high and low-performing, disadvantaged returning from correctional facilities or institutions for neglected or delinquent children and youth
youth	26	at-risk, neglected or delinquent, immigrant, homeless
peers	1	more advantaged
dropouts	1	---
families	1	---
parents	5	(parent)al participation
communities	8	(community) based organization, participation, (community) wide drug and violence
agencies	28	state, local educational, other

It appears that the law neither includes the specific learner groups that the literature would suggest to be relevant, nor does it delineate its understanding of who the agents are that it does address. For example, there are no explanations of *migratory children* and *immigrant students*, or *at-risk youth*. Equally, the definition of *minority students* and the characteristics that separate *minority* from *non-minority students* are left unexplained. Whether or not the majority-minority binary still existed when the law was amended is less relevant than the foreseeable disintegration of this binary differentiating construct, even as early as 2001. The law in this wording provides the interpretation space to define those groups by state.

Similarly, the law fails to address learner groups such as the gifted, the over-achieving, the multiply talented, the far advanced, etc. A law that claims to set high goals for everyone can be expected to be much more inclusive. Rather, it appears to address those who are perceived to be lacking, both as individuals and by their status, and it seems to focus on the perceived problems rather than on a wide array of learner groups that all need the resources to learn. It would seem that a federal law would express goals and expectations for all learners across the spectrum.

Equity for excellence

This chapter analyzed the actors addressed by NCLB, as well as the policy expectations held for them. The actor groups addressed are the following five: the disadvantaged, the limited English proficient, the homeless, and the delinquent and at-risk, and all children and students. The policy expectations and the intended way of reaching them relate back to improving student achievement as visualized in Table 7.

Table 7*Overview of results*

What is the stated goal?	How is it intended to be reached?
authority & flexibility for students, teachers, agencies	---
accountability for student achievement	provide alternative school choices for students
access	---
quality of qualification of teachers and administration	---
amount and quality of instructional time	enriched and accelerated program, professional development
parent participation	---
prevent dropping out	support systems
safe & drug-free environments	prevention, early intervention
alignment of assessment, teacher preparation and training, curriculum, materials	---

The dashed lines signify no reference in the material and one could argue that like any federal policy, this law provides general guidelines to be delineated in detail by each state and each school district. If that were to be accepted as the premise, it would follow that the states needed to do the work of defining and operationalizing the actor description for their specific contexts which is, of course, possible but challenges the already limited capacities of state administrations.

It is somewhat at odds with the mission and context of NCLB to be rather unspecific about student groups, on the one hand because it supposedly addresses all students, and on the other hand because it seems that being precise about the actors addressed would be relevant to the states in designing their plans. I began wondering about the use of conceptual terms and even though this is only partially related to my guiding question, I ran another lexical analysis on the core concepts found in the very first part of NCLB that reads:

SEC. 1001. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE.

The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant **opportunity** to obtain a high-quality **education** and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic **achievement** standards and state academic assessments.

The markings are mine and represent the chosen concepts. I repeated the lexical search as well as the one for co-text in MAXQDA 18. The results are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8*Central concepts and predications*

concepts	times	co-text
opportunity	4	equal and significant, children and youths
achievement	19	academic, gaps, standards
education	81	quality, needs, agencies, programs, services, of their children, of migratory children, disruptions, postsecondary, higher, for homeless children, free appropriate public, preschool, quality and comprehensive, continued e., language instruction e. programs, agencies

Conceptual explanations and definitions of the core terms are missing from the legal language. There is no clarification about what would qualify an opportunity as equal and significant, or determine education quality. Similarly, non-academic achievement and its indicators are entirely absent; this is a large omission given the relevance of extra-curriculars for college admission and for high schools' acquisition of their intended student groups.

The purpose of this analysis was to inquire directly into the legal language about whom the goals of NCLB sought to affect and how. First, the analysis produced a large list of NCLB addressees that extends the four student groups traditionally referenced in the literature, i.e. students of color, with disability, English language learners (ELL) and those living in poverty. The NCLB legal language adds student groups, e.g. migratory children, yet leaves them undefined so that readers are left with having to interpret these terms themselves. The legal language also implies negative characterizations of student groups that have no factual basis. Second, the analysis dissected the policy's goals from the ideas about their realization. The same vagueness of defining student groups and terminology such as *education quality* is found again in differences within policy goals and processes being made yet not explained, leaving considerable interpretation space as to what exactly should be realized and how. Vagueness might be interpreted as a prompt for closer boundaries, yet it may also serve as a resource for flexibility for those who create state regulations and wish to retain some freedom in deciding what is best for their constituency.

Third, the analysis identified excellence as the law's goal and equity as a precondition to that goal. This shift in favor of excellence comes at equity's cost; it makes equity a mere stepping-stone rather than a valued aim in itself. The risk of such a position is neglecting equity efforts where they do not further so-called student achievement in accountability's narrow conception of it, and pushing equity where it can yield tangible results quickly, for example for so-called bubble-kids¹⁰ - one of many dynamics that conceptual and empirical literature on NCLB has documented.

Review: Conceptual and empirical work on NCLB

Examining nearly two decades of scholarship on a federal legislation is a daunting task, no less in view of NCLB's heterogeneous implementation that defies claims of it being a concise policy. It is rather fifty different ones, with equally many implementation paths and unique sets of challenges (Davidson et al 2013). As such, a federal-level evaluation of NCLB presents a variety of issues that are exemplified by the nine federal data reports commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education between 2007 and 2010:

- school choice and supplemental educational services (Volumes I, IV, VII)
- teacher quality (Volumes II, VIII)
- accountability under NCLB (Volumes III, IX)

¹⁰ bubble-kids refer to those easiest advanced to the next higher achievement category

implementation of the 1 Percent Rule and 2 Percent interim policy options (Volume V)
targeting and uses of federal education funds (Volume VI)

They report highly aggregated data and with the exception of two teacher quality surveys, results are not representative. Other reported data include, for example, Title I schools and student populations and nine large urban school districts. As such, the reports cannot provide between-state comparisons, state-specific cases or outlier phenomena. The broad national scope and states' variations render the results incomprehensive, lacking the reflection of the heterogeneity of states' policies. For example, Volume I on implementation presents results of a study of nine large urban school districts¹¹. Descriptively, findings show that in seven of these nine districts, supplemental services had positive effects on achievement while school choice showed neither positive nor negative effects. Findings are not nationally representative and cannot comprehensively characterize effects of school choice or supplemental services (U.S. Department of Education, 2007a, p. xii). Also, Volume III exemplifies the issue of aggregate data by almost exclusively presenting percentage measures: Authors report that 75% of schools across the nation made AYP in 2003-04 and 13% of schools were identified for improvement in 2004-05, largely in high-poverty, high-minority, large and urban contexts (U.S. Department of Education, 2007c, p. xvii). Given that AYP measures and progression timelines are unique to each state, these percentages say little if anything at all. Volume VI is similarly remote, reporting distribution percentages of Title I national funding without any conclusions for individual states' contexts (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b, p. xxxii).

Volumes VII and VIII report teacher quality from two nationally representative studies conducted during NCLB. Both reports reiterate the policy's great variety as a challenge to understanding the status of teacher quality in the nation, notwithstanding the 94% of teachers that were labeled highly-qualified in 2006-07 (U.S. Department of Education, 2009d, p. xix). Those teachers worked less often in special needs settings, middle and high schools, high-poverty and high-minority schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2007b, p. xix). One-third of paraprofessionals did not know their qualification status under NCLB or did not provide a response. A mere 13% of elementary teachers completed more than 24 hours of professional development in reading, and 6% did so in math (U.S. Department of Education, 2009d, p. xix). It appears that while the label of highly-qualified was achieved, there was little actual qualification through academic avenues or during-service professional development, and lacking access to well-trained and experienced teachers.

Other recurring policy issues include families' limited use of NCLB choice (1%) and supplemental education services (17%) options in 2003-04 (Stecher et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2008a, p. xv). Failing communication with parents is reported as well: While officials documented having notified parents of choice and service options, parents reported not knowing and not having

¹¹ Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Palm Beach, Philadelphia, San Diego and Washington D.C.

been informed. Challenges on the federal level also include the lack of reliable, comprehensive state databases of records of student participation and achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2008a, p. xvi). The final report emphasizes states' varied structures regarding rigor, proficiency levels and assessments, AYP calculation and target measures. It provides visibly more number data and insightful analysis on, for example, the relevant difference between relational measures: 13% of Title I districts identified for improvement in 2006-07 served 40% of students nation-wide; the number of districts identified for coercive action increased five-fold while districts identified for improvement remained at the same percentage level (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. xx). Yet stronger report wording clarifies that stable AYP rates in the beginning "mask the fact that some states' rates of AYP rose substantially while others' rates fell substantially." (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. xxii) Most schools identified for improvement and action were found in little over 1% of the nation's Title I districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. xxii), revealing how clustered schooling remained. The report's implications for future policy highlight states' variation and the challenges to support systems as well as the lacking knowledge "about the quality of local improvement efforts or the effectiveness of state and district technical assistance and interventions (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. xxv).

Conclusions from federal reporting on NCLB suggest that states implemented varied accountability systems in accordance with the NCLB framework, meeting requirements for highly-qualified teachers while struggling to ensure their availability across schools and student populations. Over time, there were more students in schools identified for either category of improvement than at the beginning of NCLB. Policy offers to those families were not taken up; documentation of data and communication is reported to be lacking or done unsystematically in some states. The fact that these federal reports include data from 2004-05 to 2006-07 further cautions conclusions.

These limited insights from federal reporting direct further inquiry toward the extensive body of conceptual and empirical scholarship that is far too comprehensive to represent within the scope of this study. The benefit of two decades passed grants a bird's eye view on the strands of conversation that emerged and on recurring aspects across those strands. I shall first outline early conceptual scholarship on the impetus and goals of NCLB before I turn to empirical work and close this review by sketching some methodological considerations and consensuses in view of the continuing challenge of accountability for public education.

NCLB's in-built inability to reach its stated goals was clear from its inception: Social forces such as poverty characterize students' socially nested lives and their schooling experience profoundly, yet they are beyond any school reform's reach (Berliner, 2005; Hursh, 2005). Rather than school reform policy having failed, it is social stratification that pervades and steers societal spaces and processes, including schooling and learning: "Raising achievement requires amelioration of social and economic

conditions." (Rothstein, 2004, p. 11 quoted in Berliner, 2005). It did not need NCLB to identify schools that fail to educate students, or to identify who has attended those schools for decades: Poverty and markers of inequity are common and historically persistent denominators that school reform efforts cannot eradicate (Berliner, 2005). Early warnings sounded against the high-stakes testing rationale that would test what could easily be measured large-scale but leave other contents and functions of schooling behind; unintended yet structurally embedded consequences were foreseen, such as corrupted indicators and people, both outside and inside of education, and large-scale cheating by excluding students from testing pools, misrepresenting dropout data, narrowing what is taught to what is tested, and more (Nichols/Berliner, 2005). Criticism exposed policymakers' erroneous contention that alignment with set standards would safeguard testing against large-scale score inflation, e.g. through tests' validity issues or coaching students to pass tests without having an opportunity to learn (Koretz, 2005, p. 14). Specific inquiry on test construction matters showed how mandated performance targets and proficiency measures were arbitrarily set by decision makers: "Rarely is there any consideration of research or historical evidence about the magnitude or rate of improvement that is reasonable to expect." (Koretz, 2005, p. 18)

Warnings were also voiced about policy effects disproportionately harming students who NCLB was geared toward supporting: students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities and those living in poverty, making it vital to hold states accountable for these students' conditions of living (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 255) and the contexts that offer students opportunities to learn (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 258). To that very end, teachers present a valuable, yet inequitably distributed resource that NCLB would lastingly shorten and further cluster (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 256), leading to destabilized professional morale through conflicting accountability ratings and erroneous scoring and reporting (Berliner/Nichols, 2007; Nichols/Berliner, 2005). Later work on these criticisms proved them warranted: Teacher retention was difficult at low-performing schools and yet more challenging at sanctioned ones with perceptions of teachers being a strong influence on turnover and a cause of chronic instability in retaining them, particularly if policies stood in contrast to teachers' professional convictions. By increasing teachers' working conditions through control over instruction, professional autonomy mitigated turnover and increased retention, particularly in low-performing schools (Ingersoll et al., 2016; Wronowski/Urlick, 2010).

Early conceptual scholarship concurred that NCLB's conceptual poverty was unfit to guide education improvement, and it affirmed the need for accountability in public education. A fundamental prerequisite to its intent is large, system-wide expansion of capacities (Gunzenhauser/Hyde, 2007), including addressing the relevance and impact of out-of-school-factors that account for 60% of tested so-called student achievement: issues of housing, health, poverty and safety permeate students' lives in the shape of food insecurity, the quality of early education, their

neighborhood's collective efficacy, rates of violence and the ability to obtain medical care (Berliner, 2014; Sunderman, 2008). No test-driven, high-stakes accountability policy will be able to fix these ailments and their effects on schooling lastingly (Sunderman, 2008). Parallel to the unintended yet foreseeable collateral damage, early literature discussed strategies and measures to offset some of those effects. Scholars called for lowering the stakes and adding more and broader school quality measures to capture more than what is easily testable large-scale; summative assessments by teachers and end-of-course exams were proposed (Berliner/Nichols, 2007) as were adjustments to the policy's overburdening expectations (Sunderman, 2008; Hopmann, 2008; Gunzenhauser/Hyde, 2007).

Empirical scholarship on NCLB emerged later so that by NCLB's intended ending in 2014, the core consensus was that "knowledge about the impacts of NCLB is still nascent" (Reback et al., 2014, p. 1), not because of missing inquiry but due to its fragmented and disputed conclusions. Some of the comparative work on NAEP data of states with and without rigorous accountability frameworks pre-NCLB found test score gains for 4th and 8th graders in math and none in reading: "(...) the effects of NCLB on student achievement have been at best limited to certain groups." (Dee/Jacob, 2010, p. 156) They were not, however, as substantive as expected and indicated persisting test score gaps (Ladd, 2017a; Dee/Jacob, 2010; Figlio/Loeb, 2011). Improvement of test scores was reported in the lower and top percentiles; test scores in 8th grade math show improvement for traditionally low-achieving groups and at lower percentiles (Dee/Jacob, 2010). Other readings assess these findings as modest at best (Polikoff, 2012) and reported diverse results with long-run outcomes difficult to judge (Figlio/Loeb, 2011). In fact, a recalculation of Dee and Jacob's data without the first potentially NCLB-affected scores of 2003 eliminated the significant statistical effect for 4th year scores entirely (Ladd/Lauen, 2010).

The challenge remains that as with any proficiency measure, there is no telling how score inflation and validity issues affected results (Koretz 2005, 2011; Nichols/Berliner, 2005, Berliner/Nichols, 2007). Similar criticism addresses arbitrary cut-off points in assessing schools' AYP (Koretz, 2017, 2011), and missing clarity in how to assign a specific value over another (Polikoff et al. 2014b), resulting in schools' reversed AYP assessment, i.e. from making AYP to failing it and vice versa, depending on what state the school would be in (Wong et al., 2017, Reback et al., 2014). Calls to check for indirect testing effects as an ethical obligation aside from being a statistical necessity have not resonated. Some empirical literature reviews on NCLB even exclude test scores from their work and merely mention positive average effects in view of the need "to exercise considerable caution in interpreting any changes in students' high-stakes test scores that are observed under accountability pressure." (Mittleman/Jennings, 2018, p. 481) Others do not attempt to report large-scale insights but instead recount state case studies or such of selected urban schools; large-scale comparative

work of AYP is reported as well, prefacing that section with a reminder that "NCLB's positive effects on student achievement vary greatly across contexts and student subgroups." (Husband/Hunt, 2015, p. 223) In summary, NCLB effect research on student test scores and AYP measures offer minimal and disputed insights.

In reviewing the empirical literature on NCLB, I now shift to three exemplary instances of insight that inform the discussion of NCLB's broader effects and the scope of their interpretation. Following two disputations of leading researchers about NCLB's assessment, I briefly sketch results from an inquiry into NCLB waivers before closing on points of agreement about NCLB's legacy to accountability policy moving forward.

The first disputation commences on two-fold agreement: NCLB's impact on so-called student achievement was "clearly disappointing" (Ladd, 2017a, p. 463) and positive overall effects of NCLB include large, rich datasets on education that provide ample material for researchers, new subgroup reporting structures and more teachers meeting NCLB's requirement of being highly-qualified. The dispute centers on the overall meaning of research findings, for example the narrowed curriculum by shifting instruction (Ladd, 2017a, p. 464) and a focus on bubble kids. While Ladd is adamantly critical and conceptualizes these facts as a case in point of NCLB's flawedness (Ladd, 2017a, p. 463), Jacob holds that shifted instruction did not negatively influence test scores in other tested areas (Jacob, 2017a, p. 472). He speculates about spillover effects from tested to non-tested subjects and adds: "On the other hand, it is hard to quantify the impact of less time on subjects such as art, music, and physical education." (Jacob, 2017a, p. 472) He also contends that results of pressures at the beginning of the policy were actually positive, including focused attention on at-risk students, tutoring, extended instruction time and organization changes such as block scheduling (Jacob, 2017a, p. 471).

In Ladd's response, she argues: "It (*proficiency rate setting*) raises questions about the goals of school accountability" (Ladd, 2017b, p. 478). Whether passing a cut-off point or seeking advancement across student groups and all subjects is a matter of purpose, not measurement, and central to discussing future forms accountability policy and structure. In accordance with the literature, Jacob acknowledges that "NCLB was not sufficient to accomplish its extremely ambitious goals" (Jacob, 2017b, p. 480) but even in light of its flaws, he rejects NCLB being called flawed:

My view is that the moderate shift of time toward these high-stakes subjects (...) was not a bad thing. I would not want schools to focus entirely on these skills, but for the most part I think that schools have continued to devote considerable time to a wide variety of curricular areas. (...) But, even here, it is important to acknowledge that such 'teaching-to-the-test' can have positive long-term effects. (Jacob, 2017b, p. 481)

Their debate is a case in point for the variation that exists in assessing the impacts of NCLB and their significance: Both authors agree to large extents and yet they read the implications of the

existing research differently because they relate to other purposes of accountability. Jacobs stands with Ladd in identifying the social and economic conditions of schooling as "a major factor – perhaps the most important factor – holding back disadvantaged schools" (Jacob, 2017b, p. 482). By the same token, he also holds that this is not what federal policy is geared toward because education policy is not social policy (Jacob, 2017b, p. 483).

The second disputation is a forum on "Is test-based accountability dead?" and it encompasses three diverging conclusions for improved accountability policy: more and more varied indicators to offset known unintended consequences (Polikoff, 2017), school choice and curriculum influence for all parents and students instead of the middle- and upper-middle class (Greene, 2017), higher and more immediate stakes for teachers as part of stronger, federally mandated accountability policy (Huffman, 2017). Contentions range from so-called true accountability policy never having existed (Greene, 2017; Huffman, 2017) to warnings about serious harm by school choice policies without accountability in place (Polikoff, 2017) and the assessment of test-based accountability having produced increased test scores (Polikoff, 2017) and better education for all students (Huffman, 2017). More than the conclusions themselves, it is insightful how authors build their rationales. For example, distorting effects of testing and narrowed foci to tested content are attributed to "central-planning (...) similar to that used by officials in the Soviet Union." (Greene, 2017) Distant officials, Greene contends, are not able to make judgments on the "diverse spectrum of local priorities in our nation." (Greene, 2017) Instead, the privilege of parental autonomy and control should be extended to everyone in the form of school choice in order to "constitute real accountability in K-12 education." (Greene, 2017) Greene and Huffman both call for stronger accountability, yet the former interprets it as local, individual influence while the latter argues for federal oversight and control to protect against resisting educators and little political will (Huffman, 2017). The disputation presents relevant similarities in light of their differences: accountability is needed, as are broader indicators for multi-faceted measurement to counter the effects of the inherited problems of past test-based policy.

By the end of 2013, almost all states had submitted NCLB waivers, allowing them to create their own accountability structure. Research that reviewed 43 available waivers¹² reported that the vast majority of states did not utilize their newfound flexibility to add new subjects; only 14 states included "non-test measures and measures of student growth (to) capture more of the multidimensional nature of schooling" (Polikoff et al., 2014a, p. 8). Overall, NCLB's problems were replicated and study authors expressed surprise at lost opportunities for alternative indicators while acknowledging the lack of capacity in most contexts. (Polikoff et al., 2014a, p. 8) Waivers were

¹² waivers under review as of 2013: Illinois, Iowa, Wyoming; waivers not submitted, rejected or withdrawn: California, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Vermont (Polikoff et al., 2014a, p. 4)

assessed through grading criteria – construct validity, reliability, fairness, transparency – along letter grades A through F, arriving at increased construct validity (F to C), reduced reliability (B to C), slightly increased fairness (F to D+) and transparency at a consistent same grade C. This increase might inspire hope, yet authors warn that known problems will persist unless states increase construct validity drastically to avoid reiterating the unintended consequences by improving policy design through immediate analysis that serves to adjust active policies (Polikoff et al., 2014b).

A fragmented assessment emerges when reviewing research on NCLB. Notwithstanding the abundance of work and data generated over time, findings contradict each other and remain inconclusive across the board (Jacob, 2017a, p. 472). However, these dissonances are neither surprising nor problematic considering that NCLB was not one coherent federal policy. Its state-specific heterogeneity cannot provide one coherent set of research results; it reflects the variety that exists among individual states' NCLB versions. Hence, the federal aggregate level does not offer so-called evidence or conclusions beyond the 100% proficiency rate not having been accomplished. Searching for national, context-free findings seems to be beside the point. Recognizing that "effects vary considerably for different contexts" (Jacob, 2017a, p. 471) instead points to the relevance of socio-geographic place on the one hand and accountability measurement structures on the other. The fact that states could not realize granted flexibility and replicated NCLB structurally (Polikoff et al., 2014b) emphasizes the relevance of research on NCLB as a condition for improving accountability policy for public schooling.

Reviewing the literature on NCLB test construction and measurement extends far beyond the scope of this study and so I focus on briefly drawing on recurring takeaways: Whether test-based accountability works or not is a futile question and the answers vary after almost twenty years of scholarly debate because studies suffer from weak design or weak databases (Koretz, 2011, p. 12). The core issue lies in the misguided, far too simplistic question being asked. Contentions that ask for more precise measurement are similarly over-simplified and miss differentiated problems of, for example, standards-based reporting that misrepresents progress and invites under- and overestimating progress between or at the cut scores, respectively (Koretz, 2011, p. 13). Using growth models instead of performance targets is widely supported yet not without its challenges either: Multiple years of reliable, uninterrupted data and fixed validity and reliability issues are only the precondition (Polikoff, 2014b), further complicated by student transience, the needed consistent choice of test, its timing, etc. (Koretz, 2011, p. 13). Score inflation remains one of the core concerns, not only for manipulation and gaming but also for inherent bias and sampling issues that disadvantage groups of test-takers and underrepresent the breadth and depth of what schooling is and does (Koretz, 2011, p. 17). The mere perception of stakes is equally damaging than the stakes themselves, causing score inflation and a variety of other known side effects (Koretz, 2011, p. 16).

While numeric measurement appears to be inherently objective and clear (Pogrow, 2017, p. 1), data may still be flawed and exaggerate effectiveness while being of little use to practitioners (Pogrow, 2017, p. 2); experimental research that is supposed to bring about evidence-based practice is often too simplistic (Pogrow, 2017, p. 13) and cannot account for confounding variables in education practice (Pogrow, 2017, p. 14).

Methodological discussions culminate in calls for caution against the overreliance on test scores that has led to narrower curricula, less instructional time on non-tested subjects and increased instruction time on math and reading, teaching to the test and test preparation focused on bubble kids (Ladd, 2017a; Husband/Hunt, 2015; Dee/Jacob, 2010, pp. 180f; Nichols/Berliner, 2007; Berliner, 2005). For example, prominent work by the Center of Education Policy found "NCLB influenced classroom practice in ways that may have attenuated teacher autonomy" (Dee/Jacob, 2010, p. 181) through aligning curricula with standards in favor of tested material.

Teacher inquiry specifically has been subject to resurfacing methodological criticism about self-reports as the source for potential bias and lacking robustness (Polikoff, 2012, p. 365):

Few studies have implemented regression-based research designs that attempt to isolate the effects of school accountability policies on district, school, and classroom practices from the potentially confounding effects of other determinants. One prominent exception is a recent study by Cecilia Elena Rouse and others (2007), which used a regression-discontinuity design and data from surveys of principals in Florida to examine how school responded to pressure from the state's accountability system. (Dee/Jacob, 2010, p. 181)

The study is credited with identifying effects of accountability pressure such as focus on low-scoring learners, increased instruction time, reorganized school days and decreasing principal control, among others. However, the authors conclude the work's limitation to be "not addressing NCLB per se" but being a partial result of Florida's specific system (Dee/Jacob, 2010, p. 182). This limitation is a case in point for limitations that are inherent in most of the research on NCLB: It only exists in the form of every state's own experiment with NCLB (Wong et al., 2017), resulting in considerable variation of policy effects based on the context, the nature of sanctions, etc. (Jacob, 2017a).

The prevalent mention of the significance of context is a core finding of this review and it calls to reconsider not only research designs and research questions but also the matter of constructing improved accountability policy. I contend that these contextualized realities of schooling are of central interest to research that seeks to know how NCLB affected states' systems and schooling dynamics in order to explore the effects of particular histories and contexts different places, i.e. states or districts or regions. The methodological issue of causality is the same either way: Research often only assumes phenomena to be a result of a policy in the same timeframe. However, any impact measure, and hence any claims of the effects of NCLB, would have to explain how whatever indicator directly and unequivocally results from the policy. Turned around, there would need to be

proof that correlation or simple co-occurrence of policy and phenomenon can be excluded, and that is not possible (e.g. Husband/Hunt, 2015).

Agreement exists across the field that accountability for public education is reasonable and needed (e.g. Ingersoll/Collins, 2017; Ladd, 2017a; Jacob, 2017a; Koretz, 2011; Sunderman, 2008; Gunzenhauser/Hyde, 2007), specifically through federal oversight that ties Title 1 school funding to states' compliance with, for example, policies enacted to prevent the growing tendencies toward racial and economic resegregation and school districts secession (e.g. Frankenberg, 2019; Frey/Wilson, 2009). As such, accountability policy enjoys positive acknowledgments from several perspectives: The body of available data has grown tremendously, providing easily accessible data as a solid source for research and the public alike (e.g. Ladd, 2017a; Polikoff, 2017). NCLB was not novel but it expanded previous programs to a national level with progression targets for all schools in a state, making disaggregated reporting a new standard (Koretz, 2011, p. 12) that granted attention to subgroups and learners traditionally underserved and neglected (e.g. Ladd, 2017a; Desimone, 2013; Sunderman, 2008). The agreed negatives of NCLB have been well-documented for nearly two decades and include a breadth of unintended yet foreseeable side effects such as teacher and administrator cheating, moving and retaining students strategically, failing and advancing students before and after tested grades, narrowing instruction and curricula to tested domains, teaching to the test, misleading public reporting, etc. (e.g. Koretz, 2017; Husband/Hunt; 2015, Sunderman, 2008; Berliner/Nichols, 2007; Berliner, 2005; Nichols/Berliner, 2005). The policy was narrow in its understanding of schooling and the curriculum and expectations (Ladd, 2017a, p. 464) while at the same time overreaching on those expectations (Koretz, 2011; Hopmann, 2008); it created "pressure without support" (Ladd, 2017a, p. 406), losing the basis for public democratic discussion of education policy's underlying rationales (Gunzenhauser/Hyde, 2017, p. 506).

The common ground on which calls for improved accountability stand is the need for more and broader indicators for accountability in schooling (e.g. Polikoff et al., 2016; Koretz, 2011; Dee/Jacob, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Gunzenhauser/Hyde, 2007), including multiple measures of student advancement (e.g. Ladd, 2017b; Koretz, 2017; Sunderman, 2008; Darling Hammond, 2007) and quality of teaching through teacher flexibility and autonomy (e.g. Wronowski/Urlick; 2019; Koretz. 2017; Ingersoll/Collins, 2017; Ingersoll et al., 2016) and school inspectorates (Ladd, 2017b; Davidson et al., 2013). The consensus on measurement is almost conceptual in nature: Because "refinements in test design are unlikely to be sufficient" (Koretz, 2011, p. 23) and "(an) optimal system for one context and one set of policy goals (is) unlikely to be optimal for another" (Figlio/Loeb, 2011, p. 416), so devising broad performance goals in combination with sensible, restrained standardized measurement systems (Davidson et al., 2013, p. 23) echoes throughout. To that end, adding tested subjects to accountability measures suggests

adding science, a federally required subject in all states (Polikoff, 2014a, p. 8) and controlling for student demographics as well as focusing on within-school and within-district gaps rather than larger aggregate levels, e.g. within-state, to mitigate construct validity challenges (Polikoff, 2014a, p. 8). Aligning testing with teaching and the curriculum is necessary to produce better measures (Jacob, 2017b; Polikoff, 2012). Consistent monitoring, evaluation and revision of more than so-called student achievement will likely mitigate manipulation, together with reasonable targets and offsetting incentives (Koretz, 2017; Nichols/Berliner, 2005). A fundamental precondition to all of it is large-scale capacity building (e.g. Sunderman, 2008; Gunzenhauser/Hyde, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Mintrop, 2008; Hopmann, 2008) carried by extensive funding (Jacob, 2017b; Figlio/Loeb, 2011).

There is wide recognition that context matters to accountability policy and research because social and economic conditions are major factors in all aspects of schooling (e.g. Reback et al., 2014; Figlio/Loeb, 2011; Gunzenhauser/Hyde, 2007; Flynt, 2006), because those are the conditions in which schools operate (Ladd, 2017b). Exploring those might offer differentiated insights into creating and maintaining "localized expertise" (Jacob, 2017b, p. 483) and a more fruitful avenue for addressing so-called achievement gaps that have persisted for decades (Center on Education Policy, 2020; Mittleman/Jennings, 2018; Ladd, 2017a; Berliner, 2014; Fuller et al., 2007; Berliner, 2005). A renewed commitment to public education (Center on Education Policy, 2020) seeks to draw research and policy attention to options aside from charter schools and privatization efforts in view of its "unifying purpose (to) build and sustain communities" (Center on Education Policy, 2020, p. 6) through "recognizing that the well-being of our own children is intimately linked to the well-being of all other people's children (Lillian Katz quoted in (Center on Education Policy, 2020, p. 8).

Early conceptual literature has been confirmed in its call to broaden the conversation about accountability in schooling in all possible ways, no less to the public by discussing what and how should be taught and assessed and to navigate the contested education space in light of conflicting views of society and schooling (Hursh, 2005). Transparent and simple guidance together with support to expand capacity might be the government's reasonable federal role to play (Fuller et al., 2007), one that needs to be more constructive and positive than NCLB was (Ladd, 2017a). A conversation that acknowledges and builds on the need for human judgment on all levels of accountability policy (Koretz, 2017) is seen as the precondition for "building policy around students born into poverty (who) deserve the best teachers and most rigorous curricular, creative and reflective forms of teaching." (Pogrow, 2017, p. 16) How to include stakes and in what way is a conceptual matter as much as it is a practical one that needs to be subject to debate about the options it offers and denies (Gunzenhauser/Hyde, 2007) because accountability in education is reciprocal in more way than one: Communities are called on to build social conditions that schools can then reasonably function in (Berliner, 2005). That includes attention to out-of-school-factors

such as inadequate medical care and food instability from pre-birth to adulthood, environmental pollutants and family worries (Berliner, 2009). I read Berliner to not only call for strong social policy and extended school finance but also as criticism about school choice through vouchers that carry the popular argument that circumstances are fixed by allegedly ticketing disadvantaged students into better environments: "Some believe this is prelude to voucher proposals aimed at privatizing education" (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 247). I read Berliner and many other early conceptual critics as voices that attempted to "change the conversation through changing the problem definition" (Mehta, 2013a, p. 293), from test scores to conditions of schooling, which I explore as a potentially viable route in the final chapter.

The literature review's conclusions speak to the relevance of scholarship on NCLB and accountability as its strands – conceptual, empirical and methodological – refer conversations back to fundamental questions of the purpose and quality of public schooling: Calls for multiple, broader indicators and reasonable goals in view of the multiple purposes of public schooling need public discussion and scholarship that addresses these old foundational questions first. It is clear that NCLB's expectations overreached, yet what can reasonably be aimed for given what schooling is and what it can do remains at the core of the policy and scholarly discussions alike. A consensus appears to form around the relevance of the conditions of a given place as paramount to understanding how the histories and contexts of that place affect schooling. Acknowledging the key importance of these conditions tasks research with inquiring into a given place in such a way that it can speak beyond the case, explore and expand on known patterns and bring to light valuable insights that may inform other contexts as well.

This study so far has explored different constructions of accountability in schooling: The brief historical recount of present-day accountability policy reconstructed one way of conceptualizing accountability narrowly; that view culminated in NCLB and its construct of schooling as a matter of excellence, first and foremost. Decades of receding federal oversight for equity in schooling resulted in resegregation, unchallenged by the legal construction of standing in the discussion of the purposes and boundaries of public education. The core of the age of accountability and its inconsistencies begin to emerge from these constructions. Since the experience of accountability depends on the conditions in which it is experienced, it is vital to elicit the experiences of accountability from those addressed by the law; they may mirror aspects known from the literature or reveal entirely new angles by assigning meaning in unforeseen ways. To explore such a manifestation is to explore an exemplary place, a socio-geographical context as "(...) different constitutional mind-sets, i.e. deeply engrained ways of understanding the relation between the public and its institutions" (Hopmann, 2008, p. 425). Eliciting their understanding of accountability may challenge existing knowledge or alternative ways of dealing with NCLB and accountability. As such,

any place could have served as a unique example of one specific biotope of gatekeepers in schooling experiencing accountability within the specific conditions they find themselves in. So my case is exemplary in the sense that it is one construction of experience, embedded in the specific place, its histories and contexts. For the purposes of this study, that place is Alabama.

4. The case of Alabama

The following chapter provides a broad exploration of the state's present contexts as they form the conditions of schooling experienced by gatekeepers, i.e. those tasked with managing the distance between policy and practice. Their understandings of what they do and how they do it create a soundboard of a profession that is dedicated to advancing its students the best it can in view of the surrounding community's expectations for schooling. In contrast, meeting accountability expectation is mandatory busy work at the backseat of pedagogical investment in their school and community. This umbrella result emerged through my inquiry that is phenomenological in the sense that it purposefully elicits interviewees' horizons and ends-in-view, their lifeworlds and the relevant aspects in it. Nine conversations along a semi-structured phenomenological guideline merged into one story that suggests saturation of the collected material for reconstructing schooling in Alabama as those involved in it conceive of it. The status quo suggests that the burden of history and poverty along race and class continues to shape the conditions for schooling in the state to this day.

Discussing the impacts of school reform in the abstract, i.e. removed from places and people and histories, means eliminating the contexts onto which schooling reform falls. Yet this context is uniquely relevant to understanding how a reform affected the ones it intended to reach and what of the original intentions transformed along the way, be it because of or in spite of the reform intentions. Those involved in schooling shape policy intentions into specific experiences of schooling (Cuban, 1998; Tyack/Cuban, 1995) and thereby change reform along the way. Capitalizing on their specificity of place means inquiring into the multiple realities (Schütz, 1945) of schooling to understand how local, constitutional mind-sets (Hopmann, 2008) of those involved unfold and manifest. It is they who assign meaning to what they understand to be meaningful. Their mindsets are formative part of their experiences and provide access to how community expectation co-constructs local conditions of schooling that reflect pragmatic needs rather than reform visions (Tröhler, 2008, p. 12). After dissecting NCLB's vision in chapter 3, I now explore this case in a way that affirms school and schooling as the "complex entity with a character of its own" (Tröhler, 2008, p. 10), i.e. from the perspective of principals and superintendents who mediated and mitigated policy expectations vis-à-vis their schools' and communities' constituencies. In doing so, I separate the reformers' intentions from those upon who they fell in order to understand concrete experiences of

schooling during accountability that may speak to the balancing act between what a policy intended and what is feasible within the conditions at hand (Tröhler, 2008, p. 13).

The approach at hand avoids current tendencies to "homogenize the heterogeneous reality of education through abstract and context-indifferent standards and outcome metrics" (Mayer et al., 2014, p. 2) by not utilizing so-called achievement data, e.g. test scores, AYP measures, report card indicators, etc. to explore this case. Such course of action would have to presume certainty within the numbers, a risk embedded within accountability (Mayer et al., 2014, p. 2). In doing so, I respond to the call to discard the "planning, learning and effect premise" (Hopmann, 1999 in Westbury, 2008, p. 48) and affirm that reform seeps through contexts non-linearly and unevenly and as such finds itself morphed, as "a natural result of negotiating tensions and ambiguities" (Westbury, 2008, p. 52) that are built into the fabric of schooling. Based on this realization, I explore how schooling practice in Alabama may have been shaped by and may have reshaped NCLB.

This study inevitably carries my normative underpinnings, both regarding the phenomenon I research and the way I approach my work. From that point onward, however, it is reasoning and structured exploration through scholarship that forms the substance. For example, I choose poverty as a guiding theme, not only because it determines schooling in Alabama but also because there are students who have more stake in schooling than others and I argue that schooling needs to be there for those who need it. Students in resource-rich and stable environments are of equal concern to public schooling yet the stakes are clearly higher for those less privileged and my efforts focus on them instead of, for example, private schooling or gifted education. I am interested in a sociologically flavored approach that understands a social structure through the elements that sustain and negotiate it (Labaree, 2020, p. 100) rather than assuming that individuals' trajectories are a mere result of their choices:

I focus more on the social roles that people are induced to play than on their independent choices and actions. (...) All roles appear more solid and defined than they really are. This is in line with the nature of social structure, which is an architectural metaphor for a process of forming behavioral habits that emerge from organizational incentives. Structures appear concrete but are actually emergent patterns that depend on people to keep the pattern going. (Labaree, 2020, p. 102)

Social structures include caveats of flexibility that rich descriptions may be able to carve out and use to understand "the causes that derive from social relations (as) more than personal traits" (Labaree, 2020, p. 102) and therefore step out of the linear presumption that accountability rests on. Schooling may then be approached not primarily as an instrument for social efficacy or social mobility but as a place shaped by democratic ways of living and learning.

Approaching the case

I present Alabama as a place, intentionally multi-faceted and conflicting, in my effort to assemble an elaborate and differentiated understanding of the experience of schooling in the age of

accountability in a specific place. As such, my approach turns accountability around onto NCLB itself and inquires into the manifestations and status quo of its goals. Thus, my work differs in kind and spirit from evaluation or implementation research, and it also rejects any best practice impetus, or its opposite; in separating my efforts from evaluation, implementation or best practice research, the study proposes a different and more differentiated methodology to elicit the experience of those involved in schooling and the meanings they assign to it.

One, evaluation research on the achievement of NCLB's goals seems futile at this point as it was clear from its inception that by the policy's design, the goals could not be reached by those addressed by the law. Literature of the past two decades has documented that extensively and critically. This study embraces that fact and uses NCLB's goals as a basis to learn, document and understand the ways in which NCLB took shape in Alabama according to those who experienced it first-hand. The point is to not presume what should have been but to find out what was, through a variety of means in an effort to filter out patterns. I traveled to Alabama ready to learn from those involved in schooling about what it was they felt I needed to know, their relevant experiences and the meanings they assigned. Only then did I research data in-depth, consulted reports and whitepapers and literature about what had been raised in these conversations.

Two, this work is not implementation research, as it does not recount the enactment of policy changes or compare them against policy expectation. Even if I had set out to do that, I would have likely failed given the difficulty in obtaining information and data from the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) given that I do not reside within the U.S. The ALSDE website blocks user access from outside the country¹³ and even with friends on American soil who provided me with downloaded ALSDE materials, the documentation remained fragmented. Notwithstanding those issues, recounting implementation would have created a simplistic report rather than a fundamentally critical study that aims to distinguish appearance from essence, what something is from what it may mean, to whom, where, when and in what way. Those aspects stand on the basic understanding of multiple realities as complex, socially constructed and culturally defined. Rather than free-ranging constructivism from an anything-goes attitude, it is a position that supposes experience to mold our perception of something, say for example an empty coffee mug. To some it is the holder of delightful brew, to others it is the tool to express anger, and for yet others it symbolizes their parents' marriage. Factually, it is the same mug. Equally factually, it is different mugs to different people¹⁴.

¹³ I had multiple phone conversations about the blocked website with both representatives of their technology department as well as data management officers. The website block is a decision of Homeland Security and no solution could be found that would have allowed me to gain access. Unfortunately, representatives of ALSDE were not able to schedule a personal meeting with me for data collection.

¹⁴ I draw on Alfred Schütz's (1945) work on multiple reality elaborations on the phenomenological understanding of the social world: "'World of daily life' shall mean the intersubjective world which existed long before our birth (...). Now it

The third benefit of this thesis grows from not seeking best practice examples or worse, their opposite. Such endeavors seem at odds with my interest and my approach but I understand their underlying idea: finding something that works reliably, every time, so that it can be replicated large-scale. That, however, would require holding all variables constant, and that is not the environment that education offers. The very point of this study is its curiosity about and appreciation for the broad variety of variables that might be discovered to have been relevant to Alabama. Uniqueness seems a fruitful point of departure for discussions about how to create schooling for those directly involved in it. Years ago, I was asked to create best practice lesson plans for specific contents so colleagues could minimize preparation time. I found myself unable to meet that request because I had never taught the passive the same way twice: Students interested in sports relate to sports reporting and students who enjoy the culinary arts like reading recipes, etc. Deciding on one way to teach the passive – or respond to accountability requirements and data reports – would not only limit professional creativity, but it would also violate professional pedagogical standards of teaching that addresses specific people in specific places at specific times in awareness of teaching being situational, emergent and contingent on the conditions in which it takes place. The point of the argument is that every case is one unique way of how things can be done, and it is the curious discovery of that uniqueness that can inform future accountability policy about the differences and patterns in the ways those involved in schooling responded to past accountability expectations and requirement. It is those, after all, that public schooling and policy serve.

Any choice of case needs establishing it as a case of something in order for it to speak beyond itself to a broader, further-reaching argument. Given that NCLB was a federal policy, all states would technically have qualified for serving as my case because indeed every state would have been a unique study of a place with its specific histories and contexts that shape the ways in which schooling responded to accountability expectations. Missouri, for example, would have lent itself nicely due to its location between the South and the North, its diverse population and its issues with rapid gentrification that result in resegregation, both demographically and in schooling. Tennessee offers a lot as well: leadership in strong support for high-stakes accountability, a largely clustered population structure with rich a history in education policy on the state level long before NCLB was implemented. I could present an argument for any state because they all have a unique story that

is given to our experience and interpretation. All interpretation of this world is based upon a stock of previous experiences of it." (Schütz, 1945, p. 534). It follows that "objectively the same behavior may have (...) very different meanings or no meaning at all" (Schütz, 1945, p. 535) for the individual because "meaning (...) is not a quality inherent to certain experiences (...) but the result of an interpretation of a past experience looked at from the present Now with a reflective attitude." (Schütz, 1945, p. 535) The implications for research that is phenomenologically oriented, seeking to understand phenomena in the way they are experienced are manifold: One, researchers are "concerned with the qualities, values, and impressions of experience." (Barnacle, 2004, p. 59). This leaves a researcher "free to structure his or her interview in a way that enables a thorough investigation (Bevan, 2014, p. 138) along the basic foundational concepts of the approach: experience in the individual's lifeworld with their intentions and actions in view (horizon), being truthful to the experience as it is experienced by that person (Bevan, 2014, p. 136).

speaks to the nature of school and schooling during the age of accountability. I chose Alabama for pragmatic reasons: The institutional relationship between the University of Alabama and the University of Vienna lead to personal connections that provided access to the field. It allowed me to conduct my research as broadly as I did in the time available. Without support from the insiders of a place, it is next to impossible to piece together a soundboard of insiders' knowledge in order to permeate the surface of readily available literature, information and data. In preparation for my travels to collect data through interviews and secondary context data, I began to discover Alabama as a place by collecting basic information, starting with its location and demographic characteristics. Figure 5 shows Alabama nested in the center of the U.S. south, between Mississippi to the west, Georgia to the east and south of Tennessee.

Figure 5

U.S. Census Regions, U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau

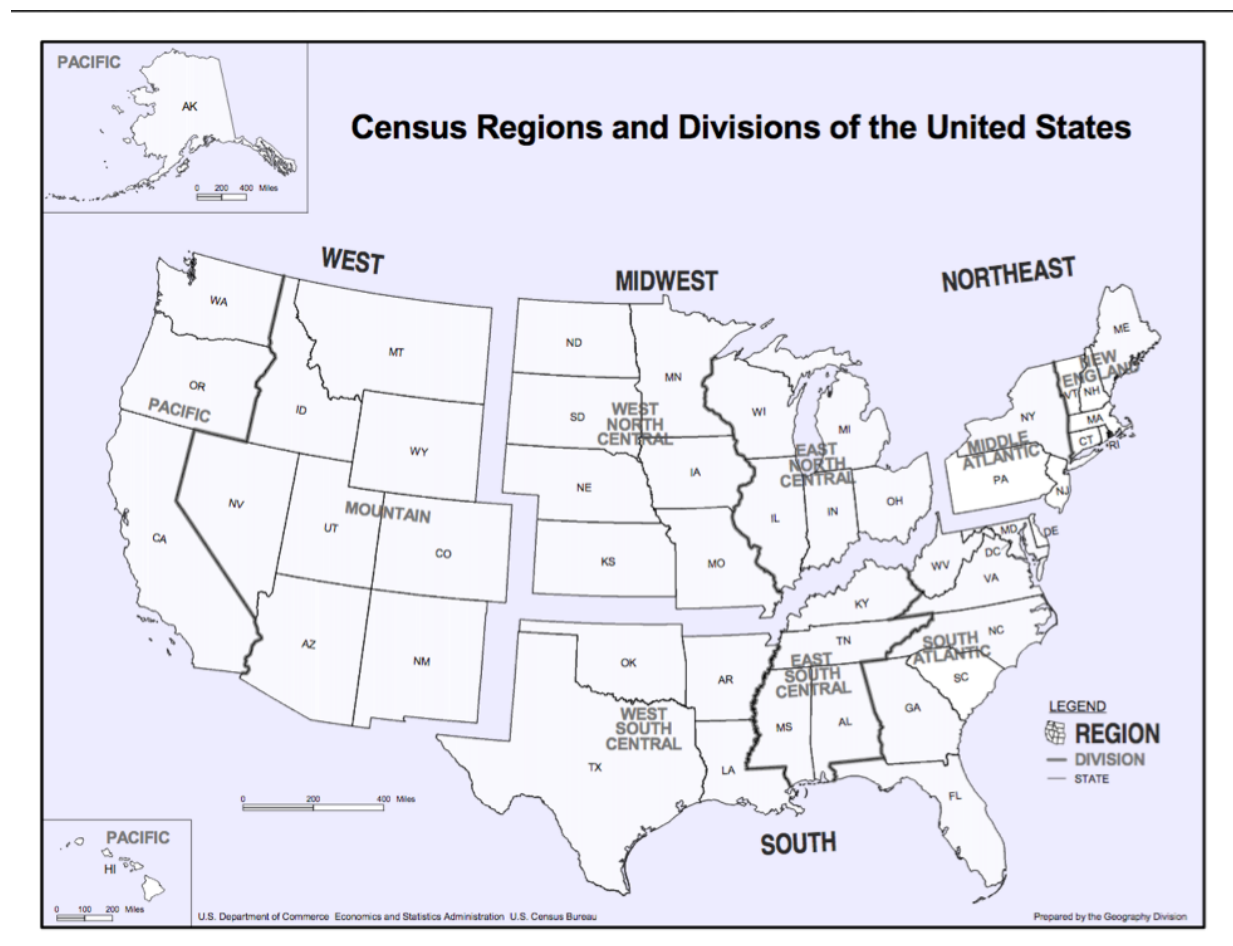


Figure 6 shows the state of Alabama to be of rectangular shape, encompassing large differences between its northern and its southern parts. The north has historically been and continues to be a hub for technology and science, hosting Mercedes Benz, Honda and Hyundai, as well as a production site for aeronautics: Boeing, among others, has development and production sites there

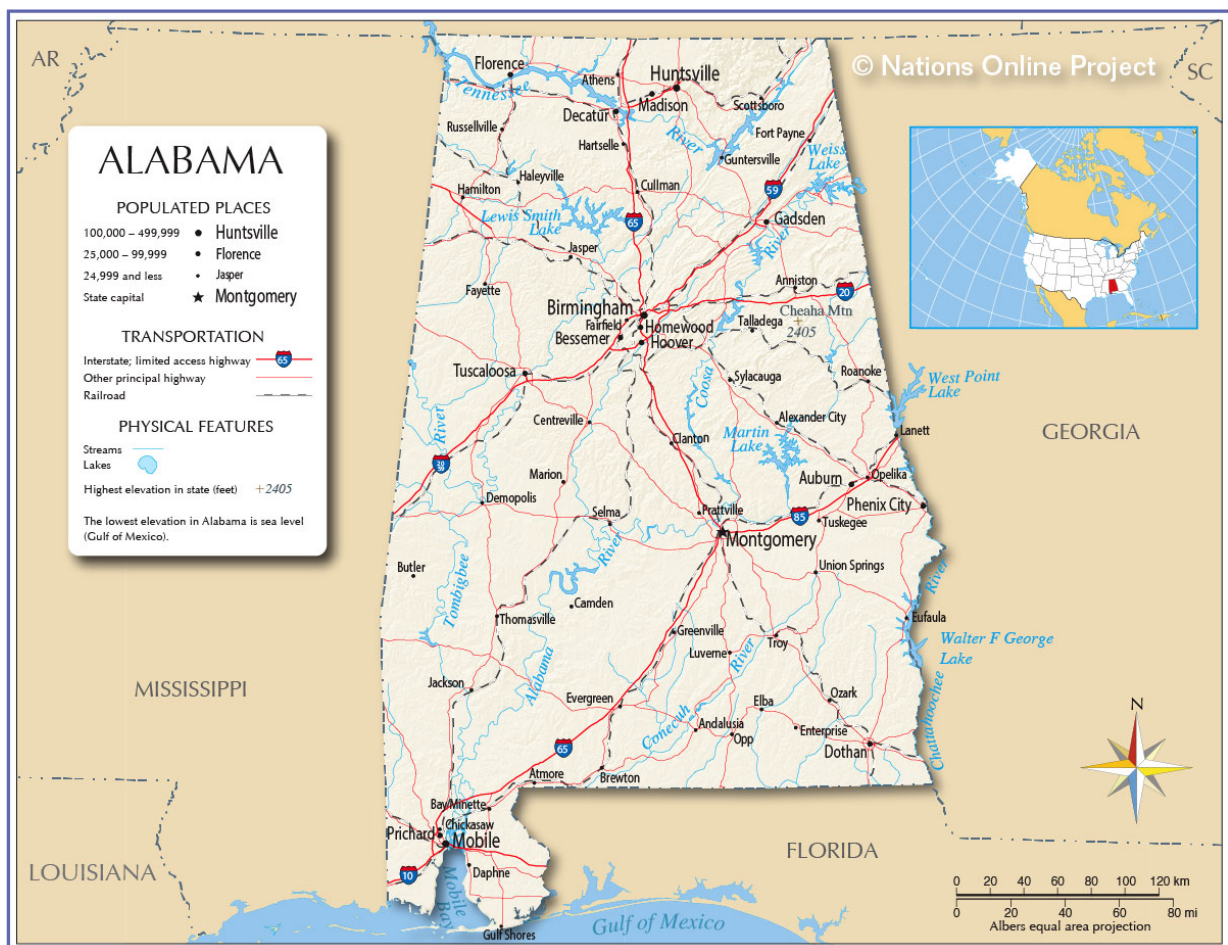
and so does NASA at its location in Huntsville where, too, the IT industry is flourishing. The central and south areas of the state carry Alabama as a national leader of the timber industry. These and more regional differences and their significance will be elaborated throughout the case.

Population and demographics

Alabama's total population of estimated 4.8 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018) includes four largest cities with a population over 100,000: Birmingham, the state capital Montgomery, Mobile and Huntsville. Tuscaloosa places slightly under the mark with a population slightly below 95,000, city and county residents combined. It is also the university capital of the state with its largest university, the University of Alabama, and its main campus located there. It is home to a total of 38,563 students with 33,305 of them being undergraduates. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010) Considering that Tuscaloosa City encompasses approximately 100,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), students account for more than a third, making it a vibrant college town.

Figure 6

State of Alabama map, Nations Online Project



Widening the lens to the state, this section reflects collected secondary context data about Alabama that critically informed my understanding of the demographics of the state in the past two decades. Since the inception of NCLB to the present, Alabama's population has changed in some ways similar to the nation and in some ways different. I first inquired into population characteristics collected in Table 9 before advancing the analysis to educational attainment (Table 10) and earning structures (Table 11) in the state.

Table 9

Alabama population characteristics 2010-16

	2010		2012		2014		2016	
	Estimate	Percent	Estimate	Percent	Estimate	Percent	Estimate	Percent
SEX AND AGE								
Total population	4,712,651		4,777,326		4,817,678		4,841,164	
Male	2,285,905	48.50%	2,317,520	48.50%	2,336,020	48.50%	2,346,193	48.50%
Female	2,426,746	51.50%	2,459,806	51.50%	2,481,658	51.50%	2,494,971	51.50%
Under 5 years	302,659	6.40%	305,091	6.40%	299,571	6.20%	292,771	6.00%
5 to 9 years	310,599	6.60%	309,360	6.50%	304,412	6.30%	305,707	6.30%
10 to 14 years	316,989	6.70%	318,484	6.70%	321,104	6.70%	313,980	6.50%
15 to 19 years	344,094	7.30%	337,159	7.10%	327,579	6.80%	324,809	6.70%
20 to 24 years	330,178	7.00%	340,808	7.10%	347,110	7.20%	342,489	7.10%
25 to 34 years	597,185	12.70%	607,797	12.70%	618,482	12.80%	626,564	12.90%
35 to 44 years	633,270	13.40%	619,112	13.00%	610,792	12.70%	606,216	12.50%
45 to 54 years	685,414	14.50%	686,672	14.40%	675,347	14.00%	656,639	13.60%
55 to 59 years	301,166	6.40%	310,336	6.50%	322,017	6.70%	332,234	6.90%
60 to 64 years	255,880	5.40%	279,202	5.80%	292,003	6.10%	297,361	6.10%
65 to 74 years	353,234	7.50%	374,441	7.80%	401,417	8.30%	434,510	9.00%
75 to 84 years	208,147	4.40%	211,411	4.40%	217,634	4.50%	225,663	4.70%
85 years and over	73,836	1.60%	77,453	1.60%	80,210	1.70%	82,221	1.70%
Median age (years)	37.5		37.8		38.2		38.6	
RACE								
White	3,188,814	67.7%	3,202,443	67.0%	3,206,588	66.6%	3,204,335	66.2%
Black or Afr. American	1,226,430	26.0%	1,249,402	26.2%	1,263,162	26.2%	1,275,780	26.4%
Hispanic or Latino	162,371	3.4%	182,268	3.8%	191,838	4.0%	193,503	4.0%
Am. Indian, Alaska Nat.	23,635	0.5%	23,655	0.5%	23,152	0.5%	21,879	0.5%
Asian	50,839	1.1%	54,487	1.1%	57,780	1.2%	60,240	1.2%
Nat. Hawaiian, Other Pac. Islander	1,349	0.0%	1,211	0.0%	1,284	0.0%	1,371	0.0%
Two or more races	55,739	1.2%	60,313	1.3%	69,196	1.4%	77,734	1.6%
Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-10, 2008-12, 2010-2014, 2012-16 American Community Survey 5-Year Est.								

Over the past decade, Alabama's population remained stable, as did the distribution along the indicators of gender and age. The Latino population experienced a slight increase as expected given the national shifts among the population (Frankenberg et al., 2019). That same perspective questions the missing population changes: Alabama's population dynamics did not much reflect national population changes.

Table 10 compares educational attainment levels nationally as well as for the state of Alabama. While attainment appears to rise consistently, numbers indicate a drop in Hispanic and Asian attainment in similar relation for both categories between 2013 and 2016 as well as for BA degrees or higher between 2007 and 2010. The U.S. averages do not reflect that dynamic, but they do show that Alabama numbers are closer to the average in the high school level than they are in BA degrees or higher. The Asian and Hispanic subgroups exceed the national average at some points.

Table 10

Educational attainment of persons 25 years old and over, by race/ethnicity: 2005-2016

Percent with high school completion or higher								
State	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Nat. Hawaiian, Pac. Islander	Am. Indian, Alaska Native	Two or more races
US 05-07	84.1	88.9	79.4	60.0	85.6	85.0	78.1	86.6
US 08-10	85.3	90.4	81.6	61.7	85.7	86.9	80.1	88.3
US 2013	86.6	91.7	83.9	64.7	86.2	‡	‡	90.1
US	87.4	92.4	85.4	67.0	86.6	‡	‡	90.6
AL 05-07	80.0	82.5	74.2	56.3	86.3	‡	75.9	75.8
AL 08-10	82.0	84.5	77.6	54.6	86.9	‡	77.2	82.0
AL 2013	84.9	87.0	81.2	61.7	90.7	‡	‡	88.7
AL 2016	84.9	87.2	81.3	58.6	84.7	‡	‡	90.8
Percent with bachelor's degree or higher								
State	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Nat. Hawaiian, Pac. Islander	Am. Indian, Alaska Native	Two or more races
US 05-07	27.0	30.0	16.8	12.3	49.2	15.4	13.4	24.6
US 08-10	28.0	31.1	17.8	13.1	50.4	14.8	13.9	27.4
US 2013	29.6	33.0	19.3	14.0	51.5	‡	‡	31.5
US	31.3	35.0	20.9	15.3	53.6	‡	‡	33.8
AL 05-07	21.0	23.3	13.7	13.3	52.3	‡	14.0	15.9
AL 08-10	22.0	24.6	14.5	10.9	49.9	‡	13.9	20.0
AL 2013	23.5	25.8	16.0	15.3	56.2	‡	‡	29.5
AL 2016	24.7	27.1	17.9	13.0	50.4	‡	‡	34.4
Data sources: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, 2005-07, 2008-10, 2013, 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data.								

Table 11 shows estimated earnings by educational attainment over time. The differences marked on the right end of the table are mathematical differences between the values of 2009 and 2016¹⁵, and they show a decrease in the employed population of about 2% with almost two thirds of those being

¹⁵ As such, they are not based on the original data and they do not reflect fluctuations visible in the represented data points.

men. This is somewhat unexpected given the stability of Alabama's population. Similarly, earnings increase for all groups over time yet they rise significantly for the college-educated population, and more so for males with a BA degree. Considering gender, the data show women's earnings to be consistently less across the board, with notable exceptions: Women with a less than high school degree or those who hold one as well as graduate or a professional degree have seen their earnings increase more than their male counterparts have. Finally, there is a striking difference between median and mean earnings in every year and that difference fluctuates over time, from around \$7,000 to \$23,000. It suggests that more individuals with high earnings pull the mean value, the average earnings, much beyond the median value. This is reflective of differences in income distribution that exist in Alabama.

I created Table 12 in reaction to the results above: With fewer people employed, gender differences in earnings and rising earnings over time, as well as earning distribution differences, I took another look at how Alabama compares to the national average in order to better gauge whether the differences are large or average or simply irrelevant. The numbers show unemployment percentages slightly higher in Alabama, with industry distributions being the same in Alabama in those two years reflected. Slightly more people than average work in manufacturing and slightly fewer are employed as professional or scientific, management or administrative personnel, in health care, social work and education. The per capita income is lower than the national average, and the percentage gains through social security, food stamps and SNAP¹⁶ benefits are two to five percent points higher in Alabama than nationally.

Table 12

Selected Economic Characteristics, U.S. and Alabama 2010 and 2017

	United States 2010		Alabama 2010		United States 2017		Alabama 2017	
	Estimate	Percent	Estimate	Percent	Estimate	Percent	Estimate	Percent
EMPLOYMENT STATUS								
Population 16 yrs & over	238,733,844	(X)	3,714,504	(X)	255,797,692	(X)	3,876,136	(X)
In labor force	155,163,977	65.0%	2,246,848	60.5%	162,184,325	63.4%	2,233,209	57.6%
Civilian labor force	154,037,474	64.5%	2,230,879	60.1%	161,159,470	63.0%	2,220,900	57.3%
Employed	141,833,331	59.4%	2,036,867	54.8%	150,599,165	58.9%	2,055,509	53.0%
Unemployed	12,204,143	5.1%	194,012	5.2%	10,560,305	4.1%	165,391	4.3%
Armed Forces	1,126,503	0.5%	15,969	0.4%	1,024,855	0.4%	12,309	0.3%
Not in labor force	83,569,867	35.0%	1,467,656	39.5%	93,613,367	36.6%	1,642,927	42.4%
Civilian labor force	154,037,474	154,037,474	2,230,879	2,230,879	161,159,470	161,159,470	2,220,900	2,220,900
Percent Unemployed	(X)	7.9%	(X)	8.7%	(X)	6.6%	(X)	7.4%
INDUSTRY								
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining	2,634,188	1.9%	38,188	1.9%	2,817,922	1.9%	32,311	1.6%
Construction	10,115,885	7.1%	160,208	7.9%	9,564,541	6.4%	131,822	6.4%
Manufacturing	15,581,149	11.0%	296,253	14.5%	15,477,389	10.3%	291,616	14.2%
Wholesale trade	4,344,743	3.1%	63,321	3.1%	4,042,867	2.7%	51,415	2.5%
Retail trade	16,293,522	11.5%	244,942	12.0%	17,167,000	11.4%	246,556	12.0%
Transportation and warehousing, and utilities	7,183,907	5.1%	107,651	5.3%	7,681,579	5.1%	107,083	5.2%
Information	3,368,676	2.4%	37,900	1.9%	3,173,300	2.1%	33,292	1.6%
Finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing	9,931,900	7.0%	117,422	5.8%	9,908,320	6.6%	115,160	5.6%
Professional, scientific, and management; administrative and waste management services	14,772,322	10.4%	176,639	8.7%	17,001,157	11.3%	192,792	9.4%
Educational services, and health care and social assistance	31,277,542	22.1%	423,951	20.8%	34,781,348	23.1%	462,536	22.5%

¹⁶ Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services	12,566,228	8.9%	154,906	7.6%	14,586,646	9.7%	172,448	8.4%
Other services, except public administration	6,899,223	4.9%	104,480	5.1%	7,371,226	4.9%	105,209	5.1%
Public administration	6,864,046	4.8%	111,006	5.4%	7,025,870	4.7%	113,269	5.5%
INCOME AND BENEFITS (inflation-adjusted dollars)								
Median household income (dollars)	51,914	(X)	42,081	(X)	57,652	(X)	46,472	(X)
Mean household income (dollars)	70,883	(X)	57,655	(X)	81,283	(X)	64,476	(X)
With earnings	91,045,812	79.7%	1,375,312	75.5%	92,371,708	77.7%	1,344,327	72.4%
Mean earnings (dollars)	71,902	(X)	59,429	(X)	83,186	(X)	67,093	(X)
With Social Security	31,387,932	27.5%	581,286	31.9%	36,313,166	30.6%	657,249	35.4%
Mean Social Security income (dollars)	15,495	(X)	14,708	(X)	18,778	(X)	18,123	(X)
With retirement income	19,998,762	17.5%	360,801	19.8%	21,876,763	18.4%	396,733	21.4%
Mean retirement income (dollars)	21,489	(X)	19,484	(X)	25,798	(X)	23,470	(X)
With Supplemental Security Income	4,626,547	4.0%	101,261	5.6%	6,390,187	5.4%	124,004	6.7%
Mean Supplemental Security Income (dollars)	8,221	(X)	7,380	(X)	9,743	(X)	9,329	(X)
With cash public assistance income	2,816,127	2.5%	27,259	1.5%	3,041,626	2.6%	32,235	1.7%
Mean cash public assistance income (dollars)	3,553	(X)	2,462	(X)	3,230	(X)	2,693	(X)
With Food Stamp/SNAP benefits in the past 12 months	10,583,720	9.3%	206,852	11.4%	15,029,498	12.6%	278,382	15.0%
Per capita income (dollars)	27,334	(X)	22,984	(X)	31,177	(X)	25,746	(X)
Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2010, 2013-2017 American Community Survey								

Table 13 explores poverty once more along the standard general indicators of families and individuals for the state of Alabama. Nationally stable, poverty rate developments for those in poverty in the past year are higher in Alabama and slightly growing and specifically high for children between 5 and 17 years of age. The inverse is true for the elderly population.

Table 13

Percentage of families and people whose income in the past 12 months is below the poverty level

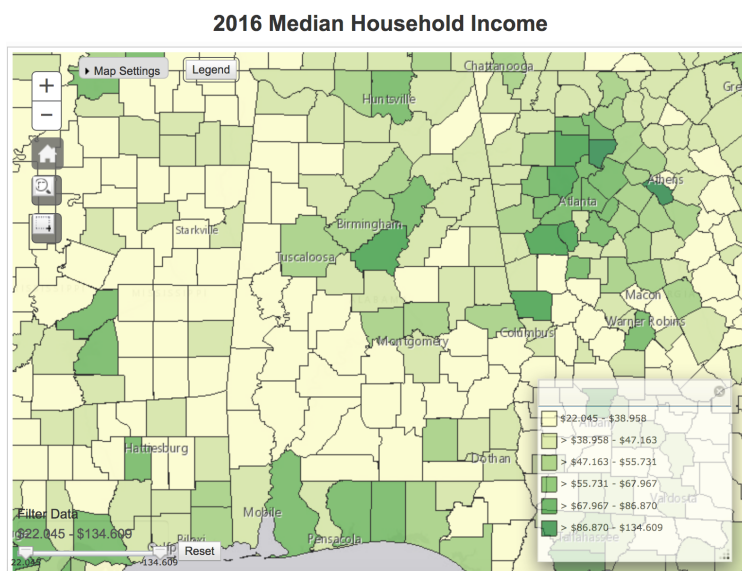
	United States 2010		Alabama 2010		United States 2017		Alabama 2017	
	Estimate	Percent	Estimate	Percent	Estimate	Percent	Estimate	Percent
All families	(X)	10.1%	(X)	13.0%	(X)	10.5%	(X)	13.6%
With related children under 18 years	(X)	15.7%	(X)	20.5%	(X)	16.7%	(X)	22.1%
With related children under 5 years only	(X)	17.1%	(X)	22.6%	(X)	16.2%	(X)	22.6%
Married couple families	(X)	4.9%	(X)	5.6%	(X)	5.3%	(X)	5.9%
With related children under 18 years	(X)	7.0%	(X)	8.0%	(X)	7.5%	(X)	8.6%
With related children under 5 years only	(X)	6.4%	(X)	8.4%	(X)	5.9%	(X)	7.9%

Families with female householder, no husband present	(X)	28.9%	(X)	36.3%	(X)	28.8%	(X)	36.5%
With related children under 18 years	(X)	37.4%	(X)	45.9%	(X)	38.7%	(X)	47.6%
With related children under 5 years only	(X)	45.8%	(X)	53.1%	(X)	43.7%	(X)	51.5%
All people	(X)	13.8%	(X)	17.1%	(X)	14.6%	(X)	18.0%
Under 18 years	(X)	19.2%	(X)	24.2%	(X)	20.3%	(X)	26.0%
Related children under 18 years	(X)	18.8%	(X)	24.0%	(X)	20.0%	(X)	25.8%
Related children under 5 years	(X)	22.3%	(X)	28.2%	(X)	22.5%	(X)	29.7%
Related children 5 to 17 years	(X)	17.5%	(X)	22.4%	(X)	19.0%	(X)	24.3%
18 years and over	(X)	12.1%	(X)	14.8%	(X)	12.9%	(X)	15.6%
18 to 64 years	(X)	12.6%	(X)	15.5%	(X)	13.7%	(X)	16.9%
65 years and over	(X)	9.5%	(X)	11.6%	(X)	9.3%	(X)	10.4%
People in families	(X)	11.3%	(X)	14.5%	(X)	11.8%	(X)	15.2%
Unrelated individuals 15 years and over	(X)	24.8%	(X)	30.5%	(X)	26.2%	(X)	31.1%
Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2010, 2013-2017 American Community Survey								

A different way to understand the distribution of earnings is to plot them regionally and over time, as is done by the Small Area Income and Poverty Estimate (SAIPE) data tools, for instance. Figure 7 makes tangible how demographically specific the earning distribution is in Alabama.

Figure 7

Median Household Income in Alabama 2016, SAIPE (screenshot of interactive map)



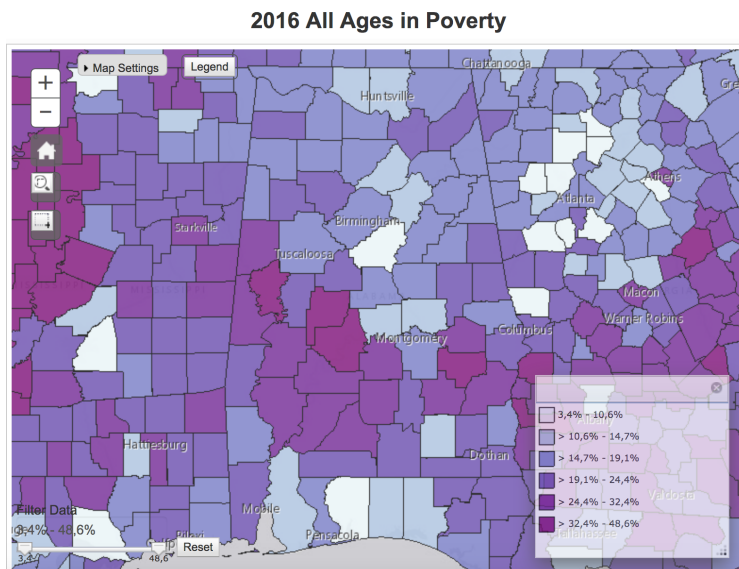
Data source: Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE): <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/saipe/data/tools.html>

I chose to show the 2016 map because the corresponding maps for 2009 and 2013 reveal no detectable change. The demographic distribution of earnings, too, seems stable over time. The light green areas represent least earnings and dark green areas reference earnings upward of \$86,000. The

distribution of the high and low earning regions is characterized by a north-south difference with the highest earning areas around Tuscaloosa and Huntsville as well as Mobile and the central region of the state earning least. The identical characteristics and distributions appear when mapping the demographics of the population living in poverty.

Figure 8

All ages in poverty 2016, SAIPE (screenshot of interactive map)



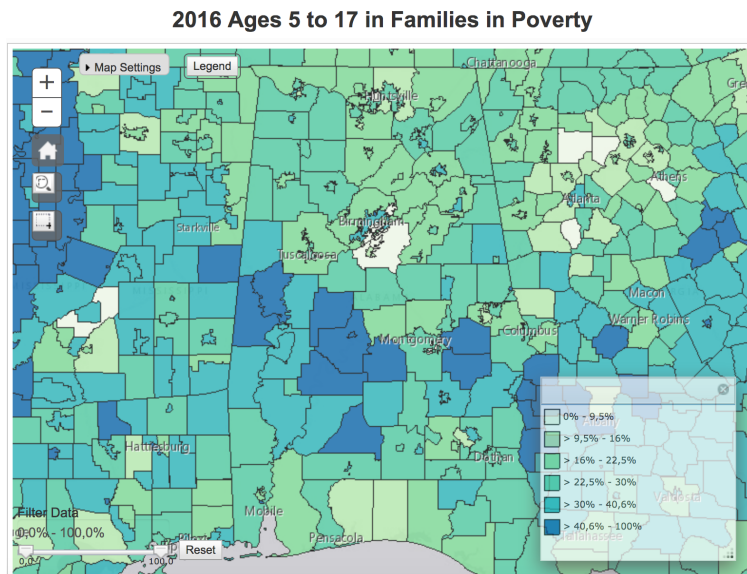
Data source: Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE): <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/saipe/data/tools.html>

Similar to median household income, poverty is also stable over time and exemplified in Figure 8 that shows Alabama areas in poverty, the dark ones being home to more people in poverty than the lighter ones. The areas marked to have 32% and more people living in poverty cluster together in the lower half of the state, again stable over time as visualizations of other years show. Mapping children and youth living in poverty shows a familiar pattern, yet higher in percentages.

Figure 9 further focuses the inquiry onto children and youth ages 5 to 17 who live in poverty. The dark blue markings reference areas with over 40% of children and youth living in poverty while the light green areas mark fewer than 10% poverty rate.

Figure 9

Ages 5-17 in poverty 2016, SAIPE (screenshot of interactive map)



Data source: Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE): <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/saipe/data/tools.html>

The difference between a family in poverty and a child or youth in poverty likely results from reporting structures for children and youth in poverty, which is the case for the status of homelessness as well. In Alabama, students who live with relatives or are doubled-up in a home with other families qualify as homeless and are therefore eligible to receive funds under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1987) or under Title I that are both currently reauthorized under ESSA.

The interview partners

My initial exploration of population and demographic data led me to poverty as the meaningful indicator along which to further study Alabama and to determine whom to approach for interviewing. I knew I would not be able to extend my research trip beyond three weeks, so I felt I needed to secure interviews beforehand in order to not having to rely on word of mouth connections. I began by downloading a complete list of school districts and identifying those with most and least percentages of 5-17 year-olds in poverty. When I plotted them on a digital map, they cluster geographically around the northern band encompassing Tuscaloosa and Birmingham and the mid-south Black Belt, which then became my focus regions.

Figure 10
The Black Belt

Traditional Counties of the Alabama Black Belt



Data source: <https://cber.cba.ua.edu/edata/maps/blackbelt.jpg>

The Black Belt is named after its tremendously dark and fertile soil that brought about cotton and wood for centuries, picked and farmed by generations of slaves who remained disenfranchised and poor long after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. The area stretches far beyond Alabama, all the way to Texas through Louisiana and Mississippi, and into Georgia and the Carolinas and Virginia. Massive farms were worked by slaves and today, they are endless stretches of the same cotton fields and still numerous if smaller farms, many of them raising catfish in artificial ponds so big that they look like lakes. I will return to those impressions and some historical particularities of this region later.

I vetted the list of school districts with most and least poverty indicated in one more way: I extracted the best and worst reputation districts from three prominent school ranking and neighborhood websites: [niche.com](https://www.niche.com/k12/search/best-school-districts/s/alabama/)¹⁷, [neighborhoodscout.com](https://www.neighborhoodscout.com/al/schools)¹⁸ and [schoolfinder.com](https://www.schoolfinder.com/go/AL/districtrank.aspx)¹⁹. Their rankings corresponded closely to my list in that they claimed low-poverty districts to be highest quality

¹⁷ <https://www.niche.com/k12/search/best-school-districts/s/alabama/>

¹⁸ <https://www.neighborhoodscout.com/al/schools>

¹⁹ <https://www.schoolfinder.com/go/AL/districtrank.aspx>

schools and vice versa. I disregarded any other claims of data-based school quality assessment and simply used them to double-check whether my perception list of schools would correspond to what local parents and the public used to obtain information about the schools in their district. This is not to say that any of their attributions hold true for any schools at all. It is merely the way in which these matters are negotiated in public spaces and within communities. For pragmatic reasons of time availability, I excluded schools that were further than a 90-minute-drive away from Tuscaloosa, where we spent most of our time. This left 27 schools, 14 high-poverty and 13 low-poverty indicated, that I contacted to arrange for an interview with their principal.

Figure 11 represents a screenshot of my preliminary due diligence on each district and each school. Green markings signify high-poverty indicated schools and purple marks schools listed as the best schools by one of the three websites. Schools that had to be excluded on the basis of distance are marked in salmon color.

Figure 11

Screenshot impression of the file used for choosing interviewees

						excluded, too far	listed as best schools by one of the three	highest poverty
Name		Estimated Total Population	Estimated Population 5-17	% 5-17 year olds of total population	Estimated number of relevant children 5 to 17 years old in poverty who are related to the householder	% of 5-17 year olds in poverty	location (distance from Tuscaloosa)	schools
Alabaster City School District		31754	6475	20.39	733	11.3		
Albertville City School District		21522	4010	18.63	1563	39.0	2 hrs, 11min	
Alexander City School District	2002	17,290	2,925	16.92	502	17.2	2 hrs, 10min	3 elementary, 1 middle, 1 high school; http://www.alexcityschools.net/
	2013	17,292	2,719	15.72	1,158	42.6		
	2014	17,276	2,673	15.47	961	36.0		
Andalusia City School District		9044	1512	16.72	471	31.2		
Anniston City School District		22759	3304	14.52	1122	34.0		
Arab City School District		8238	1491	18.10	250	16.8	1hr, 59 min north	
Athens City School District		23494	3767	16.03	770	20.4	1hr, 59 min north	
Attalla City School District		6019	971	16.13	283	29.1		
Auburn City School District		57,441	7,120	12.40	994	14.0	2 hrs, 46min	
Autauga County School District		55246	10643	19.26	1855	17.4		
Baldwin County School District		195540	32652	16.70	6171	18.9		
Barbour County School District	2002	15,009	2,380	15.86	750	31.5	Clayton and Louisville; 3 hrs 11min	1 primary, 1 intermediate, 1 high school; http://www.barbourschools.org/
	2013	14,124	1,769	12.52	759	42.9		
	2014	14,026	1,782	12.70	686	38.5		
Bessemer City School District	2002	29,532	5,449	18.45	1,653	30.3	43min	5 elementary, 1 middle, 1 alternative, 1 high school; http://www.bessk12.org/?PN=Schools2
large district, rising poverty, close	2013	27,510	4,765	17.32	2,009	42.2		
	2014	27,565	4,767	17.29	2,227	46.7		
Bibb County School District		22512	3590	15.95	1096	30.5		
Birmingham City School District	2002	240,849	42,545	17.66	12,637	29.7	54min	18 elementary, 8 K-8 schools, 8 middle schools, 7 high schools, 1 alternative; https://www.bhamcityschools.org/domain/
large district, rising poverty, close	2013	212,631	30,718	14.45	12,740	41.5		
	2014	213,072	30,731	14.42	14,908	48.5		
Blount County School District		51246	9201	17.95	2218	24.1		
Boaz City School District		9619	1742	18.11	464	26.6		

I collected these detailed data on the 27 schools through the Civil Rights Data Collection (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) and specifically used the same eight basic aspects for the available years of 2011, 2013 and 2015 for each of the schools: enrollment characteristics, students' disability status, absenteeism, ACT/SAT taking, Advanced Placement (AP) taking, athletics participation, retention and teacher data. Additionally, I studied the school websites extensively to gain a better understanding of what the school as a community emphasized and offered the students, and what each school communicates to its community. Principals' statements, for example, provided unique insight into the values represented, their understandings of leadership and visions for the futures of

students. The initial idea was to not only use this background information to individualize the e-mail to the principals, but also to potentially include some of that material in the conversations.

Those websites were testament to the school culture and the school resources, as the quality differences were extraordinary: Some schools had extensive information about all aspects of school life documented, archives available, up-to-date announcements, individual teacher sections for classes and projects, parents' sections with forms and administrative information. Other schools included not much beyond the location and a contact form without any e-mail addresses. In the latter, teachers were not represented, nor were the students or their activities within the school. In some cases I was unable to find the principal, because in some regions, one principal serves multiple schools. Even though I had personalized every contact e-mail with the name of the principal and school, their sports teams, their extra-curriculars etc. after, of course, introducing myself and my interest, I did not receive a single response and by the time we got to Alabama, I had not one interview secured.



Figure 12

*Curriculum and Didaktik Symposium
announcement, University of Alabama
September 2018*

The purpose of the research visit was to create a soundboard of the Alabama experience of accountability in

education through interviews with as many principals and superintendents as possible. During the three-week research trip to Tuscaloosa in September 2018, my partner and fellow doctoral student Stefan Becks and I were kindly hosted by the College of Education at the Tuscaloosa campus as a token of the relationship between the University of Alabama and the University of Vienna. Dean Peter Hlebowitsh generously provided us access to infrastructure and valuable resources as well as the opportunity to attend social events and faculty gatherings and Dr. McKnight's doctoral seminar. Dean Hlebowitsh also hosted the *Curriculum and Didaktik* symposium.

Our involvement during those three weeks not only provided us with inspiring intellectual enrichment and practical sponsorship, but it also provided my research with the credibility needed to obtain interviews. Because I had no appointments upon our arrival, I phoned all 27 schools, some multiple times, to coordinate personal visits and interviews. I left numerous messages that were unanswered or rejected. Two of my phone conversations were abruptly ended when I explained my request. Initially I attributed those difficulties to individual schools, yet during the course of my

process, these difficulties appeared systemic: It was inordinately difficult to contact the principals. Answering machines were full and would no longer accept messages. Individuals were too busy and could not find the time. Two individuals were unable to meet me in the available time but assured me of their willingness to speak with me. One principal did not appear at our initial meeting or at the second meeting as they were out of town. It was the secretary's friendly help and quick thinking which secured the assistant principal instead. He surely also did not have the time but carved it out of his busy day. In the interview, he represented to me how strongly he felt about speaking on the record on what he felt were relevant issues. These experiences characterized the high-poverty indicated schools and looking back, I cannot blame them. The day-to-day of any principal is hectic and burdened with more tasks than are feasible, so there is no time to grant to a stranger who – for what I sensed and in some instances was told - was feared to be nosy or judgmental or journalistic. For that same reason I was not surprised to find the 13 schools on the affluent end of the spectrum to be easily reachable and responsive, mostly friendly and generally more open, yet also careful: One interview partner of a wealthy, highly respected school only agreed to speak with me after a university acquaintance had validated my work and my approach as being genuinely interested rather than intrusive. Another principal told me in a phone conversation that the school was practically overrun with researchers interested in studying them so that he simply cannot grant all the requests, including mine. One principal only agreed to see me because they had recently conducted their own doctoral research project. Two interview partners agreed to see me last minute because someone had approached them on my behalf. These individual instances show how in the end, a lot fell into place in favor of my study because individuals cared enough to support me in my endeavor.

The interviews

My purpose for these interviews was to learn everything that my conversation partners deemed relevant for me to know so I could best understand schooling in Alabama generally and schooling under NCLB accountability specifically. Because it was them who had directly experienced it, they commanded insider knowledge that I wanted to collect and study to understand how they assigned meaning to their experience. It became clear to me early on asking a fixed sequence of questions would not provide me with the flexibility to adapt to what I would encounter throughout our conversations. To explore interviewees' representations within their own perspective meant developing an instrument that would guide the process for exploration independent of the content because that was up to the interviewees to provide. Finding and mastering a suitable technique became the major directive for the interviews.

I found theoretical guidance in the body of work that uses phenomenological approaches for inquiries into the structure of various experiences, initially developed within the areas of health

research and psychology. Mark T. Bevan's method of Phenomenological Interviewing (2014) provides a structure of three domains for interviews about lived experiences: Contextualization, apprehension and clarification questions serve as the outline of a semi-structured interview that guides the conversations while maintaining their explorative nature. Structured steps and flexible exploration complement one another:

Understandably there will be those who consider structure in phenomenological interviewing as its antithesis, but they should not be alarmed because structure does not necessarily have to tell you what to ask but rather how to manage the process of questioning. (Bevan, 2014, p. 138)

It is indeed the technique of approaching and exploring a phenomenon, rather than setting the content of the individual questions, that is structured. The method also allows the interviewer to flexibly react and thereby enrich the exploration through proper contextualization, layered apprehension and multiple clarifications. Instead of merely collecting private views or multiple anecdotes, the researcher prompts and aids the interviewee in their effort to carve out specific aspects of their experience along the cornerstone concepts of phenomenology:

Structure in the phenomenological interview method to be explained here is provided by the following key concepts: description, natural attitude, lifeworld, modes of appearing, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. (Bevan, 2014, p. 138)

As is the approach on a whole, these concepts – natural attitude, lifeworld, modes of appearing, epoché and reduction - are rooted in phenomenology, a field within philosophy that originated from the works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in the early 20th century and served as a foundation to Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, among others. Since its conception, phenomenology has also sparked interest among fields that adopted the approach of exploring and structuring specific experiences: In 1929, Karl Jaspers wrote on the ways in which the field of psychiatry might benefit from applying phenomenology to their purposes and interests (Zahavi, 2019c), an effort spearheaded today by philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe and his extensive body of phenomenological work on mood (e.g. Ratcliffe 2013), depression (e.g. Ratcliffe, 2014), hallucination and intentionality (e.g. Ratcliffe, 2017).

From the early decades of the 20th century onward, intense controversial debates were had about phenomenology's rightful interpretations and applications, and this dispute continues to this day. In his elaboration on the histories of that influence, Dan Zahavi (2019c, p. 1) describes the ways in which cognitive science has used and therefore reenergized phenomenological applications in and beyond the 1990s.

In education, one of the prominent applications of phenomenology is Max van Manen's work, encompassing his seminal *Researching Lived Experience* (1997) and *Phenomenology of Practice* (2014) as central contributions. Developed within the Dutch Utrecht School movement (van Manen, 2019, p. 4), his concept of phenomenological inquiry represents a particular understanding of

applied phenomenology used in education research. His work is widely received and not without criticism; it stands in stark contrast to emerging education approaches and approaches of other disciplines that utilize what phenomenology offers in their non-philosophical academic contexts. The extent of the existing differences has recently manifested in a written disputation: Max van Manen (van Manen, 2017) offered an assessment of J. A. Smith's work on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which led to multiple rebuttals (Smith, 2018; van Manen, 2019) as well as to contributions by philosopher Dan Zahavi (Zahavi, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c), a seasoned voice in the realm of phenomenology and its application and relevance to psychiatry, philosophy of mind and philosophy of cognitive science.

The differences between applied phenomenology and phenomenology as philosophy are numerous and controversial, and demand a brief look at not only its genesis within the philosophical domain but also its long-standing scholarly debate. Dan Zahavi's contributions provide extensive accounts of both aspects in his contribution to the disputation between van Manen and Smith. It would reach far beyond the purposes of this study to explore the disputation in its entirety, and even if I were to undertake such an endeavor, I would fail to provide a conclusion, as both this disputation as well as the dispute as such remains unsettled. It would be equally fruitless to attempt a comprehensive contextualization of the extensive body of work that is referenced in the debate as such an endeavor would have to trace references back to the original works of Edmund Husserl, including more than a century of their interpretation and, no less, an overview of the paths that have formed from the core to the various understandings of phenomenology, both as a philosophical field and as an applied science, that exist in fruitful parallel today (Zahavi, 2019). I shall therefore abstain from this task and instead sketch the core aspects of the disputation within the context of this study.

The debaters first and foremost disagree fundamentally on whether or not the epoché or reduction is required for proper phenomenological inquiry - a heated discussion that has a long history among followers of Husserl's work. Bevan (2014, p. 139) and van Manen (2017, p. 777) both reiterate the necessity of the epoché or reduction the way they understand it: as a bracketing, a setting aside of the researcher's previous attitudes, knowledges and experiences as a precondition for phenomenological inquiry. Smith takes a different position and contends that:

the primary role of the researcher is (a) to invite the participant to share this sense-making; (b) to act as a witness to its articulation; (c) and then, in turn, to make sense of it. (Smith, 2018, p. 1956)

In this passage and in his work generally, Smith "does not appeal to the epoché and the reduction" (Zahavi, 2019b, p. 2), thereby earning van Manen's criticism:

In other words, not all qualitative research inspired by phenomenology is phenomenology. Pointedly, one must ask whether a study that makes claims to phenomenology actually practices the method of the epoché and reduction implicitly or explicitly in a philosophically appropriate or valid manner. (van Manen, 2017, p. 777)

In Van Manen's editorial "But is it Phenomenology?" (2017), he challenges the nature and substance of Smith's work on IPA as not being phenomenological but therapeutic in nature, to which Smith counters "Yes it is Phenomenological" (2018). In essence, Smith's counter-argument is a methodological critique of what he perceives to be narrow prescriptiveness on van Manen's part that disregards the diversity of approaches:

Researchers drawing on these conceptual sources to inform their empirical work can (and should) discuss the methodological consequences of their choices, but they cannot lay claim to a single, definitive form of phenomenology because phenomenological philosophy is diverse. (Smith, 2018, p. 1956)

Smith characterizes the nature of phenomenological work to be far broader and open to other disciplines, including "health sciences, sports science, sociology, management, architecture, humanities, and pedagogy" (Smith, 2018, p. 1958). What to Smith is a concerning tendency toward "prescriptive judgments and categorical differences" (Smith, 2018, p. 1958) to van Manen and Zahavi is a dangerous, conceptual arbitrariness that threatens phenomenology's reputation (Zahavi, 2019a). The difference between Smith and van Manen is pointedly exemplified in their choice of titles: What one calls phenomenology, the other calls phenomenological, and it is this difference that Zahavi meticulously analyzes and explicates, first in his response to both (Zahavi, 2019a) and later in further elaborations on the issue: Fundamentally, "phenomenology is a philosophical endeavor" (Zahavi, 2019b, p. 1) and the question of how it can inform empirical work is one of separate consideration (Zahavi, 2019b). As such the epoché and the reduction are essential to philosophy, yet not relevant for non-philosophical applications of phenomenology (Zahavi, 2019b, p. 12). This is not to diminish its influence or its relevance, but to strengthen the substance of both fields in dissecting their constitutional difference:

The fact that phenomenology also has this non-philosophical relevance, the fact that it has served as a powerful source of inspiration for so many disciplines, is part of its enduring value. (Zahavi, 2019b, p. 13)

Zahavi puts van Manen and Smith's dispute about the epoché and the reduction to rest by suggesting that the difference between both is "considerably smaller than (van Manen) has made it out to be" (Zahavi, 2019c, p. 5) because in Zahavi's view, both have little to do with phenomenology as philosophy. While Smith does not claim his work to be philosophical, van Manen vehemently does. In his response, Zahavi (2019c) delivers a detailed account and unsparing assessment of the "multiple problems with van Manen's presentation" that he concludes to be "a confused mishmash that ultimately erodes the reputation of the very tradition he takes himself to be defending" (Zahavi, 2019c, p. 5). Unsurprisingly, van Manen's rebuttal is fierce and bitter in tone (van Manen, 2019) yet less concerned with the critique's substance and more a personal defense of his career and connectedness to the emergence of the field represented by the Utrecht school.

A preliminary appraisal of the arguments thus far allows for some conclusions in view of the study at hand. It is clear that my inquiry carries characteristics of a non-philosophical phenomenological approach, and as such it was necessary to clarify that my phenomenological approach does not require the epoché or reduction. In fact, there is long-standing historical disagreement on the structure and application of the epoché or reduction in philosophical work. Existing interpretation and misinterpretation of Edmund Husserl's late work that was written after his transcendental turn led even dedicated followers of his time to distance themselves from Husserl:

Husserl's introduction of the epoché and reduction is closely linked to his transcendental turn, i.e., his turn towards transcendental philosophy and his increasing commitment to a form of transcendental idealism that insisted on reality and objectivity being dependent upon subjectivity. (Zahavi, 2015, 2017) But his is by no means a commitment that was shared by all phenomenologists. (Zahavi, 2019c, p. 3)

What may weigh yet more is that there seems to be no significant reference to and certainly no acceptance of the epoché and the reduction among phenomenologists:

Scheler strongly distanced himself from what he took to be Husserl's overly narrow focus on consciousness (Scheler, 1973: 311) (...) It is indisputable that neither Heidegger nor Merleau-Ponty made many references to the epoché and the reduction. (...) Sartre only mentions the epoché once in *Being and Nothingness* and that is only to distance himself from it (Sartre, 2018: 370). The same holds true for the few occasions where Sartre mentions Husserl's phenomenological reduction. As for Dreyfus, he has for years derided both notions. (Zahavi, 2019c, p. 3)

What remains, then, is the question of how to proceed with applied phenomenological research approaches that seek to carve out experiences. Zahavi (2019c, p. 6) provides guidance between the boundaries of philosophical inquiry and a banal "hands-off approach, where one simply asks the patient to describe his or her experiences and then sits back and listens" (2019c, p. 6). More than that, phenomenological interviewing is about "conducting the interview in light of quite specific ideas and notions taken from phenomenological theory" (2019c, p. 6), which Bevan's method embeds as pillars of contextualization, apprehension and clarification of the phenomenon of interest.

With Bevan's three pillars in mind, I prepared a variety of contextualization questions to elicit my interviewees' biographical as well as professional settings in order to explore the interviewee's backdrop against which the person experiences something:

(The) experience of the lifeworld stands out against a backdrop of context or horizon, with a personal biography that provides meaning to that object or experience. (Husserl 1970 as quoted in Bevan, 2014, p. 139.)

Some interviewees began our conversation by giving an account of their history in education (H; B; Da), their experiences as a student that influenced their choice of career (W; G) or a brief introduction to what they understand to be the prevalent issues of the day in education in Alabama (I; D). In ways they felt meaningful, all of them thereby "provide(d) some degree of narrative, which gives context but also highlights areas for further questioning." (Bevan, 2014, p. 139) They knew

best what I needed to learn, and given that I cannot ask about what I do not know, I opened every interview conversation by referencing the information materials I had sent, introducing my background and my interest in schooling once again. I stated that notwithstanding my extensive reading and diligent preparation, I realized that there is only so much one can read about. I was there, I concluded, because I was hoping that they would help me understand Alabama schooling and accountability in the state as they saw it, assuming that I knew nothing and wanted to understand everything.

I consciously prompted interviewees by outlining my own context and relatedness to my work and the way I seek to understand schooling under accountability, which is from the point of view of an educator. Contextualization is much more than collecting personal and biographical information; questions aim to understand the ways in which what people do is connected to who they are, not by my assertion but by theirs. As such, I elicited

contextual elements that provide meaning to the experience (...), the complexity of (...) and their interrelatedness (...). It is these relationships that begin to offer the researcher insight into meaning of experience and how it is constituted. (Husserl, 1970 as quoted in Bevan, 2014, p. 140.)

Eliciting those contextual aspects means asking questions that may startle the interviewee: If done well, they cause a person to stop and recognize their motivations or assumptions to then reflect upon them. This means taking on a naïve attitude, questioning what is seemingly obvious to trigger "self-questioning as a reflective process that remains self-conscious" (Bevan, 2014, p. 139) instead of drawing these conclusions as the interviewer. The answer "I don't know" to an interpretative question, for example, is not the end of a line of inquiry but an opportunity to ask explorative questions about separate aspects and therefore explore phenomena more deeply. The point is to "develop questions that are relevant to the individual" (Bevan, 2014, p. 140) and have them explore and explain what they themselves say. In doing so, the interviewer leaves the meaning to be assigned to the interviewees themselves.

For apprehending the phenomenon, Hall et al. (2016) developed an extensive list of apprehension questions for their study about teachers' experiences with nutrition education that served as meaningful guidance in my interview preparation. Table 14 is part of their publication and kept in its original form to show the character of such guidelines as they appear almost in the form of extensive notes.

Table 14

Interview protocol by Hall et al. 2016

Questions
To explore broad experience with nutrition and nutrition education:
How would you describe your current role in nutrition education?
How does this compare to the role you think you should play?
Tell me how you feel about teaching students about nutrition as part of the school curriculum?
Probes: comfort, confidence, enjoyment, appropriateness
How do you view the subject of nutrition compared to other subjects you teach (such as math, English etc.)?
How influential do you believe YOU, specifically, are in changing students' nutrition knowledge?
confidence? behavior?
Probe: in what ways?
Tell me about anything you may do – nutrition or physical activity – related in your classroom outside of GHK (Growing Healthy Kids)
What motivates you to provide this extra education?
To explore and generate more detail about specific experiences:
Tell me about your experience teaching the GHK curriculum.
What is different about GHK compared to other nutrition curriculum or materials you may have used?
Tell me about what went well with the GHK curriculum.
Tell me about what barriers you faced in completing the GHK curriculum.
Tell me about what influence you think GHK has had on students' nutrition knowledge.
Behavior? Confidence?
Probes:
Tell me more about that...
Can you give me an example?
I want to understand what you mean, can you tell me again?
What do you think that is?

The intention in apprehending the phenomenon is to work with interviewees' narration and to ask "descriptive and structural questions (to) add depth and quality to information" (Bevan, 2014, p. 140). For example, interviewees gave descriptions about the high stress level of principals' jobs. Immediate apprehension questions related their descriptions to something they had mentioned before, such as the value of downtime to recover: "What happens to your recovery time when you know you are on call 24/7" or "Describe what it felt like to have to leave your son's game so quickly?" Given the necessary rapport and trust, such questions serve as gateways to yet new strands of reflection about, in this case, the relation of family values and professional values that otherwise might have been left unspecified. As was expected, exploring concrete examples (Bevan, 2014, p. 141) has proven immensely fruitful in my interviews.

The third stage clarifies phenomena by means of imaginative variation (Bevan, 2014, p. 141), a technique I adapted from Matthew Ratcliffe's lectures about his work at the University of Vienna. Its aim is to detail and distill single aspects of an experience, as in Ratcliffe' prominent example of the experience of seeing a tiger. Whether a tiger is experienced as an immediate danger (in the

classroom), or an object of endearment (in the zoo) or the subject of pity (also in the zoo) depends on the horizontal context of the experience, the person who experiences it, the state of mind of that person, etc. Equally infamous is the classic example of sitting in a café: The experience varies if one expects their partner to arrive, or if the partner has just left after an argument that led to the relationship's demise. The way one sits and sees one's surroundings, the way the coffee cup feels to the touch, the intensity of smells and sounds, all of these details carry different significance, respectively. Thought experiments of such kind help sharpen analytical skills in various ways. I applied similar ideas to the interviews as well by contrasting an interpretation with a hypothetical counter such as "How would you respond to someone claiming that X?" for example. It is the invitation to imaginative variation, safe in the hypothetical and open to speculation that can carve out even richer descriptions of an experience.

In view of the above, I created my interview instrument along a non-philosophical phenomenological approach that seeks to elaborate on cases "not (as) 'case studies' in the clinical sense; they are analyses of single cases" (Smith, 2018, p. 1957). This difference is vital: The approach at hand stands separate of classical empirical studies that are characterized by sampling, effects and generalizability. Rather, I undertook a structured exploration of the ways in which specific individuals experience accountability of schooling in Alabama as a phenomenon of a place, its histories and contexts, as experienced by them.

Collection and analysis

I conducted eight interviews with superintendents, principals and academic counselors from cities and counties, metropolitan and rural areas, affluent and high-poverty indicated schools. The group included two women and six men, middle aged to nearing their retirement. Each of them held more than 15 years of experience in schooling and each of them also experienced schooling in various capacities throughout their career. Every interviewee waived anonymity when I explained how I planned to safeguard their anonymity, some without any further comment and some outspokenly stating that they stand not only for what they will say, but for schooling and policy issues being discussed critically in research, especially from someone on the outside. Against their wishes, however, I maintain the anonymity of persons and schools²⁰ in order to safeguard the focus of my work: Creating a soundboard of lived experiences in Alabama that are neither representative nor linearly attributable to any circumstance, personal or school characteristic, gender or position other than the ones that the interviewees themselves assign.

The conversation guideline represented in Table 15 has proven immensely fruitful in the conversations. Each lasted well over an hour and all were most amicable, carried by a sense of

²⁰ I reference the individuals by using a letter code for each person, for example: F.

professional collegiality. I was given a lot of insight and lots of information and recommendations for further reading and research based on the work I had arrived with. All interview partners treated me as a welcome guest, graced me with their attention and serious consideration as well as authenticity and openness in our conversations. I encountered people who were frank as they were direct in their statements and viewpoints, opinionated and clearly positioned yet well argued, and both willing and able to reason their point of view. They spared me no truth, and I felt as though they spoke truthfully about matters pleasant and those less so.

Table 15

My phenomenological interview guide

guiding questions: *Beran (2014)* – (1) contextualization, (2) apprehending phenomenon, (3) clarifying phenomenon

Who am I? personal concern: poverty, equity, freedom to choose a future.

My project: experience of schooling in Alabama, learn everything that I can't read in books or articles

anonymity - recording ok?

Assume I know nothing and want to understand everything.

--- Contextualizing ---

Who are you? name, age, bio, experience, job here

What does it mean to be X in your context?

What do I need to know to understand your being X? (*lifeworld*)

What do you do?

What do you experience in your work? What do you see?

Describe your typical X.

Where have you been before? What was it like?

Talk about community characteristics, goals, wishes and hopes (*horizon*)

--- Apprehending ---

How is it different now from being a new principal?
 when the board visits? or at a board meeting?
 at a previous school?
 during critique or conflict?
 among other principals?
 at home? in church? (*modes of appearing*)

What is it like to X?

Give an example of X.

Where does accountability come in? How do you make it work? For you, for them?

--- Clarifying ---

You said X. What do you mean by that? (*aspects of something and concrete examples*)

If X, what would that change? (*take that variation from the interview as it develops*)

Anything else we didn't cover but you feel I need to know to understand?

Thank you - gift - How to stay connected?

With the consent of my interview partners I recorded them and used Trint²¹, an automated transcription service, to create preliminary, rough transcripts. They served as the preparatory documents that I then hand-corrected in the transcription application F5 to create representations of the spoken word as closely as possible. Because my purpose was to capture the ways in which interviewees view phenomena and understand them, I transcribed filling sounds and words, repetitions, interruptions, sentence breaks, etc. as was feasible. One interviewee, for example, emphasized his words by hammering his fist on the table, which I noted as such in the transcript, whereas I generally opted not to characterize behavior or movement or inflection. Finally, I transferred each of the transcripts into its own word document, purposefully not utilizing MAXQDA 18 again, so to maintain the integrity of each interview as a whole, complete unit of meaning that I would continuously refer back to. Throughout the analysis, I worked with the printed transcripts, transferring notes and codes into the digital document and creating new document versions along the way to trace and document changes.

I approached the material analysis in much the same way that I approached collecting the material through the interviews, which was to employ a structure that would allow me to carve out the rich detail the interviewees provided me with. In preparing the analysis, I readied myself yet again for learning from the interviewees by reading and re-reading the transcripts in their respective entirety and doing so multiple times. Precisely because I had no fixed question sequence, and because some questions had become more relevant in some conversations than in others, I first considered each conversation as a unit, as a relational body of narrative that would offer highly interwoven aspects. As a result, I needed an equally open and flexible analysis structure that would allow me to represent the contents as closely as possible to the interviewees' representations.

I utilized a specific version of thematic analysis (Braun/Clarke, 2006) because "it is not wed to any pre-existing framework, and so it can be used within different theoretical frameworks" (Braun/Clarke, 2006, p. 9), as is the case for the non-philosophical phenomenological approach as well:

(...) who wish to draw on phenomenology should look to it not as a rigorous method, but as an open-minded attitude and theoretical framework that can be used in conjunction with a variety of methods." (Zahavi, 2019c, p. 8)

Thematic analysis corresponds to my work's purpose in that it lends itself to "report experiences, meanings and the reality of participants" (Braun/Clarke, 2006, p. 9) and allows for doing so from a more constructivist-leaning paradigm that does not interpret motivation from what is said, but rather focus on the contexts and conditions that the material is located in (Braun/Clarke, 2006, p. 14). The interviewee's meaning can take center-stage in the form of rich and detailed descriptions

²¹ trint.com

from the material (Braun/Clarke, 2006, p. 6) in full acknowledgement of the active role that I have in doing so:

An account of themes 'emerging' or being 'discovered' is a passive account of the process of analysis, and it denies the *active* role the researcher always plays in identifying patterns/themes, selecting which are of interest, and reporting them to the readers (Taylor/Ussher, 2001 as quoted in Braun/Clarke, 2006, p. 7)

I read each interview multiple times and then organized it along the common grounds that had been part of most conversations in view of my conceptual framework of *Didaktik* and *Curriculum* that I employ throughout this study. It serves as a basis on which to conceptualize schooling and teaching. I made the conscious decision not to structure my interview guideline according to aspects of the framework, however, because of my stated purpose of leaving it to my conversation partners to relate their understandings to me. The analysis directly links to this study's framework as well as its approach, a relevant quality criterion:

What is important is that the theoretical framework and methods match what the researcher wants to know, and that they acknowledge these decisions, and recognize them as decisions. (Braun/Clarke, 2006, p. 8)

Clarity and quality of research are synonymous and mirrored in Smith's observation as well: "Of course, it is important to judge whether work is not just consistent with a particular research approach, but that it is also making a contribution that is significant." (Smith, 2018, p. 1957) The substance of the contribution at hand is to offer a narrative of Alabama as a place of schooling, continuously confronted with accountability expectations, led from the way in which the interviewees experience it and what they deem relevant in their contexts.

At the beginning of my analysis process, I familiarized myself with the material in depth by reading each transcript multiple times, identifying anecdotes and points of heightened interest that co-referenced material of the same interview. This occurred quite frequently since aspects of poverty and funding, for example, were substantial to every conversation in similar ways. So were biographical references and contextual aspects as they were implicit in the interview guidelines. I used color markings to identify those contents that I reworked then multiple times to find themes that denoted more precisely what the interviewees shared: Material initially marked as biographical reference I then carved out into much more varied codes. As the readings progressed it showed that the purpose and the narrative context in which biographical material was shared were different. For example, some interviewees shared anecdotes of their high school experience as a student to exemplify the social dividing lines along color and class. At other times, biographical references included previous employment and experiences of poverty and lacking resources. Maintaining the marker of biographical reference was no longer meaningful considering the narrative contexts and the meaning that the interviewees sought to relate. In my analysis, I linked their accounts to existing literature and context data (Braun/Clarke, 2006, p. 24) along their narrative sequence so to keep

their meaning intact. I do so by providing adequate and multiple examples from the material (Braun/Clarke, 2006, p. 25) that make it possible to understand it within its context.

The conversations were transcribed in full and analyzed in full. To think into the material, I read each interview transcript multiple times, even after coding. The quoted representations are exemplary instances of the patterns that the responses exhibit and are, as such, themes:

A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. An important question to address in terms of coding is what counts as a pattern/theme, or what 'size' does a theme need to be? This is a question of prevalence both in terms of space within the data item, and prevalence across the entire data set. (Braun/Clarke, 2006, p. 10)

I chose to not represent material that was only briefly mentioned, not elaborated on, or did not reappear in that conversation or any others. In other words, if an aspect did not become a substantive element to the narrative, it was not considered relevant. In one interview, for example, the person moved from grandparents caring for students to students with behavior problems in one long list of things that were expressed as troublesome. They were neither elaborated nor exemplified or revisited later, so I did not use these passages even though other interviewees also mentioned those at some point. Mere quantity in mentions, however, does not qualify as a pattern because the purpose of exploration was not met. As such, prevalence in my material refers to richness of detail and elaboration in view of the complete narrative given (Braun/Clarke, 2006, p. 11). Equally, these considerations allow for anecdotes to become key components to the analysis, as they are condensed examples for interviewees' meanings that provide most insight into what it is interviewees wish to express. The anecdotes are identified as such and hence are not erroneously qualified as a theme in and of themselves (Braun/Clarke, 2006, p. 25). They are markedly not arbitrary stories, but highly reduced illustrations of complexity in the shape of an experience that stands exemplarily for a broader, significant phenomenon.

The final phase of my analysis included reading across conversations, deciding on themes and aspects that were represented within these themes. Rather than representing them without their context in a classically empirical manner, I chose to sequence them into the linear, written narrative that includes extensive quotes that illustrate the themes through the interviewees' own voices. This approach to presenting material is by no means new and lends itself to work such as mine: The Center on Education Policy (2019) presented state leader interviews in the same manner, dedicating half of their report to the results of seven semi-structured phone interviews with leaders from seven states on the basis of their themes, narrating and exemplifying each one, adding enriching factual information wherever feasible or necessary. A recent study about principals' discretion in using evaluation systems also presents results of 44 principal interviews in 13 Connecticut districts (Donaldson/Woulfin 2018) through discussion and exemplification through themes that form the

major component of their publication. A final example is an inquiry into school leaders' perceptions of their gap management (Knapp/Hopmann, 2017), based on 10 school leader interviews, themed and exemplified within the narrative of their results.

Before I introduce the themes of my interviews, I give a brief account of my own experience of Alabama, based on my hand-written research log and observations gathered during the three weeks as well as before and after each interview. These notes assisted me in reviving details of the schools and my interview partners. Every visit created a lasting impression and because my work seeks to capture experience, I provide mine in order to frame the richest and fullest picture possible of what it was like to visit and learn about school and schooling in Alabama and the ways in which the aspects of our conversations bear meaning to principals, superintendents and academic advisors as described by them.

Alabama as a place

Alabama took my breath away from the very first moment: Its scenery is stunningly beautiful, consisting of lusciously green fields and long stretches of forest, covered in a blanket of clear blue sky that seems bigger than anywhere else. The eagles' screams are constant companions and so is Alabama's friendliness, its people's hospitality and their charming southern accents. The generous servings of rich and hearty food, too, can take one's breath away, and so do Alabama's scorching heat and humidity that are nearly unbearable at an of average 100°F/38°C degrees in that September, so mind-numbingly hot to the point where crossing the parking lot became painful: With the obligatory bottle of water in hand, dressed lightly and wearing a college hat, I could feel my mind shutting down and my focus drifting off as sleepy drowsiness was setting in. Approaching my favorite bookstore, my breathing flattened and my walk slowed until the automated door released the breeze of chilled air with a scent of coffee and freshly printed magazines that pulled me back into full alertness that would soon turn into being cold in the strongly air-conditioned inside. One adapts and adjusts over time, we were told repeatedly. A long-time Alabama resident originally from the UK who came over in the 1980s testified vividly to his own long and taxing process. It seems, however, that our three weeks were nowhere long enough to make that adjustment, and so the constant heat remains with me as one of my most tangible memories.

Equally palpable are Alabama's enormous disparities that reveal themselves in every detail of life. They exist side-by-side all that is beautiful about Alabama, unapologetically openly and blatantly visible for everyone who sees with more than just their eyes. Some of those might indeed not be an Alabama-specific characteristic but may be typical to the Deep South, or indeed exist in patterns across the nation. The point stands either way: Alabama as a place is a memory shaped along the lines of difference that were stunning and became formative to our every-day experience there. Our

most affordable dinner option, for example, was a chain restaurant for students where we befriended the nearly 70-year-old waitress over a discussion of what would be permitted inside the football stadium. She was a splendid source of valuable advice because her second source of income is, in fact, working the security checks at the entrance at the home games at the Bryant-Denny Stadium. Having multiple jobs at her age is a necessity for a large part of the US elderly population and possibly more specific to the income group rather than the state. It is, no less, an example that I could not pair with an experience in the contexts that I live in, and as such it is relevant because it sharpened my awareness of the disparities of age and income, education and opportunity. It certainly caused many conversations reflecting upon our role as visitors and researchers, so graciously supported by the School of Education at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa that to a significant degree makes the town that Tuscaloosa is. A similar encounter turned into a continued exchange: During previous travels, chance gifted me with an educational conversation at the front desk of a renowned hotel chain's lobby where a history teacher and former principal turned hotel manager led the evening shift. We quickly fell into a substantial conversation of nearly two hours, during which time I received considered and experienced first-hand critical insight into public education in Tennessee. Mr. Brown's knowledge grows from more than 30 years of teaching and education administration experience, as well as a formal degree in that field in addition to his degree in Criminal Justice. We met again in September 2018 and he elaborated on aspects relevant to my work in Alabama as well as an enormous amount of background information and historical context that served as source and inspiration for my learning process about the region. It informed this work every step of the way and his insights prepared me well for what I experienced in the process of obtaining the interviews.

It was clear to me from the beginning that my inquiry might also be met with reservations, resistance and possibly hostility, and indeed it was. Schools' assistants hung up on me mid-call, appointments were not honored, principals questioned my intentions and unrelated to my research visit, I experienced multiple instances of US doctoral colleagues' harsh criticism of my work as being ill-informed and inappropriate given that I am a cultural outsider, a European with a cultural-historical background of equally dark histories of oppression, and no less a white woman who would never be able to understand the black and brown experience, let alone create insightful research about it. Notwithstanding the fact that my work is specifically not about any of these aspects, I made a point of taking these concerns seriously in crafting this thesis and responding considerately. Although some differences could not be settled, I found them manageable and I was able to discern my actual purposes from the ones people baselessly presumed I had. In two particularly meaningful instances, the course of the interaction changed the initial reservation into mutual interest, which is why these examples stand out in my memory. It had been extraordinarily difficult to reach a particular principal

even though communication with the assistant was friendly, prompt and effective in every way. Only through a coincidence did I later learn that the principal had had strong reservations against the interview, fearing judgment and investigative purposes in the context of the very expansive resources the school commanded, its preferable ranking, its reputation and of course its wealthy, fairly demanding clientele. Only after an acquaintance from our symposium at the University of Alabama approached the principal on my behalf, the worries were put to rest and made our meeting possible and extraordinarily fruitful. The interview turned out to be one of the longest, most engaged, most educational exchanges.

Equally coincidental was an initially slightly hostile encounter that took place because a principal did not appear for our set meeting twice and the elderly assistant was kind enough to make time in the assistant principal's schedule. A very irritated high school student whose job it was to tend to visitors walked me through the hallways: My first impressions were motivational mantras and rules on the walls, floor markings and classrooms without windows. I entered the smallest of offices, the door hitting against the chair, and I shook the assistant principal's hand as he greeted me: "So what brings you to the hood?" I sensed some critical distance, some possibly negative expectation that I could not quite locate. The mood lifted when it turned out that all the water bottles in the small fridge were frozen solid. My conversation partner's mood lifted yet again when I drank my soda from the can, which seemed to have surprised them. As our conversation progressed, the quality of our exchange and the mutual interest did too. I grew more comfortable and felt less out of place. Initially, I had felt intimidated, shifting in my seat, speaking too quickly, nervous opposite this clearly knowledgeable, clearly critical and indeed strongly opinionated person. The situation was also peculiar given its context: A large inner-city school, guarded by fences and police presence in the middle of a neighborhood that was unwelcoming, poor and run-down. I had driven through the immediate surroundings of that school, seeing rows of streets with identical, government-assisted houses, one after the other, with sofas in the streets and wooden planks fixed to the houses at the streets' entrance reading "no visitors welcome". Looking closer into these streets, the windows of the buildings were open and people walked around outside, children playing in the front yards in 40°C humid weather that gave me trouble breathing. These houses likely had no air-conditioning, and given the average distances that one covers there day-to-day, nobody walks unless they have no transportation. It painted a painful picture of living conditions in that neighborhood because walking in that weather is not only very uncomfortable but also a health hazard.

There are numerous ways in which disparities find expression in neighborhoods and in public spaces are manifold yet no less clear, and I experienced them in Alabama's northern cities as well as in the Black Belt area, for example in Selma. History is still palpable there, not only at the famous Edmund Pettus Bridge and the town's center, but especially at Selma's fringes where old houses with 1990s

cars in the front lawn appear abandoned as an old couple walks out on the street, alongside heavy traffic. A block down there, a long line of people waited in front of a small fenced-in tobacco store. The busy street that runs across north of Selma is in need of repair and so were all the small convenience stores and the occasional motel. At the gas station, a large, hand-written wooden sign reminded patrons in large black paint that it is prohibited to stay longer than ten minutes. No lingering and no loitering, the sign read in its second line. Putting gas in the car was time enough to wonder about why that sign might be needed, and why the cashier was secured behind two layers of fence, both around the booth as well as in front of the cashier's desk. It was also time enough for our legs to be covered with love bugs - the large, black insects typical of the South that had splashed over the front of the car.

Leaving north, there were countless cotton fields, miles of jungle-like forests and wide swamps, home to the love bugs and surely all kinds of other exotic animals. In that same area, merely minutes down the road, tenants of small houses along the highway have their windows wide open, their children playing in the grass that was almost as tall as them, hopping around between gardening tools. It was startling to think about the quality of living in this weather and climate, the environment that nature creates there and likely no air-conditioning in a house along a highway that serves as the main commuting route for the prevalent timber industry of the area. A ten-minute drive later, the houses had become mansions, reminiscent of *Gone With The Wind* of 1939, complete with the large front yard with a white-walled fountain, a beautiful symmetric driveway leading up to the shiny white porch, framed by well-maintained plants and flowerbeds. Wealthy towns along the coast have similar scenery, where mansions sit comfortably behind the white beaches of the Mexican Gulf, each worth a fortune, home to weekend and summer residents.

These disparities of living standards are mirrored in schools where they show in every aspect: Some of the schools I visited had no windows, were surrounded by high fences with barbed wire and carried warning signs alongside the fence informing visitors of possible vehicle searches for weapons. Children walked along concrete walkways that were literally falling apart, crumbling beneath my step, connecting the two school buildings that together form the school's campus. Often times there were posters on the corridor walls that reminded students to be proud, to greet teachers, to stay on the right side of the hallway, to keep a positive attitude and to be a coachable, committed member of that school community. In every case, these mantras were paralleled in the principal's strong message on their website and the spirit of discipline and focused encouragement in the school website's descriptions and in the schools themselves. Children and youth I saw in these environments moved quietly and spoke little, addressing the teachers as well as the guests politely and with a tangible sense of distance yet curious interest. The reception at these schools was careful and curious and a certain sternness that characterized all exchanges. Yet I also remember one

contrary example of a principal's assistant who waved excitedly from afar, loudly sending kind greetings across the front lawn of the school.

Expectedly, my visits to the schools that were ranked most desirable were quite different from my experience at the high-poverty indicated schools, already as I arrived: The space surrounding the school building was impressively large and it included well-maintained green spaces and trees, a large driveway entrance and exit with informative signs and flags in the school colors and announcement boards, followed by clearly organized parking lots in letter sections, dedicated not only to visitors and members of faculty and administration but also parents. In some cases, there was separate parking for various student groups. The car makes suggested a much wealthier clientele than in the schools before, and that impression solidified upon entering the school buildings. The entrance was a reflection of that school's culture and social life, both inside its community and with the larger community of which it is an active part. School colors and mascots, the sports teams and the band, their respective emblems and mottos were proudly presented to anyone walking in. Walls showed pictures of faculty and staff as well as events organized together with the surrounding community. Office spaces were fully carpeted, sometimes in the school color and including its emblem, and the seating areas, too, included displays with plaques and medals of distinction in sports and academic disciplines, national school and state teacher awards, pictures numerous accomplishments of the student body as well as the faculty and the school on a whole. A full-size natural stonewall was the highlight of my visits, followed by spotless floors and hallways painted in calming colors; the media center with a generous number of computers for students' use and an equally generous sofa space vis-à-vis the floor-to-ceiling glass façade. Mantras encourage students to be respectful, responsible and resourceful in order to change the world.

I reserved ample time to observe students in these entrance areas: I saw children and youth naturally moving in their surroundings, clearly comfortable and involved with their peers, actively engaged with the person in charge. In one instance a school bus arrived and the teacher instructed the class about the afternoon's plan. Her voice was only slightly projected, the 12 children listened while some of them organized their bags, tied their shoelaces or whispered with their peer. At no point was it necessary to explicitly direct anyone's attention; the situation seemed natural, and the people involved appeared at ease and friendly, including the bus driver. As the children entered, she smiled and greeted every kid, offering high-fives to two little ones and asking some older ones about their weekends and parents. Mutual rapport and comfortable acquaintance seemed to underlie their exchanges. In high-poverty indicated schools, that experience was starkly different: Spaces were much smaller, of lower quality and inhabited by a spirit of determination and guardedness. I could feel the hierarchy between teachers and students, and among students as they passed each other in the hallway. The atmosphere felt much more guarded, and so did the communication. I remember

overhearing two telephone conversations with parents that were directed in tone and brief in words, seemingly characterized by the intent to communicate and uphold a rule of some sort. In one instance, the dispute was the rule of having to appear at school irrespective of other commitments, and the other instance was about something the student was supposed to bring to school, possibly a note from the parents or the doctor. Since I was only privy to one part of each of the conversations, I can merely represent my impressions and not the actual content. Staff addressed parents sternly and pointedly, possibly trying to close the conversation in a directing manner rather than, for example, to find out reasons or make cooperative suggestions toward a mutually satisfactory solution.

Students' demeanor and movement in these spaces appeared heavy in a sense, certainly not as light and carelessly comfortable as in the schools described before. The tone in which faculty and administrators addressed students was much less collegial and more conscious, professional in a sense as a teacher speaking purposefully to a student. The difference in communication is the difference between the teacher persona, so the professional role, and opposite of that is person without their role in mind, the way they would communicate with a younger family member. The latter communication is likely less purposeful, less guarded, freer in a sense than is the communication one has with potentially difficult students in a tense high school environment. Having worked in such environments myself, I am keenly aware of my own communication difference in the various settings. For that reason, I do not attach any criticism to my characterization of what I experienced in any of these schools because the professionals that create these environments do so with good reason and ample experience. The atmospheres and conditions of schools, both physical and non-physical, could not have been more different, yet it became clear in interviews that they are united in their pedagogical aim to benefit the students, guided by the standards of the profession.

My experiences reflect the disparities in Alabama, as probably any place is always everything, from its best to its worst. It seems that this is particularly true for Alabama, as it is "home to both the birthplace of the confederacy and the civil rights movement" (Anderson, 2017, p. 295), so that the disparities visible today are to be read against the state's extraordinary history and the larger historical contexts in which, for example, Alabama formed its Constitution in 1901 that is in effect to this very day. The place is "dually complicated and inspiring" (Anderson, 2017, p. 295) and as such, it is heavily dissonant, characterized by what appear to be irreconcilable discrepancies on the surface. Below that surface is a rich and complicated, very present history that is by no means remote or gone, but vividly at work in discussions about social policy including schooling.

There is a danger one runs as a researcher in entering social spaces that are highly complex, highly interdependent and continuously changing as a result of the societal negotiations between the

various actors involved. Specifically as an outsider, one might be susceptible to only recognizing that which is favorable, nice, comfortable and smooth, or indeed only seeing that which is different from what one knows. Yet, the same concerns may rightfully be uttered in the opposite situation of researching environments one is closely familiar with. There, too, lie dangers of blind spots, only for opposite reasons. Clearly, such concerns must be addressed but cannot be grounds for dismissing research of this nature as research then would have to come to a complete halt. In awareness of these matters, I purposefully invited and prompted the interviewees' honesty and criticism, explored the seemingly non-fitting details, the counter-intuitive facts, and halted to understand disruptions because these instances are particularly educational, most enlightening, and offer truthful insight into complex matters. That is why I am deeply grateful to the individuals who so kindly took time out of their busy schedules to speak with me. I meant it when I concluded each interview with the offer to be back and to give back to each school community individually, in whatever way and capacity they see meaningful to their particular environment. Some of the interviewees promised to take me up on that offer and I look forward to getting involved.

Disparities

Schooling in Alabama is fundamentally characterized by its historically rooted, widely gaping disparities that have permeated the state's societal structures for more than a century, including the inequitable distribution of wealth, equity and opportunity, in its communities and in schooling:

(...) semblances of Alabama's dark history with inequity can still be seen in its education system today. (...) Alabama's present system of education finance – deeply rooted in and stemming from a prejudicial state history --- is unable to promote an equitable and quality K-12 public education system. (Anderson, 2017, p. 295)

The dissonance between Alabama's worst and most beautiful historical moments is tangible to this day in the shape of the tensions that live and breathe in the state. There seem to be neither any confusion nor any coyness on the part of the interviewees about the rootedness of these disparities in the persisting inequities:

(...) intentional creation of pockets of poverty that box African Americans into a life of continued poverty, creating generational poverty (...). As a result, you had two systems of education. (L, p. 1)

I think the big thing, you probably figured this out now, there's the haves and have nots. (H, p. 17)

For me the big picture is socioeconomic class and I just feel like poverty is such an issue in this country and it is the number one factor in how we educate. (...) You know, if you have money and you come from an affluent area, you're automatically going to be educated better than someone who goes- and then the cycle that it creates, the unfairness of that. (W, p. 34)

These three statements from my interviews exemplify the legacy of Alabama's history of intentional disenfranchisement that continues to manifest itself in schooling of the present. One landmark effort in overturning this legacy is former Governor Riley's attempt to lead tax reform in 2003. The

plan sought to change property tax laws based on the 1901 Alabama Constitution by way of a referendum that was ultimately brought down by "the influence of special interest groups and well-funded lobbyists" (Hamill, 2007, p. 1133). The history of legal attempts to change Alabama's tax system and as a result, its Constitution together with its various amendments, is long and equally unsuccessful. A prime example is *I. L. v Alabama* (739 F.3d, 1273), a case litigated at the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit, coming from the Northern District of Alabama. Plaintiffs were public school children's families from the Black Belt counties of Sumter and Lawrence who claimed having been disenfranchised under the tax system as the tax cap in their counties limits tax revenue and as a result, limits school funding. Even though the district court found in their favor in part, stating that "four of the challenged provision in the Alabama Constitution (...) were 'enacted with a racially discriminatory intent'" (739 F.3d 1273, p. 3), the court ultimately rejected plaintiff's claims on complex legal grounds of issues of standing and failure to show that "this alleged injury is redressable through the relief sought" (739 F.3d 1273, p. 4). The court's decision concludes that changing the Alabama constitutional tax caps in response to the plaintiffs' is not guaranteed to solve the issue as a public vote might still lead to the existing tax caps being kept in place. As such, "granting the plaintiffs the relief they request would result in nothing more than a mere 'moral' victory, something the federal courts may not properly provide." (739 F.3d 1273, p. 6)

Notwithstanding the ultimate failure of the case, the court's reasoning in its opinion is remarkably unwavering in clarity on the historical disenfranchisement in Alabama. The circuit judges begin their reasoning by acknowledging the gap in education funding:

In the 'best of all possible worlds,' state and local government would ensure adequate funding for all facets of their public school systems. In the world in which we live, however, the reality is that some public school systems do not have sufficient resources to education the children entrusted to their care." (739 F.3d 1273, p. 1)

After recounting the specific legal cases brought from Alabama since 1981, judges not only acknowledge but affirm "Alabama's long history of racial discrimination (...), Alabama's 'racist past...cast long shadows'" before siding with the district court on the matter of the Constitution's Amendments. (739 F.3d 1273, p. 11) Part V of the ruling begins with yet another affirmation:

In deciding this difficult appeal, we are cognizant of Alabama's deep and troubled history of racial discrimination, and given the evidence at trial, we share in the district court's concern regarding Alabama's public education system: 'Alabama continues to be plagued by an inadequately funded public school system – one that hinders the upward mobility of her citizens, black and white alike, especially in rural counties ... [As a result,] [t]he children of the rural poor, whether black or white, are left to struggle as best as they can in underfunded, dilapidated schools. D.E. 296 – 1 at 797-98. Courts, however, are not always able to provide relief, no matter how noble the cause.' (739 F.3d 1273, p. 12)

The court's finding affirms that prejudices run deeply and "the intent to disenfranchise certain groups of citizens persists in its education system" (Anderson, 2017, p. 300). These dynamics

manifest themselves throughout schooling, yet it becomes specifically visible and problematic in the way Alabama schools are financed.

Based on the Alabama Constitution of 1901, tax contributions are capped in ways that systemically disenfranchise black and brown communities within the state as the finance system's strongest effects are felt in the Black Belt area where poverty is endemic and the black and brown communities is represented in the majority. To address these matters, the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) commissioned a report in 2015 to assess "the fiscal equity of Alabama's school finance system from the 2006-07 school year to the 2012-13 school year" (APA Consulting, 2015, p. 24) that concluded the following:

- Over the past seven years, Alabama's school finance system has either barely met (by some measures) or failed to meet generally accepted equity standards, and has become more inequitable.
- There is a moderate positive relationship between local property wealth and per-student spending, which suggests that Alabama could do more to support school systems in low-wealth communities.
- Alabama's school finance system also fails to meet equity standards for vertical equity, suggesting the state could do more to provide support for students with special needs.
- Per-student expenditures increased slightly - \$458 over the seven-year period. When inflation is taken into account, however, per-student expenditures have actually decreased by \$513.
- Alabama's total K-12 enrollment is declining. Enrollment dropped by 0.5 percent between 2006-07 and 2012-13. About a quarter of all districts experienced enrollment decreases of 10 percent or more.
- The data suggests that differences in local property wealth drive wealthier districts to have high spending levels, more teachers per 1,000 students, and higher teacher salaries on average. (APA Consulting, 2015, p. 24)

The assessment is sobering. It calls for a more equitable and a more contemporary school finance structure, drawing on comparison analyses with 12 other states of the Southern Region Education Board. Alabama is unique among all the states in the U.S. by continuing to use its historic formula for financing schools: First, it calculates the target revenue need for each school system on a unit basis for personnel (APA Consulting, 2015, p. 4), with a complex calculation for a multiplier for Special Education and student-teacher ratios. Next, the state deducts the expected property tax yield of that school system based on a 10 mill-millage with 1 mill equaling \$1 for each \$1,000 assessed property value. So 1% of a property's value is dedicated to education, unless the property holder qualifies for exemptions. There are many causes, for example receiving government assistance, being over 65 years old, being blind, or suffering from permanent or total disability. Also various limits apply to business properties: Utility companies are taxed at 30% of their marked value assessment, commercial property at 20%. The properties limited to 10% taxation of their marked value are farms, timberland and owner-occupied residential property (Alabama Department of Revenue, n.d.). This bears heavily on school districts where exemptions cluster, as is the case in the Black Belt. Finally, the state reduces its contribution by "the amount of local contribution collected (being) less than the amount expected" (APA Consulting, 2015, p. 5). Property assessment systems are vastly complex and vary greatly, and so does the mill value:

The value of one mill of property tax varies dramatically across school districts in Alabama, ranging from more than \$1 million to less than \$100,000. More importantly, the value of one mill of property tax per student varies from less than \$35 in 13 school systems to more than \$120 in nine system. (...) School districts can generate revenue from local taxes other than property taxes, provided that the amount of revenue generated is equivalent to the yield of a 10 mill tax on ad valorem²² property. (APA Consulting, 2015, p. 6)

The variation in funding that results from the Alabama mill system is exacerbated by the fact that wealthy communities can supply additional funds to provide schools with, for example, more teachers than would be regularly funded, as is the case in one of my conversation partners' schools:

We have over 1000 kids in athletics. (...) We have 37 sports (...). I have seven art teachers on campus. I have foreign languages. And here's something you may need to be aware of too, is that the state of Alabama gives me a certain amount of teacher units per year based on my enrollment. If I had to just use those teachers on campus, my classroom size would be huge and I couldn't offer those programs and offerings. But thankfully the city (...) actually provides me with extra teachers. (...) So I think I've got 229 certified teachers on campus. About 40 of those I would not have if the city didn't pay for those afterwards. So you're able to offer a variety of different programs, but you also keep your class size down, 17, 18, 19 kids. (H, p. 10)

For another principal who is located in the heart of the Black Belt area, that very same provision means the exact opposite as most parents in the community do not work and receive government assistance. Hence, a variety of tax exemptions apply that cut school funding:

It's, it's definitely a money issue. We have limited funds, the property tax is very low in this area. So there's not a lot of money- (...) if they're receiving government assistance, they're not supporting the area. That's important to kids because the kids get- We get our money from taxpayers and if they don't own property, they're not paying taxes. (F, p. 2)

A third and final example of the millage system's effects was represented to me in two conversations with leaders in closely neighboring city and county systems that receive different mills: The city incurs 21 mills of property tax, yet the county only incurs 10 mills with an even split of the sales tax revenues. Their conditions are not only significantly different, but they also worsen the already uneven distribution of funding: While the city serves roughly 10,000 students at significant levels of poverty, the county serves 18,000 students in 20 and 34 schools, respectively (D, p. 3), yet the leader with far fewer financial options says this: "I don't begrudge them a dime. (laughs) They need it." (D, p. 3) What helps manage the situation and balance the disparity is the voluntary and close collaboration of both leaders that are aware of their challenge and address it in view of student transience and the community they form:

So we're a city within the county, we have the numbers. I mean we have a greater rate of poverty. We have a greater rate of high needs students, but the relationship, it's not as different (...) I mean the county school system has also some of the same challenges that we have (erm) so the relationship or the two- we work together. Even though we're two totally different entities. The things we work on are similar, so here recently, and it's not been for long, but the last couple of years we've actually joined our work together in some areas because we also share students. Our students go back and forth from the city and county (erm) we have- in the city we have a pretty high number of students who are transient within the city, but then sometimes they go outside the city too. Public housing is

²² Latin for "according to value"

more so done from a county perspective. So that sometimes means (...) families will move potentially to a home in the county and then moved back into the city, sometimes a couple of times within a year. So we try to have some similarities between the systems so the students don't experience such jarring, kind of changes when they go into different schools. Certainly within the city schools we try to keep our curricula aligned and similar so that no matter where a student is, that we're similar our curriculum and all that, but the city county relationship- and it's, it's left to whoever's in leading the two systems. There's nothing structurally that necessarily has them operating together. (Da, p. 5)

Um, the thing I will say is we have a very, very blessed community in terms of our political leaders work well together. Our Chamber (of Commerce, *note*) works well together. The city schools and the county schools, we see ourselves as partners. These are all our kids. It doesn't matter where they come to our school, to their school. (...) Anytime there's ever something where you share. I mean, it's just like we're all in this together and that's the way our leaders are- number one, our community leaders want us to do that, but they're very supportive of our industry around here is so supportive of our schools. (D, p. 16)

The same rapport and professional collaboration that is visible in their example extends into their community foundations that provide funds and support when it is needed. For instance, after a Superintendent's presentation in front of the Chamber of Commerce where he reported extensively on learners' needs and especially on lacking reading skills (Da, p. 3), the local Rotary Club donated funds in the amount of \$100,000 dedicated to after-school reading support in that school district. So for better or worse, one of the Alabama's strong response patterns to disparities and need is to fall back on its respective community: "The solution, as so often happened with education in Alabama, was to rely on charity." (Flynt, 2006, p. 21) Church communities provide a similar kind of contribution in the very practical form of secret backpacking:

You know almost all of our schools do the secret backpacks of food on weekends, so kids will have something to eat with churches and they'll come in. So when the kids go to PE²³ on a Friday, they leave their backpacks, lined up across the hall. The churches and all would come in and they're putting food in their backpack so they'll have something to eat over the weekend. Uh, we have kids routinely for Christmas, you know, you're talking about that or during the holidays. It's not 'this toy, that toy'. I hope I have something good to eat, those kinds of comments. So you're having to do a whole lot more of those kinds of things before you can even attempt to get to the academics. (D, p. 2)

In yet another conversation, a principal explained how they utilize federal funds for their homeless students. In fact, the vast majority of students at that school qualify as homeless because doubling-up in a home fulfills the federal requirement for being a homeless student: "In some cases the parents could be living with (them), for example, your sister and her family is living with you. Right. But they will be considered homeless. They can be in the same household, but they're still considered homeless because they don't have their own." (F, p. 23) While the school does not serve children or youth who live on the street, students who live with family members and qualify as being homeless in the system, was described as an advantage to both the students and the school: "Actually, it provides better support for them because that way we're able to buy their clothes. We

²³ physical education

buy their school supplies, through federal funds. It's a benefit of being homeless if you don't have money." (F, p. 24) This is a case of a policy working well because it affords extra resources; reducing homelessness in this case would in fact exacerbate living conditions for students who would then no longer enjoy benefits that advanced them quality schooling.

The larger area of Birmingham, Alabama, is another insightful example to the study of various lines of difference as they have grown and manifested through history to this very day: For the longest time, downtown Birmingham had been home to dismal urban living conditions of the poor that attend schools that struggle financially as well as academically. The city has only recently been pushing revitalizing efforts through quality housing, public parks and public areas for sports and leisure activities. Nicknamed as the Pittsburgh of the South, Birmingham used to be shaped by its steel production history of industrialization:

The Birmingham was the unofficial capital of Alabama's first industrial revolution is no surprise. As one of the few major southern cities without an antebellum past, the Magic City seemed on the way to fulfilling the implications on its nickname. (Flynt, 2006, p. 131)

The city's reputation was built in the early 20th century when its population grew from 38,000 to 138,000 in merely 10 years between 1910 and 1920, putting it on the map as the steel city that employed more than 100,000 industrial workers in 788 factories by 1924. Given its segregated population structure as the U.S. city with the highest rate of black residents at 38%, industrialization soon led to fast and undirected "urban growth that created problems of poor housing, high crime, pollution, and traffic congestion" (Flynt, 2006, p. 131) Around the middle of the century, with civil rights tensions flaring and racial riots rummaging the highly segregated city of Birmingham, it was not only the white working class and the KKK who supported segregation and instigated escalation:

On the crest or Birmingham's Red Mountain, in mansions with gorgeous views of downtown Birmingham, the old-line families and business magnates were more than happy for these ruffians to do what they would not stoop to do. George Wallace was not *their* kind of governor; there was not a whit of gentility or refinement in either his personality or pedigree. And yet many of them had secretly voted for him, and they were more than a little pleased with his constant railing against out-of-state black and white civil rights 'agitators'. (Wallace Kennedy, 2019, p. 101)

It is George Wallace's daughter, Peggy Wallace Kennedy, who in her recent autobiography offers this testimony and assessment of a time and a spirit that made her father the leading political figure of Alabama for nearly 40 years. Birmingham's hills, then and today, function as the dividing line between those having to live and work within the polluted industrial pit of the city and those who can afford over-the-hill living (G, p. 1). When the industry left in the 1970s, Birmingham transitioned to becoming a center for the medical profession, complete with cutting edge research hospitals and nationally recognized university programs in medicine and health sciences at, for example, the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Communities of the Birmingham hills as well as other hedged communities are the wealthiest communities in the state. A principal described these

school districts as "closed and self-sufficient" places, some of which "take no federal moneys" (G, p. 1). While this is only true for some affluent school districts, there are some that command resources to a degree that makes federal funds obsolete. Another interviewee gave a similar impression: "Well, they live (laughs) in these- in Mountain Brook, in these rich white communities and they're like bubbles and they- They are so segregated that these people literally go through their entire life without the awareness that three miles down the street people are homeless (W, p. 2).

Most schools place between these extremes, and they received high praise for their diversity throughout my conversations. A principal drew an insightful comparison to their previous leadership position a decade ago that shows how lacking funding leads to a lacking curriculum and much less opportunity to create an experience-rich school:

It's inevitably so big of a difference between schools or school systems with money that again, that could finance programs. (...) compared to my last stop 11 years ago, very poor rural school, not a lot of programs and not a lot of offerings. Not a lot of remedial programs that you put in because they didn't have any money. And here I think, I think we're a, and I truly believe we're, we're successful here with overwhelming majority of kids is because of the variety of programs, activities that I can offer. Does that make sense? And I think that's really important on a campus that has 3,000 kids and diverse population and extreme diversity in levels of kids academically. (H, p. 8)

The principal continued to detail how students may start a school club at any time by successfully advertising their idea first to a teacher sponsor before drafting some bylaws and then pitching the idea to the principal. (H, p. 11) In the 2018/19 academic year, the school was host of over 70 student clubs, including a 400-member school band that only recently had received its own newly constructed band building. In the same stroke of the conversation, more details about the opposite experience were also relayed to me, drawing further on the interviewee's personal experience:

South of here, when I first moved here (...) very high poverty, but it was predominantly white, but just a rural school, so the funding was atrocious. I mean, I had- was trying to do things with not enough teachers- start just based on being a skeleton schedule. Just a few things that we could offer. I didn't have any AP classes. I didn't have any other things because we couldn't do it. And that's what you're going to see to a very, very high extent down there. (H, p. 11)

Watching student development under these conditions of missing resources and lost opportunities led that person to finally transition to the current position, because the locally ingrained sense of what is possible was experienced as limiting: "I can tell you as passionate as I was about being there, it's a great place to be. The people. Great. But the expectations for generations there were very low academically." (H, p. 13) It was frustrating, the person reported, to see students who were suited for college choose not to even consider the option, merely on the basis of their "dad's been a steel worker" (H, p. 13). Given the rural environment and its dismal income structure, it was clear that students would not have much opportunity to educate themselves further or to advance their pay structures in the future: "That was very, very frustrating" (H, p. 13).

Opportunity seems interwoven with the lines of difference that exist along rural and urban places, generational wealth and poverty that clusters demographically. By asking interviewees explicitly how

their experience would be different anywhere else, the exploration honed in on the differences of place and clarifies how interviewees relate to these aspects of place. Their elaborations suggest that their work at its core is focused on community; responding to its contexts and expectations, and thereby serving that school's constituency:

I don't know it would be different. (erm) I think I know the teachers here and I know the students and parents here so it makes it easier when something comes up, bad or good to, to approach it, but if I maybe had known somewhere else, (erm), I know that I could do the job, but I know I would have some difficulty because I don't know if I would have some of the support I need being an outsider coming in somewhere else. (F, p. 20)

Yeah, somewhat. I think there's gonna be- some people can handle that just fine. Some people see themselves as leaders that can go anywhere and do it, which I think you can, but I think for me here right now it's, it's, it's rooted in this community and it's knowing the (erm) not only the community value because that's, that can be a good thing and a bad thing like local community norms can be dangerous. Right. But, but at least knowing the context of the community and kind of working with the community to circuit, but what's our vision forward and that you can't do that with transplanting and you can't do that by saying, okay, now you come in and do this job and then somebody else will do it two years or I don't know that you can do that well, okay. (Da, p. 17)

That's a good question. (...) let's just say I went to Perry County, they, they, they moved me, the State Department came in and said, we're moving you to that school district. (erm) you know, I think what you have to do is you have to look at the students that you're serving, families that you're serving and you want to serve them the best way possible. So me coming in with my wonderful ideas from (this) high school might not be what best serves them. I probably have some ideas that might help in certain ways, but I mean I think you have to garner from the people around what's happening, what's working, making evaluation from yourself for, for yourself, (erm) you know, move forward. But I think you definitely have to acclimate to the, to the environment to, in order to get any positive movement forward. (...) I mean I think that there's a certain, there are certain ways you about schooling that you're, you're not going to miss on it. I mean that these are the good days are going to be good thing. So I think you have to start with setting the environment to be able to do those things. (B, pp. 38f)

The relevance of community and context characterizes these educators' work in a variety of different ways as the material repeatedly shows. These three examples highlight not only the quality of interaction with a school's constituency as vital to schooling, but also the extensive professional attention that is given to context and the embeddedness and interwovenness of the school's demographic environment. As an illustration of what it means to be the principal in their specific contexts, I was provided this example of the parking lot issue:

(...) we have a huge parking lot, but it's really not big enough for all of our students. And that's our, we don't bus to school. That's how they, they either carpool or they drive. And (erm) but we had to change because of our numbers, how we issue parking passes, which seems like a very small thing and it seemed like a very small thing to me. It is a very big thing for students apparently. And they had a lot of problems with this, but they weren't going to be vocal about it and come talk to me and say, why are you doing this? So they just decided to be mad about it. So we went through the first month or so of school last year. It worked. I mean it was fine. They still got their party passes, they get parked at school. So I didn't think anything of it. (erm) and I had a group of students who wanted me to come talk to their class and so I went to talk to their class and one of the questions they asked was about parking. So I explained to them the rationale, the reason how we went about making that decision and what the outcome was. And they were like, why didn't you just lead with that? Why don't you tell us that last year or the beginning of this this year as to why they were like, that makes total sense and doesn't make me angry at all. I was like, okay, well I guess I just need to do like walk

you through the process, you know, but how do you do that with 2,000 kids in a community this big? So I say all that to say as you know, I think people just want to be communicated with, you know, they want to know what's going on. They want to feel a part of the process as much as possible. So I think if I were taken to another place I would try to do school like I think school should be done, you know, and not ruffle a ton of feathers, but I'm bringing people along in the process. (B, p. 39)

Note how the principal acknowledges that the issue at hand may not be relevant to some, yet as became evident, it bears significant relevance for the students and as a result, it had to become relevant to the principal as well. Anecdotes such as this one are valuable because they allow the outsider to understand the complexity that schooling is in this case. They deliver unique and valuable insights into the every-day practice of schooling that consists of negotiating social cohesion and community in the shape of, for example, negotiating the rules that govern the usage of the parking lot. Given that these students commute exclusively by car, it is understandable how the parking rules are not really about where cars are parked, but that these rules effectively shape students' social lives: Coordinating personal schedules on a daily basis with others means not only adapting one's own life to the irregularities or changing preferences of others. It also creates a necessity to function in social groups in order to maintain the clocked schedule of students. It challenges their time-management and self-management equally, both before and after school; in fact, it may regulate social structures of schooling at their core because coordinating transport becomes the prerequisite to a multitude of aspects regarding student school life.

Schooling and educators that serve the community are inevitably intertwined with the forces that shape that very community and its larger contexts, including its demography, its socio-economic make-up, and no less its histories. Every-day practices and experiences are constitutive to the ways in which those involved in schooling conceptualize of it and so it follows that educators then lead the school and the community in view of the peculiarities of that place, considering its particular histories and contexts.

History

All interviewees extensively elaborated on the inheritance of history that Alabama schooling carries today. This interviewee's opening to our conversation was more direct than any other:

Okay, so after, after slavery, African Americans were continued to be (erm) discriminated against. (erm) we fast forward to say the 20th century and (.) where you live had a lot to do with what, what kind of education you would get. So by intentionally creating these pockets of poverty, you sort of box African Americans into a life of continued poverty, creating generational poverty, ok? (erm) African Americans couldn't buy homes in- in nice areas because the taxes (erm) for the schools were based on property taxes. You would get more money for a school if you lived in a nicer area. They got more funding for education. African Americans weren't a part of that. So as a result, you had two different systems of education. (L, p. 1)

The wording at the beginning of this statement shows considerable restraint: Characterizing the time period of Reconstruction as discriminatory is euphemistic and so is the person's initial description of

demographic segregation. As the interviewee continues, not only is there more particular historical information, but also an expression of emotion and engagement with the issues described:

African Americans weren't allowed to have the really great paying jobs. They weren't allowed to buy property in areas where the property would (snaps fingers) appreciate. And it created these dense (hammers fist on table) pockets (hammers fist on table) of poverty (hammers fist on table) . It created these schools (hammers fist on table) that perpetuated that poverty because we are fooling ourselves if we don't say: Who your child sits next to in the classroom (hammers fist on table) is more (hammers fist on table) important than who (hammers fist on table) is teaching (hammers fist on table) your child because you created a pocket of poverty where achievement is skewed based on how good people are doing within that subset. (L, p. 1)

The intensity of the conversation is exemplified by the person hammering their fist on the table and by their repeating of phrases that strengthened the message that I was being conveyed. This dense energy of wanting to convey that message characterized the conversation throughout; more than with others, I felt that this interview partner wanted to teach me about these complexities once it was made clear that I was willing to learn. Other conversations contained moments of the same strong messaging and the same uncompromising clarity about Alabama's inequitable history and present of schooling that is rooted in its school funding and ultimately, in its Constitution: "The linking of educational with political reforms is significant." notes Horace Mann Bond (1994, p. 137) in his dissertation, originally published in 1939. His work reaches far beyond his case study of Alabama and it is in its own difficult history of publication as well as through its remarkably differentiated wording a tangible testament to the reach of history:

Bond's contribution to educational historiography involved more than anticipating recent scholarship, however. The subtlety and complexity of his interpretations exemplified a level of historical sophistication that is certainly worthy of emulation in any historical or other interpretative work. (Urban in Bond, 1994, p. xxi).

Scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington changed the way Black history was told, and Horace Mann Bond contributed to this work as well in conducting and publishing his research long before the famous 1960s era of the Civil Rights Movement and its many leaders. Mann's body of work is characterized by his multi-faceted approach to his subject:

The tools of study that Bond employed in this work were historical methods and social scientific analysis informed by critical, sociological insight. The purposes for which these scholarly tool were used, however, the analysis and betterment of the educational and social conditions of black Americans, had been established in some of Bond's earliest childhood experiences. (Urban in Bond, 1994, p. xi)

Bond's scholarship and career life were closely interwoven with and reflective of his experience as an academic of color in his time. Born in Tennessee in 1904, Horace Mann Bond obtained his doctoral degree from the University of Chicago and contributed to the academic community through various faculty appointments throughout the nation. Before his death in 1972, he served as the Dean of the School of Education at Atlanta University and as the Director of the Bureau of Educational Research (Bond, 1994, p. xii). Notwithstanding his considerable reputation in the academy at the

time, publishers declined his dissertation manuscript until only in 1939, and only with a \$700 contribution of his acquired prize funds, the book was published by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (Urban in Bond, 1994, p. xiii). Given the uncompromising analytic clarity in his work, the adverse reactions to it were not surprising. Bond tells the history of suppression as an academic, grounded in scholarship, and represented in research, going far beyond "a dispassionate, scholarly rendering of the subject. Bond's book shows that the plight of Amos and other black natives of Alabama had its roots in the historical circumstances he recounted." (Urban in Bond, 1994, p. xiii) As such, he took direct aim at established narratives about Reconstruction history by disputing dominant, racist reiterations that amounted to "a defense in the values of the old South" (Urban in Bond, 1994, p. xiii) as presented by the author of the standard work at the time of Bond's publication, Walter Linwood Fleming. Rather than an ideological showcase, Bond's work presents a sharp analysis of economic patterns and demographic structures that affected education in Alabama; the praise for his academic commitment to scholarship followed directly after its publication and continued throughout his career (Urban in Bond, 1994, p. xiii).

Horace Mann Bond's dissertation "Negro Education in Alabama: A Study in Cotton and Steel" (1994) includes a chapter on Alabama's 1901 Constitution as it was foundational to schooling in Alabama, as it is today. Understanding it means understanding the ways in which "the linking of educational with political reforms is significant" (Bond, 1994, p. 137). Today's issues with millage taxation, equal representation and the significance of demographic structures based on economic characteristics present themselves against the backdrop of the history of the Constitution, and the reasons for why it is still in place.

After the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865), the era of Reconstruction encompassed a variety of complex histories of the historical task of addressing the formal abolishment of slavery and its societal legacy:

You know you gave them the promise of- you gave the promise of equality after the Civil War but reconstruction of the South by and large was a failure and African Americans were sort of left to their own devices. Now you had (erm) historically black colleges and universities that work, oh man, tirelessly, you know, and and and and diligently and they worked very hard to educate the descendants of slaves or you know, African Americans in the South. But at some point, you know, (erm) those forces that (.) conspired to keep African Americans down in society or- (erm) hold African-Americans back, by and large, were very successful. (L, p. 2)

That task, however, did not result in equality for black and white populations. Share-cropping in the Black belt, for example, maintained the old social order of white ownership, and black labor under conditions that bore no similarity to the living conditions of whites. In fact, the resemblance to slavery was striking²⁴ just the same as it was in industrial Birmingham that employed over 40% black workers at lower pay and housed them in far more disastrous lodging arrangements than their white counterparts. It was a reflection of what "the literature exhibits (in) many documents expressing

²⁴ For a distinguished cinematographic representation, watch "Mudbound" (2017) by Dee Rees

complete satisfaction with the Negro 'in his place' (...)" (Bond, 1994, p. 142), mirrored in separate schools of vastly differing quality, for example. What is more: "This thinking was general in Alabama." (Bond, 1994, p. 146) as exemplified by the Birmingham Superintendent of the time who openly claimed that the ability to reason will be out of reach for black children (Bond, 1994, p. 147). This sentiment grew violent in the following years, peaking in the largest number of lynchings in the U.S. in 1892, followed by a peak in Alabama lynchings of 27 in 1893. It became clear by the turn of the century that "political corruption threatened the very existence of orderly government (Flynt, 2006, p. 6).

The Constitutional Convention that created the Alabama Constitution of 1901 was not merely a singular event but reflective of "events, economic, political, and social, which had parallels in each of the other states of the lower South during the same period." (Bond, 1994, p. 164) The convention's president, John B. Knox, led the 155 Convention delegates who convened in Montgomery. Democrats formed the majority with 141 representatives, trailed by 7 Populists, 6 Republicans and one independent member; no women and no black representatives were present. Delegates as well as president Knox made it known before the convention that changes in the status quo were unwelcome, as exemplified by the president's clarification of the agenda at the convention's opening:

And what is it that we want to do? Why is it within the limits imposed by the Federal Constitution, to establish white supremacy in this State. This is our problem, and we should be permitted to deal with it, unobstructed by outside influences. But if we would have white supremacy, we must establish it by law – not by force or fraud. These provisions are justified in law and in morals, because the negro is not discriminated against on account of his race, but on account of his intellectual and moral condition. There is in the white man an inherited capacity for government, which is wholly wanting in the negro. (Alabama Constitutional Convention, 1901, p. 538)

Statements of the kind were represented to the degree that prompted, for example, former Governor Oates to call for moderation and unbiased deliberations. It was also those few moderate voices that spoke in favor of hearing the four petitions brought to the all-white delegation by representatives of the black voters in the state, Booker T. Washington being the first one of the petitioners. Much can be gleaned from the petitions' tone:

The petitioners explained their pleas as the only way by which Negroes could represent their views to the Convention, since no Negroes were included in its membership. (...) Each represented himself as a good citizen and as a taxpayer. Their race, they said, had been brought to America forcibly, but had benefited from slavery. Negroes had rendered much service to the white people; they had nursed 'you and your children,' and shown deep loyalty during the war (...). The Negro was declared to be at the mercy of the delegates. (Bond, 1994, p. 169)

An example of the tone of such a petition is provided by Bond who prefaces it referencing the "usual technique" (Bond, 1994, p. 170) of black leaders to call upon the whites: "And if you of the dominant race will be generous in your dealings with us, generous in the matter of education, you will ever have at your door a people who will not trouble your sleep with dynamite nor your waking hours with strikes." (Bond, 1994, p. 170)

These documents indicate that at no point did the idea take hold that the black population had rights that were inherent. Instead, they were constructed as rights that the white class was at liberty to grant. The complexity of this appalling view is potentially underestimated and needs clarification in order to properly integrate the Constitution and its effects today into the sentiments of historical times. Bond exemplifies the old southern understanding of the relation of the races by quoting delegate J. T. Heflin, who represented Alabama in the House of Representatives from 1904 to 1920 when he served as a Democratic U.S. Senator until 1930:

That, Mr. President, was the negro that had been brought up in the back yard and in the kitchen, and brought up to reverence and respect his master. There was a spirit of fear that went about him; reverence for his superior, and a feeling of humility and obedience on occasions like that was innate, and we are glad that they did so well. I am not an enemy of the negro; I am a friend to him in his place. (...) I love the old-time Southern negro. He was in his place as a slave, and happy and contented as such. (Bond, 1994, p. 173)

Such an environment did not permit for representing other interests than the ones carried by the delegates; preconvention pledges against raising taxes and against so-called backward movements on education (Bond, 1994, p. 178) were upheld in the result on taxation: The ad valorem tax system was upheld and the maximum tax rate from the previous Constitution was reduced by one mill so that the respective counties would be able to levy that one mill as they saw fit; "since the county levies would be expended within the county, the schools for white children in the white counties stood to receive under the new system a larger share from this local levy they had before received from the State levy." (Bond, 1994, p. 179) There had been other proposals, however, separating the distribution of local taxation along the lines of race of the property owner, providing tax monies from white property for white schools and vice versa. When asked about company taxation, it was proposed to divide the tax amount according to race ownership percentage (Bond, 1994, p. 181). Such bizarre examples exemplify the state of mind of the delegates.

Ultimately, the Committee on Education, which included 14 representatives of Black Belt counties with over 50% black population, produced two reports: a minority report signed by three Committee members representing white majority counties, and a majority report. In essence, the two documents differed only in tax appropriation structure, with the minority arguing for race-based separation and the majority proposing per-child distribution of funds. The arguments around the reports centered on issues of illiteracy first but soon morphed into a debate about the constitutionality of racial segregation based on classic invocations of the stereotype of the dangerous black man (Bond, 1994, p. 190). While eventually yielding to the unconstitutionality of segregationist tax appropriation and adopting the majority report, "the Convention had disfranchised the Negro" (Bond, 1994, p. 191) as unequal and fundamentally inferior:

The crowning argument for the education of Negroes, concluded Jones, was that the Negro had a soul. "We ought to teach the negro at least enough to enable him to read his Bible, to understand the laws that he is to obey, and to understand the contract he signs." (Bond, 1994, p. 191)

The consequences of the Constitution were immediate: Voting registration regulations resulted in a decline of eligible black voters from 181,000 under the 1875 constitution to 2,980 by 1903. In the Black Belt alone, formerly 79,311 voters were reduced to 1,081 registration eligible black voters. The white voting population saw a similar dynamic, shrinking from 232,800 in 1900 to 191,500 by 1903 because they had failed to pay their poll tax. (Flynt, 2006, p. 15) The restrictions represented a historical step backward from previous constitutional voting regulations that had been much more inclusive, and Alabama – alongside Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas and Virginia - maintained them, openly defying the 1964 Supreme Court ruling that found poll taxes to be unconstitutional. It was the *Harper v Virginia Board of Elections* (383 U.S. 663, p. 1966) case brought initially from Virginia that ended this particular form of voting disenfranchisement while many other forms persisted.

One recent victory against voter suppression is the Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2018, introduced by Congresswoman Sewell from Alabama. It passed with 228 to 187 votes in the House of Representatives in June of 2019 (Nilsen, 2019) and restores federal oversight in specific regions of 11 states in order to safeguard voters' rights and to fend off attempts of voter suppression. Federal oversight to monitor voter suppression strategies had been found unconstitutional in *Shelby County v Holder* (570 U.S. 529, p. 2013). The Alabama-specific pattern of resistance includes many examples beyond voting rights: Women's rights were only ratified in 1920 when the majority of states ratified the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution that provided women the right to vote. Federal rule held and it was only in 1958 that the state of Alabama officially ratified this Amendment on paper.

Against this backdrop, it is nothing short of stunning that the 1901 Alabama Constitution rules to this day: "That such a document could still govern Alabama (...) is a testimony to the continuing power of the economic and political elites that put it in place." (Flynt, 2006, p. 3) Alabama's current tax system is the very same ad valorem millage tax system that originated from the 1901 Constitution. Already briefly after the time of its inception, the Education Commission of 1919 noted, on the one hand, the positive changes made through the flexible one mill in county tax but concluded, on the other hand, the "relief (being) entirely inadequate, as the results have clearly shown" (Bond, 1994, p. 193). Similarly, a Brookings²⁵ report in 1932 assessed the Constitution to be a "'warped and distorted' revenue system (...), defective, detrimental, and unsound" (Bond, 1994, p. 193). Today's recommendations for tax reform are in unison and clear the same way they were more than a hundred years ago, and they call for progressive property tax with more tax being paid by those owning more property, without caps or large-scale exemptions:

An easy solution (...) is to increase property tax amounts in a progressive manner. (...) Changes in the ways that Alabama presently classifies and assesses taxes for certain kinds of property could add a significant amount of money to local revenue coffers. By either altering property tax caps or raising

²⁵ The Brookings Institution, then Institute for Governmental Research, today: <https://www.brookings.edu>

property tax rates altogether, Alabama could significantly increase the amount of money it has to fund education. (Anderson, 2017, p. 307)

The solution to increase taxes progressively and to redesign the property assessment regulation was put forth in Governor Bob Riley's large-scale effort for tax reform in 2003 and famously failed, some say due to very well-funded counter efforts (Hamill, 2007). As a result, the basic regulations put in place by the 1901 Constitution stand to this day, notwithstanding the fact that it effectively disenfranchised the African American constituency not only of their voice in the proceedings by not having any African American representative involved and only four written petitions publicly read. It also led to a significant decrease in registered African American voters, inequitable taxation and tax cap policy that unduly burdened the black community to the point of "final disappearance of the Negro as a political power" (Bond, 1994, p. 193).

Throughout the century, African American leaders emerged who helped create education opportunity and who gained national recognition for making considerable strides toward representation and equality. In his dissertation, Bond dedicates a detailed chapter to Booker T. Washington and J. L. M. Curry as two influential personalities on the education of African Americans in Alabama. They became two names associated with the tremendous efforts put forth by Historically Black Colleges such as Tuskegee Institute, and the efforts of countless individuals and institutions within the state that offered education for African American students who otherwise would not have any access to education. Most intriguingly, however, Washington and Curry lauded each other's work (Bond, 1994, p. 199) over the years, mirroring the conflict of the time not only in their relation but within themselves, too. As elaborated above, the tone of the time was deeply divisive and racist, making Bond's analysis of the structure of both men's arguments for public education for African Americans that more telling.

J. L. M. Curry's position was deeply conflicted by being "the representative of a dominant social class and (...) the advocate of public, tax-supported education" (Bond, 1994, p. 200) because he supported education also for those who did not pay taxes. His argument was to appeal to the white constituency through the figure of paternalism: "The education of the Negro must be undertaken as a part of the white man's burden." (Bond, 194, p. 200) African Americans' education was so turned into a duty so "to prevent a widening of the breach between the races and to bring about their higher advancement." (Bond, 1994, p. 200) As such, he reframed the matter of black education a matter of white self-interest.

Booker T. Washington was equally masterful in using the tone of his time to soothe his white audience's fears against revolt by "invoking the shade of the traditional, paternalistic relationship so dear to the romantic picture of the ante-bellum South." (Bond, 1994, p. 208) He addressed his audiences separately by race, winning over both sides and thereby becoming an "arbiter of matters

affecting the Negro, not only in education, but in social, economic, and political affairs as well." (Bond, 1994, p. 208) Both personalities are assessed to have immeasurable impact as "legends, as social forces, in affecting the course of human history." (Bond, 1994, p. 225) More than just their accomplishments it is their ability of "transcending the spheres of his own and our generation, and giving promise of increasing power through successive generations in an undiminished flow into the future." (Bond, 1994, p. 224)

The impact of great personalities on the sense of a time, the overarching *Zeitgeist* that imposes itself on ways of having societal conversations is to be witnessed time and time again, also today, when on the surface it seems far removed from Bond's days. Personalities such as the recently passed Elijah E. Cummings or the work of legendary John Lewis remind us of a reality that still knows racism, hiding under false pretenses just as much as it hid under paternalism until not long ago. It seems those personalities manage to stay within the truth, use the structures in place to advance their cause and to tilt the board ever so slightly so that the ball could roll into their corner. This gives hope to the spirit of the promise that Bond references, manifested in the example of Peggy Wallace Kennedy who in her autobiography reflects critically on her experience of paternalism:

Now I look back on my childhood with Bernice from a different viewpoint, relating to the culture of paternalism toward African Americans during that time. "They were just like family," we said. Some would say that paternalism is just a softer version of racism, but in truth there is no difference." (Wallace Kennedy, 2019)

A sober look at the family metaphor reveals its cruelty: George Wallace's servants lived with a man who was the poster-segregationist, a deeply racist politician who built his career railing against the black community rhetorically, by instigating violence and by failing to provide policy protection against white supremacist mobs. The dissonance between those truths – calling black servants family and advancing white supremacy politics and the KKK at the same time – must have been an inordinately wide gap to bridge for anyone around him, no less his daughter. Her account of her double-life as the politician's daughter and someone who continuously grew apart from her father's views is an educational read and a contemporary narrative of her public repenting and her joining the efforts of great personalities of her time, for example, walking the bridge in Selma hand in hand with John Lewis.

Cognitive dissonance appears to still be a fundamental part of the place of Alabama, specifically also the African American experience, as I learned from my interviewees, an oxymoron that needs to be negotiated even at university:

So you're African American and you're a doctoral student. You can't go asking- you don't want to be- you pushed into that corner of the angry African American academic who is here to (erm), you know, uncover the conspiracy. So you sort of play along, you, you, you- maybe in the future if you get an opportunity, you may do something to change the way things are. But it sure ain't gonna do you no good right now to go in and start kicking up dust. And these are the people that that have to, you know, accept you into the learning community and make you a doctor, you know, you have to work

with these people. So of course you don't want to offend them. You are not going to go in and start asking those questions about how messed up the situation is. Because they're not going to want you around. They much rather deal with somebody who's going to know their place and accept the tradition and the heritage, you know. (L, p. 9)

The example ties a hypothetical black doctoral student's cognitive dissonance back to the paternalism experience documented above: The question to negotiate at any turn is whether to speak the truth and act accordingly or whether to serve the interest of the powers that may be in order to advance the cause by advancing one's own standing. It would be naïve to present this dissonance as a simple question of character, decided once and solved forever. Quite on the contrary, it may be the lesson to learn from great personalities that the far more challenging and far more fruitful position is to accept that continuously negotiating cognitive dissonance is the work needed in order to ultimately reach a resolve and not resort to inactive cynicism or explosive yet non-permanent revolt.

The frustration of dissonance is no less clear:

You know what it reminds me of? Really? Honestly? And you can tell them I said it. I don't really care. (...) (sighs) (sighs) Our n-words are better than your n-words. So on Saturday, we're gonna settle it. And we're gonna put our n-words out there and you put your n-words out there and we'll see who's best. But now when it comes to opportunities in business, when it comes to opportunities in politics, when it comes to (..) these same people who root for you, going in a ballot- going to cast a ballot for someone who is going to enact legislation and policies that will be favorable to you and your family and your background and your community, where you come from, they will exhibit incredible cognitive dissonance at that moment. But on Saturday afternoon, you're the best thing since pockets and pants and sliced bread. (L, p. 11)

This interviewee references the long history of slave fights, arranged by slaveholders for their amusement, as an opportunity to measure up against one another, bet and win money, or potentially trade slaves (Lussana, 2010). Quentin Tarantino depicted that practice in his award-winning movie *Django Unchained* (2012). In the passage above, this practice is used as a metaphor for football, in fact, as game day on Saturday afternoon is the time when large crowds celebrate largely black football players while at the same time not supporting the black and brown communities by voting for policy improvements, such as the Alabama tax referendum. Other interviewees spoke to this dissonance as well:

The history of education in Alabama, the history of politics in education in Alabama. The, the funding of education in Alabama, (erm) because all- the politics (hammers fist on table) and education (hammers fist on table) and business (hammers fist on table). I mean, all in the politics of all that education is, that kind of at that intersection, you know, where, um- and from a historical context, you know, unfortunately you look, even though we were a progressive little city, we still have this past, this past, um, that that's there and in many ways unfortunately still impacts decisions that are made for education and funding for education. (Da, p. 22)

The dissonance finds expressions in the person hammering their fist on the table in the attempt to put into words how history and politics, education and business intersect: The past weighs down good intentions and good efforts by affecting decision-making, particularly for funding. I asked the person to explicate what was only implied: "Political historical piece- I understand you're alluding to

something, I'm just not sure what to." The answer is telling, not only for referencing segregation and the lingering distrust in education but mostly for the second half of the statement that speaks about the conflicted status quo in a way that mirrors that conflict in the language itself:

So I mean just there's, I mean you've got everything from um, where we've come from in a short period of time in history with separate schools and even in this school used to be, this building was part of a separate education system. And so all- they're com- I mean, what would you get in the community context is just, even though I believe this, this committee particularly is really working to trust education and trust teachers there's still an automatic distrust for some. Um, so it's hard to get real strong consensus on how do we support education at a high level, um, because you got such differing positions that come to that, that decision table. And I believe it plays out in politics with local and state level. And then it plays out into the decision making policy for education, you know, and then even you look at- if you get real deep into Alabama, you got this new accountability act if you read up on it. (Da, p. 22)

There is a clear sense of urgency in all interviewees' statements regarding the reach of history and its connection to education policy-making. Intentionally created pockets of poverty, for example, are a result of historical, purposeful decision-making that intended the generational poverty (L, p. 1) that characterizes Alabama to this day:

I mean, we're nationally ranked, we're very low on the education scale. So what's really interesting about that though, as you look at our state, and there are certain pockets that actually outperform most other areas in the country, but they were just (inaudible) pockets that struggle. The equity in our state is just so wide. (B, p. 6)

What was discerned in the interviews and presented analytically and hence, separately in this dissertation narrative are matters that are immediately intertwined in the empirical world, making it almost impossible to, for example, separate disparities from their historical roots and their manifestations as inequitable funding practices and the levels of poverty associated with the state of Alabama, notwithstanding its equally generational and equally intentional pockets of wealth and privilege.

Funding and poverty

I ended every interview on the same question: Is there anything else I need to know that we have not discussed yet? Without exception, all interviewees' answers come down to poverty and funding issues:

Money is the biggest issue though. Without money- (...) Even if I think if you check out- are you interviewing (*person*) from (*another school*)? And now the, even if you look at even, um, two schools within this county, um, you would see their facilities was built for white kids and our facility were built for black kids and we have, you can tell the difference in our buildings and their buildings, but you know, that was years ago, but I'm just mentioning that because our kids, even though the difference. (...) quality, quality, we have constant issues with rest rooms because the plumbing wasn't done correctly. Um, some of the classrooms, just, just, there's a, there's a difference even though there are no white kids at, at, um, Marion and that school was built for- even when you go into the principal's office, you'll be able to see the difference. Yeah. It's a difference. And you can tell that (erm) we're separate, but it wasn't, it equal. Yeah. And were the same in the same district. We're schools next door. (...) Yes, 20 miles away (F, p. 27)

After that conversation, we drove to the school referenced and the difference was just stunning: Throughout the town there were signs leading toward the school. Once there, we parked in a large, well-maintained parking lot framed by trees. The school itself had plaques and signs and decorations that identified the school as such. They were truly separate, not in the least equal settings. The interviewee's reference to the historical doctrine of separate but equal (*Plessy v Ferguson* 1896) is in this case not as historical as it may seem; as late as the 1980s, Alabama schools were built inequitably, with greatly differing financial resources and also very different levels of care, as the interviewer exemplifies. It shows how wide differences in Alabama are not a story of the past, but the present between those who have and can, and those who do not. It seems that generational poverty and generational wealth combined into generational privilege is able to continue its momentum that keeps the dynamics of disparities going, from student loans down to the very buildings where children experience schooling. Disparities in the availability of nearly every aspect of schooling shines through in the interviewees' comments:

Um, I, I think, I think the big thing, you probably figured this out now, there's the haves and have nots. It really, there really is. Um, and that's, that's one of the big reasons why I'm here and this job is that a, I wasn't very large schools in Louisiana all my career. Came back and became a principal, very small rural school, okay, low income poverty area. Um, great run, great people. After five years I told my wife, I came home one night, I said, yeah, I think, I think we've done all we can do. Because we're not getting, we're not getting any more funding. (H, p. 17)

I enjoyed this particular conversation for its educational candor and the person's uncompromising pointedness in connecting the dots: Disparities and the structure of schooling are intertwined on a multitude of levels, no less for educators who by any standard are intrinsically motivated, driven professionals who adhere to the standards of their profession. By the same token, Alabama conditions appear to inhibit educators:

So the other part is teachers and people and we have some of our absolute best teachers. They love education, love our school system, (...) Pay (hammers fist on table), benefits (hammers fist on table), and working conditions. It's not that they don't value education, it's not that they don't, but it's like, do you really want this- you know, they want better for their own child than what they say the profession becoming and the demands on it. (D, p. 16)

This passage is followed by an explanation of the two-tier retirement system in Alabama that affects all government employees. The interviewee reports being tier-one so after 25 years of work, they can retire: "the benefits were great, good insurance, good retirement plan" (D, p. 16). Sick days would accumulate to another year of retirement for 180 non-taken sick days. In stark opposition to this model, a tier-two employee may retire but they are not eligible to draw on their retirement until they are at least 60 years of age:

So that's what teachers are seeing, a new tier one employees as they're coming up, you know, and of course we're trying to educate and it's going to be more important for the millennial- that group to look at a retirement plans and you know, 401k and all those kinds of things. So, but working conditions (hammers fist on table) and benefit change (hammers fist on table) and that's just not

education. We're here and there- Like I said, I just had the uh, the (*city's*) HR director, he just retired after 10 years. He's working with another company now. They were struggling with the same thing. Public Safety. They struggled with the same (hammers fist on table) thing. So that retire- and all that has to go back to funding in Alabama. That's general fund budget woes. (D, p. 18)

Funding education is an issue for all parties involved, no less for students who want to find a way to access higher education after high school. Student loans and scholarships are one path toward college. Coming from poverty and poverty-stricken schools often means not having the grades needed to qualify so more often than not, students seek opportunity through athletics:

I mean, I think the numbers are there in the socioeconomics and the census, those who have are doing wonderful and those who have not are like hamsters on a wheel that are running to chase- and then know they'll throw this athletic thing out there and say, well, you know, if this kid comes to school, he works hard and he distinguished himself as a strong athlete then- Come on, statistically- Why do you throw that out there to poor people and say, hey, he can be a great ballplayer. You probably- anybody could be a good lawyer. Anybody can be a good doctor, you could be an engineer, but you have to be genetically gifted for sports to beat your way out of poverty. And I wish they would really just take it off the table. Yeah. (L, p. 15)

When I first encountered this figure of criticism about athletic scholarship, I felt conflicted because it seemed that opportunity for students to distinguish and qualify themselves could hardly be something to be opposed. What made me critically distant was learning how the system sometimes reverses the initial sequence: Instead of obtaining a quality education and being involved in athletics for higher education on the side, the quality of athletics is put first and the academic education follows second, and that continues in college athletics:

No, it's not working, but we don't want, we want to- But we're not going to do anything in college athletics, I think to not make money. I mean, that is obviously the name of the game with these TV shows like- we have sold out to contracts and large corporations sponsoring these ball games and so we sold out to the money aspect of it and anything that we do that's gonna, you know, and if we, if we start (erm) (..) admitting that we're failing students athletes, like, we're failing their well-being, I guess, then if we admit that then we have to do something about it and in order to do something about it, we had to spend the money, you know, that we have- because at the end of the day, if you want to do something about student athletes' well-being, then you don't make a basketball team spend two weeks on the road traveling to play and miss two weeks of class, you know, you don't do that. That's not good for their well-being. If we recognize and admit that that's a problem. Then we have to change that over when we change that we don't make money and we're not going to do that. (W, p. 11)

Even without the issue of athletics, funding education and specifically higher education remains a problem: Not only are students saddled with debt for decades, but college education has become a commodity and is traded as such long before it is about the academics:

What they've done (..) here is assigned a value to a school based on the name of the school, like the University of Alabama is a pretty good school. Auburn is a pretty good school. Then you have maybe second tier of universities like University of North Alabama. They're smaller schools. You got the University of Montevallo, ok. They have branded these schools and sold them to the consumer as an experience, not just in education but an experience. Come be a part of a winning tradition, okay. Along with that winning tradition comes a huge price tag and that huge price tag pays for, you know, (erm) (..) I'm not going to say athletic programs (laughs), but let's say it pays for a (..) student recreational facility or a well-manicured lawns and greens. These ancillary benefits to help influence you to come to that school. But anybody with any sense knows the quality of the education that you

get at a university largely depends on you (hammers fist on table), and what (hammers fist on table) you (hammers fist on table) take (hammers fist on table) out (hammers fist on table) of it and what (hammers fist on table) you (hammers fist on table) get (hammers fist on table) out (hammers fist on table) of it. So- (..) education is very expensive as a result and I don't think that it is a question of intellectual ability. (L, p. 8)

As harshly as the person criticizes the system, they also acknowledge that they plan to go back for another graduate degree at their alma mater, the University of Alabama. This first-hand experience account exemplifies dissonance: While being historically informed and openly critical, there is an equally sharp realization of the fact that this is how conditions present themselves at this time and will likely be the ones in place and at work for some time. Still, there is no giving in when it comes to assessing the effect of that situation:

You take an 18-year-old, right? And you tell this 18 year old, I need you to mortgage the next 25, 30 years of your future based on a speculation that you're going to come to this institution and be successful. And when you leave this institution, we're going to empower (hammers fist on table) you (hammers fist on table) to go out (hammers fist on table) and earn (hammers fist on table) a living and you'll (hammers fist on table) be (hammers fist on table) able (hammers fist on table) to pay this- they call them student loans, but really you're mortgaging your future. (...) Totally predatory. (L, p. 8)

The mortgaged future is a reality for generations of American college students in debt. Federal students loans account for 93% of education debt, followed by 24% credit card debt, 7% home equity debt and 12% other forms of outstanding balances for education. As of 2018, the average amount owed was between \$20,000 and \$25,000 with debtors paying between \$200 and \$300 a month. Three in ten debtors currently defer their debt by acquiring another degree. Two in ten individuals with education debt are behind in their payments, showing grand disparities in the age group below 30 where first generation and non-white students owe more than twice as much as their counterparts. (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2019) These insights solidify the claim that far-reaching education decisions are made early in life, based on unreliable parameters:

But a lot, a lot of students go right into it and they're seduced (emphasis) by the winning Alabama-University of Alabama football team, come be a part of the tradition. If you're not playing football, you weren't recruited and you're not going free. How are you a part of the tradition? You watch a contest for four hours on a weekend that you have no power to influence the outcome and you're enhanced by that? That's really a good reason for you to come to this school? Wow. That's how you're making your decisions? But there's so much wealth involved, there's so much business involved, there's (erm) so much tradition, but I guess African Americans tradition with that institution started- what in the late sixties and when Bear Bryant decided that African Americans could- were good enough to play on his sports team, you know, is that really what we want to do? (erm) To the people, you know, who are our future leaders? Is that the system that we want to put them through? (L, p. 14)

It is nearly impossible to challenge this reasoning on facts, yet that is precisely the point: It is not reasonable consideration and intellectual assessment that any of the funding issues are addressed with because if that were the case, one would expect more collective effort toward change. The

impression forms that the system as it is yields enough positives to keep its structures in place. As far as poverty and funding are concerned, these issues are by no means limited to Alabama:

For me the big picture is socioeconomic class and I just felt like poverty is (...) such an issue in this country and it is the number one factor in how we educate. You know if you have money will come from an affluent area, you're automatically going to be educated better than someone who goes- and then the cycle that that creates, the unfairness of that and that's- I've seen that, that aspect probably more in my experience I mean, that's been the underlying issue I think (..) (laughs) everywhere, you know, everywhere I go and everywhere, everywhere I see. (...) I traveled now all over the United States and I see it everywhere I go, you know, I see the same issue everywhere I go (erm) and in other states it may not be a race issue because there are other states that aren't as diverse, but it's still a socioeconomic class issue. (W, p. 35)

Back on the education administration level, the structure of unequal funding appears in the interviews as well. Alabama's premier pre-K programs that are recognized nationally, for example, are not funded by the state but hinge on local dollars or grants even though the children who had been through the program were at 86% to 88% reading ability by the third grade – far beyond what their peers are able to do without the program (D, p. 3). The cost for social workers is also not covered by the state but by the city itself (D, p. 2). Another principal told me that they are able to maintain the 17-19 student classroom size and the large number of extra-curricular offers only because the school district finds extra monies for the school outside of the mill and sales tax budgets.

Secret backpacking and having students who qualify as being homeless are very unexpected ways of mitigating poverty. Local church work in many places includes coming to school on a Friday and filling a gym full of students' backpacks with food. (D, p. 2) This example is given from an urban context but it is also clear that "urban poverty is different than rural poverty" (L, p. 4):

We don't have kids who were living on the street, but we have kids who are living doubled up in homes or tripled up in homes. Three families in one household or somebody who's living with her grandmother or somebody living with a cousin or you know. (F, p. 22)

This school principal leads a school where over 80% of students qualify as homeless due to doubling-up in a home with a grandparent or a relative. In fact, the principal hosts a cousin and therefore speaks from different perspectives in the matter. (F, p. 22) They reported that the high homeless rate actually functions very much to the benefit of the school because federal funding is much higher and allows the principal to dedicate resources to having more school buses that now manage to pick up all children from sometimes fairly remote areas. Before that, it was hard to advertise extra-curriculars because the school could not transport students effectively and neither could their parents:

(Afternoon extra curriculars are) optional and the bus actually picks them up. So, you know, there's not an issue with transportation. I know the first year that we consolidate it and did it, there was no transportation provided and the numbers were really low, but once a week because their areas so rural and the kids can't walk here and some of the kids who live far away. (F, p. 11)

Monies are also invested into providing school supplies and clothes for homeless students. Some parents reject this kind of support and end up giving back what the school hands out to the students: "And we've had parents that who, who are offended by that though, and give the clothes back. I don't need you to buy anything for my child, but once the child is- we have to put them in as homeless or living in their own household." (F, p. 23)

There is a consensus among the interviewees that "poverty is a huge part (and) there's still lots of work there" (D, p. 16) and part of the issue is that the ways in which poverty shows are manifold and oftentimes unexpected. An academic counselor I spoke with educated me on the various experiences of poverty that exist and that go unnoticed:

And you take all those kids that come from that area and put them in a school that is- the buildings aren't up to par, the teachers aren't- you know. Everything is- How do they even dream? I mean, when you've never been out of an inner.- when you've never seen anything other than that, how do you even know what to hope for? And that's what I would see. I would see so many kids that had never- they didn't know the opportunities that were out there for them to go get because they had never seen opportunity. Everything around him was hopeless, you know, because they lived in these areas of poverty- or of poverty and crime, you know, where they were literally scared to walk to the bus stop because they could get shot. (W, p. 7)

By this person's account, poverty affects not only the school facilities and infrastructure but to no small degree limits students' aspirations and the ability to identify opportunities as such. The environment they function in is often times significantly different from what schooling expects from students and that gap needs filling:

I mean we had a player one time that kept failing the drug test. And it was like, you know, you're sitting there and talking to them but you know (laughs) we have a drug policy, you know, and you can't fail (laughs) you know, I mean like you're going to get kicked out of school, you know. But the kid had grown up smoking pot in the living room with his father, like, you know, how do you take someone who is 18 and that the only thing he knows. That is the only stress reliever that he knows and now at 18 you're going to tell him like, you can't do that anymore and we're not going to tell you or help you figure out another way. Like, we're not going to (.) show you, I mean, that there's other solutions for you to relieve stress. Just don't do that and and and figure it out. Well I mean, it's impossible. It's impossible. (W, p. 8)

Offering support and tangible alternatives to engrained behaviors is one of the areas of work that school and college counselors cover because parents may not be aware or may also not have had the experience needed to relate their children's needs in that regard. One of the most telling anecdotes that exemplify this gap is the first day at college and the syllabus:

I think they're so intimidated by what just happened to them in the first five minutes of the first class, that they don't look at it again. And I would tell them, I'll be like: hey guys, you're going to walk in. This is what it's gonna feel like, this is what it's gonna look like. You're gonna get a packet of paper called the syllabus. Don't read it. (laughs) like (laughs) Don't look at it. The only thing you need to know, the teacher's name, there should be contact information for the teachers, like I would tell them, you know, the book you need is in there but you don't even need to- you can go to the bookstore and hand them your schedule and they're going to be able to pull your- so I would tell them exactly like there's going to be four things in that big, big ass document that (laughs) you need to know. The rest of it, don't worry about that because you're going to freak yourself out. (W, p. 34)

The point here is to make tangible how far removed these lifeworlds are and that students are not able by themselves to mitigate that gap without someone who knows them and their structures and can, therefore, connect these experiences for them. This responsibility is rarely taken up institutionally even though it would be desperately needed:

To me, you have to assume that they don't know what they don't know. And you have to assume that they don't know. I mean, and then- you recruited them, you went into their house, you saw where they come from. So so figure that out. Make a list. So these are the guys that probably aren't gonna have a clue when they get here what to do. And then have them in some- have someone sit down with them and be the bank for them, something, but you can't expect them- (...) They don't know, and half of them have parents that have ever- you know, they don't know either, they never had a dollar either (laughs) you know. And these kids are making these schools millions of dollars. (W, p. 40)

The bottom line in this person's narrative is that students are being sent the message that they themselves did wrong because everyone else knew and they did not: "I've seen this in the students, it's just this continuation of the message of you did it wrong, you didn't do like everybody else did, everybody else knew." (W, p. 34) The problematic conclusion is that individuals are made liable for what is a system's responsibility: "Blame it on the kid, not the system – that is our explanation." (W, p. 9)

The lack of interest and care for how student poverty actually looks is exemplified most memorably in this story:

I had a quarterback in the SCC, so a quarterback at the highest level of college play. (...) They promised him when they recruited him as they would not make him live in a dorm. That they would let him live in an apartment because that's what these kids want to do. They want their freedom. (...) So he's living in an apartment a couple miles away from campus and he doesn't have a car. (...) So now he has to walk to class every day. Well, you can imagine he's not going to go when it's cold. When it's raining, when his leg hurts from getting hit yesterday in practice. (W, p. 36)

As a result of not living on campus, students receive monthly checks as reimbursements for the cost of mandatory campus meal plans and living costs. The intention is for students to cover their living expenses independently. However, U.S. banks only cash checks for their own customers. Without a U.S. bank account, a check cannot be cashed. That issue creates a sequence of problems in the case of this quarterback:

So this kid was getting like \$1,700 a month. In a check, ok. He didn't have a driver's license. So you have no identification. He didn't have a bank account, he had never had a checking account or bank account. He can't get one without a driver's license (laughs) because you have to prove who you are to open up a checking account. So he would get these checks and there was one bank in town that would be cash scholarships checks of athletes and just hand him the cash, so he would get his check and he would go to this bank and he would go to this bank and he would crush it and be carrying around \$1,700 of cash in his pocket. Well, here's a kid who was literally homeless and had no- had never had a dollar, so he had no clue what to do with 1700 of them. (W, p. 37)

When my interview partner arrived upon the student's call, it was clear that no utilities had been paid for months, leading to multiple eviction notices that had been slid under the door. The student had no idea of what that meant. The money had been spent and the player's food intake was not only

low but unhealthy, making him susceptible to injury and less effective in training. The counselor then helped and put measures in place that solved the problems, yet this example represents a larger, more systemic issue:

If this is a quarterback, the quarterback, the most important person on this team at the highest level of play, the best conference in the country, that highest level of college play that there is: What in the world is happening to everyone else. And the coaches had no clue. All the resources and all the support that they had supposedly to support these football players, no one had a clue that any of this was going on. (W, p. 39)

It is temptingly easy to default to individual responsibility and assign blame to those who have no realistic option of mitigating their circumstances. Blaming people for their circumstance is not only wrong on the most basic human level, but it also does not solve the issue at hand: Poverty is not being noticed in the ways it exists and it is not being mitigated by those who could, resulting in desperate narratives of people with potential to do well if given the needed support.

The interviewees were clear about the issues and their grievances being structural, not personal, and a reflection of the particularities of a place rather than the fault of individuals or individual actions. Their attitude impressed me throughout: They articulated problems clearly and opinionatedly while being appreciative and truthful about the good that exists in parallel. All of them were outspoken about disparities and willing to discuss them in critical examination of their own work, praising the people around them and describing others in their narratives with respect:

And- (...) and that individual may be a really great guy and he may mean no malice to anyone, but he's in a situation, you know, that's- it's like Nick Saban and I know in the south everything's a football reference, but if you've got all the talent and you got all the money and he got the best coaches, you can't help but be successful, but can (hammers fist on table) you (hammers fist on table) come (hammers fist on table) where I work and get (hammers fist on table) those (hammers fist on table) same results? No, you don't have the same kids. You don't have the same parents. (L, p. 3)

There is anger and frustration, and clear expression of both, but not at the expense of collegiality. In fact, unbeknownst to them, both interviewees appear to agree on the facts:

I will say though, and what's really difficult, what I'm, what I am constantly thinking (erm) being thankful for my blessings for is that I'm in this school district and I'm not in (inaudible) schools, or Claiborne county. (...) I mean, there are so many things that I'm not having to deal with. You know, I don't deal with a lot of poverty in our school. I don't deal with the, the basic needs, you know Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Our kids for the most part- Now we have a few are there, but for the most part they were well taken care of. So there's a whole element of school and taking care of people that I don't have to worry with, which is wonderful for us. (erm) So I feel for those principals who have those tasks designed for and they have to worry about those other things. (B, p. 28)

There is no confusion about the state of affairs in Alabama schooling when the same person acknowledges that "they're never going to be able to match the equity of what we have here (because) there's no way that you can spread that wealth out to have them be as successful as we are (erm) in all parts of it." (B, p. 3) On the basis of the material, I do not think anyone I spoke to would contest this statement. Collegiality appears when interviewees reference each other:

I feel for those principals who have those tasks designed for and they have to worry about those other things. (B, p. 28).

I don't begrudge them a dime. (laughs). They need it. (D, p. 3)

I think there's a lot of box checkers, you know, there's a lot of academic counselors that- and I don't think it's their fault. I think they're just trying to get through their day. (laughs) They're overwhelmed, they're stressed out, they're not making any money. They're young, they weren't trained properly. (...) I mean if you had a quarterback at Alabama coming up a credit short of eligibility, can you imagine? That person would get death threats. (W, p. 11)

Next to collegiality is an overwhelming amount of praise from the interviewees for the people they work with and the effort that educators and other professionals invest into schooling. Summarizing the dissonances of Alabama schooling is so very difficult because of the complexity and the interdependency of so many aspects; yet it is precisely that complexity which makes the case an interesting and exemplary case, as this person characterizes pointedly:

It is such an interesting case study and again, being someone who has never lived anywhere but Alabama, I think Alabama is a wonderful place to live. It's a, it's a, it's a jewel (erm) and it's a beautiful place to live, but we're, we're so behind, and as a state and probably what progressive education should look like (...) the inequity in this state is so bad (...) That inequity exists in that short air- That just shouldn't- It shouldn't be that way. And unfortunately in Alabama we haven't figured out how to, how to- you know, the rising tide raises all ships. We haven't figured out how to do that yet, but we have these pockets of great people who are really getting it and getting along and it's more than just the educational value. It's the, the, (erm) the infrastructure, the, the tax base, you know. (...) all of that is just so inequitable in this state and it, and that variance causes us to not get it right. (B, p. 46)

This passage exemplifies yet again that there is no lack of clarity about the disparities as well as the seemingly unending investments that the profession makes to further and better Alabama schooling. It is no easy task, as the following will show, yet there is a strong and present sense of confidence in their professional practice that is articulated distinctly and proudly.

What they do

The briefest summary of all interviewees' descriptions of their lifeworlds is "wearing different hats, ten on a given day" (B, p. 26):

I'm the CEO of this organization (erm), the HR director. I'm the financial advisor. You know, I manage the books- well, I don't manage, I have someone to manage the books, but I'm responsible for them and I sign checks and P.O.s and I do that every day. (...) I'm our personnel director, but I'm also the counselor for the adults in the building. I'm the disciplinarian (erm), you know, I'm the manager- I am the communications director (erm) because I have to communicate all the good things and the bad things that are going on at school. Um, and then, you know, just generally the fire-putter-outer when people throw their hands up and don't know what to do, then they come to me and I have to figure out what that is and that's every 15 to 30 minutes we're doing something different and then you lay on top of all of that the background noise of state mandated accountability and reporting, which I have to do all of that. (...) It's not hard, but it takes time. So we have to do all of those things and just all of those pieces put together is the general day. So that's the normal. (B, p. 26)

The account details the broad variety of the principal's obligations together with the stressor of tasks changing extremely frequently over the course of any given day. Notice how policy reporting duties are characterized as not challenging yet time-consuming in an already fast-paced environment. That is what another principal describes the "simple little stuff" (F, p. 9) that manifests slightly differently in their school:

Mostly dealing with little simple stuff, like (erm) this morning it was a little bit different because I had to deal with some, some teacher issues, teachers having issues, but usually it varies. (erm) Looking at data, going inside the classroom, trying to see, making sure the standards are being taught, making sure the students are getting what they need, check in with the teachers to see what they need. (erm) Handling discipline. I do handle, although we have two- I have two assistants. (F, p. 9)

They add that sharing the responsibility with the assistant principals is a great relief and frees up valuable time; in addition, they are able to go over to the other building every once in a while to see the students in grades one to twelve: "It's chaotic over here, but the little kids do a lot of hugging over there and when you-(laughs) When you want to feel good, you go across the street (laughs)" (F, p. 10). In a different school, the structure is yet larger and the principal oversees the work of six assistant principals but remembering a time when that was different and more hectic than it is now:

So I was, uh, I was a k-12 principal (at one) point, which was crazy. I've been got kindergarten in one minute, senior the next minute and have 800 kids. So that was, that was probably an education in my toughest job. Uh, this one's tough because of just the size, the enormity of the school, you know, we're right at 3000 kids. (H, p. 2)

A principalship goes far beyond organizing and leading school life; it is a public position and while principals are not elected officials, they lead no less public lives both during their time of work as well as outside of it: "It is very public and I do represent on behalf of our communities, our families and our school district so, and it's not too bad. It's a lot better than I thought it would be." (B, p. 44) They explain how they adapted to their visibility by learning how to behave differently in public than they did before, for example at their children's baseball games and in restaurants, when shopping for groceries or at public events such as football games. As such, this principalship reaches far beyond schooling, and that includes not only meeting the employers' expectation "that I'm pretty much on call 24/7" (B, p. 28), but it also includes an average of two evening commitments per week and weekends if the workload requires it (B, p. 29). As a humorous anecdote, the principal shared that they "had to change (their) mannerisms" (B, p. 43) because taking their family out for dinner was no longer possible without multiple long-winded interruptions. As a result, they dine at restaurants that are two communities further away so to enjoy some privacy and family quality time.

Community structure and its high expectation were at the core of interviewees' descriptions about what it is that they do:

(...) and because of the size of expectations of the community and everything else, there's no way with all of our programs and everything's going on here that I can micromanage. (H, p. 2)

We have a very well-educated community here and they want to know. And so we have to be accountable for that to our community because they're going to ask, well, why is *(the community)* down here when we expect you to be up here? No matter what the measure is, people in *(the community)* expect us to be in the top three. (B, p. 15)

Both passages stress that involving the community in schooling means having to find the time to address also uninvited or inconvenient contributions and questions. Being able to rely on the community when needed is the other side of that coin. When called upon, communities tend to be very quick and effective in helping to address issues of funding, for example: The Rotary Club found \$100,000 for literacy when the education leadership made a convincing case for it (Da, p. 4). There is an overarching sense that schools and schooling serves the community members, first and foremost through taking professional responsibility for what happens in school and involving partners in creating the conditions for schools to thrive:

Um, the thing I will say about our- we have a very, very blessed community in terms of our political leaders work well together. Our Chamber works well together. Uh, the city schools and the county schools. We see ourselves as partners. These are all our kids." (D, p. 16)

Interviewees spoke to their immediate interwovenness with the community, next to their balancing act of juggling the ten or more hats. One strong side effect of this structure is that school leadership appears to be focused on matters outside the classroom.

Principals seem to view their role to be that of education managers who are first and foremost concerned with leadership questions, so that they can be proactive and impactful on educational outcomes (Da, p. 12). What is more, the job of the principal has experienced a lot of change in the past decades, leading to high turnover rates in the field. One interviewee was a contract principal on a continuously renewable three-year contract, a structure they deliberately chose so they "can renegotiate my contract" (H, p. 16). They are the exception to the rule as most incoming principals receive single year contracts that may be renewed and subsequently extended to three-year contracts or longer ones (H, p. 17). This contract length is indicative: For the last 20 years, fluctuation in principals has increased and resulted in the end of the former system where leaders would emerge from the school community and hold a principalship for a decade or longer: "You would see a lot of longevity in the position." (B, p. 22) Since 1971, however, that school had had eight principals in total, with the last five individuals having been turned over in the past eight years:

I was the fourth principal in four years, and then the school wants a better fit and what that person that's going to identify better with where they are and where they're going. And so they are turning over people in that. And I think that (erm) it's also, this is not, this is not an easy job. I mean it's, you know, I guess everybody (inaudible) hard depending on your, where do you come into it. But what we're also seeing is that the demands of the job itself are to a point where people aren't staying in it as long. So, you know, the lifespan of a principal is just shorting because of the stress and anxiety and issues that come with it. (...) you take on so much of the pressure from the community and it's, it becomes so much not about education, teaching and learning, which is why you got into it. And then people really get tired of that and they want to either revert back to more of an instructional role because that's what you are in this profession for. Or to move into a central office type of a leadership administration where you can more control your environment and your factors because in

this role was just really a, it's a minute to minute, day to day, put out fires and you know, deal with people and move up, move the ship forward ever so slowly. (B, p. 22)

This passage testifies to the relevance of the community context of a place: A better fit means more identification with the respective context and the goals of that specific school and community. Therefore it is not only the job of a principal but the job of schooling on a whole that is tied closely to the community's specific characteristics. The example mirrors its wealthy and resource-rich environment that commands the resources necessary to find a choice candidate, and that has candidates to choose from as well. That comes at a price for both parties involved: The interviewee names the pressures and demands of their job clearly yet ambivalently: "So I don't let that stress me, but it's still a stressor." (B, p. 26) There is stress and anxiety from community pressure (B, p. 22), the size of the expectations of the community (H, p. 3), the enormity of it all is where the pressure is (B, p. 27), in both cases again characterized by the specifics of an environment that is

a very (erm) participatory community and so because we are affluent, people will do donate money. They give money, they give time and volunteerism, but in turn they expect a voice, a seat at the table and opinion about everything that you do, whether they understand education or not. (...) Everybody wants it now or they wanted it five minutes ago (...) They don't want to know what I think they want me to say what they want to hear. (B, p. 26)

These pressures show their effects also in administration in the context of a less affluent community that has been struggling with both a lack of teachers as well as a lack of qualified, well-educated principals that are prepared for the continuous storm that a principalship is:

when you have a stop in the flow of teachers, there's a secondary stopping the flow of principals. Right. So we, we don't, we don't see the number of people going into principalship either. (...) We see people getting into the principalship before they really need to. They don't get that experience set is necessary that allows them to at least better understand the job. So you know, when you jumped into that principal chair, all the things you heard these principals saying that you know about being a principal are true, the job is fast, furious, and in many ways like it's hard to even be successful as a principal because it's so much being thrown at you. But when you put somebody in there who hasn't had the experience set, it's double, it's tripled that, you know, the pressure. Terrible. (Da, p. 14)

While the description parallels the previous interviewee's experience of the pressures on the job, the experience that principals enter their job unprepared seems counterintuitive to the high turnover rates. Yet the difference lies in the context: Communities that provide schooling in difficult conditions expectedly have a more difficult time to recruit qualified and prepared principals that command both experience and expertise:

So now when we have open positions, we don't see the number of folks applying to be a position to be a principal even, you know. So we, we changed that here we say now all of our assistant principals are about 18 of 20. What we haven't done this in past, but last few years we've said if you're an assistant principal, you've got to be on the path to being a principal here. And if not, we need you to get out (...) because gone are the days when you post a position and have, you know, 50 people apply (...) Now we're down to like, man, I just hope one surfaces, you know, and so we don't have people going into the principalship- but you look at teachers, look at their principal going, why would I want to go do that? Why would I want to get beat up like that? Or why would I want to expose myself to that kind of pressure and stress? (Da, p. 14)

Wealthy communities enjoy the needed resources to negotiate principal contracts and to sustain a well-sourced working environment that draws applicants, specifically those seeking to make a change for themselves, relocating to a place where they have the opportunity to affect students and their trajectories more effectively, as principal H described before.

I was repeatedly surprised by the interviewees' openness and confidence with which they expressed their criticism and their views to me with immediacy and urgency. It struck me as unexpected that individuals who clearly operate under a significant amount of pressure would not be more worried about their wording or about the impression of being critical of policy, for example. In fact, they made a point of putting on record that they do not to work in fear of things (e.g. B, p. 31), some more personally than others:

But you know, embedded in my character's a certain rebel nostalgia and I just can't in good conscience, whatever I have to give up, you know, in order to sort of be honest and forthright. (L, p. 10)

Instead, they express a high level of confidence in their professional practice. I decided to share this impression in one interview situation and to ask directly about why I could not observe interviewees being fearful. Confidence in professionalism was the first half of the answer:

I'm very confident that I'm doing a really good job. I think that I'm good at my job. (erm) I think that we are good as a school and I say we, I say that all the time. I'm, I want it to be around people who are we people, not I people. It's not my school, it's our school. And so I could not do what I do without all of these other people. (...) We do a good job, we have great students to work with and we have a very supportive community. And so my confidence comes from the fact that I know year in, year out even by looking at data that we're going to fall consistently where we need to for- into the foreseeable future (erm) and probably not have to do a whole lot of extra work. Now, even saying that we don't look at it that way, we look at it- we always want to continue to do better. (...) So we don't work in fear of things. Um, we try not to work in fear of our litigious society and that's a hard part for teachers because teachers constantly have this thought of what if I don't do it right away, then I can get sued- If I have a special needs student and I don't manage them well then. But you know, at the end of the day, if you're doing the right thing for somebody and you're really trying to educate, then I mean, I think we're going to be okay (...) So it's my professional view. (B, p. 31)

Note how the person does not exhibit surprise about my observation but instead expresses excitement about being able to talk about these matters, quickly followed by elaborating on the relevance of their team, the students and the community being the constituents of that school. There is an outright rejection of pressure through threats – "litigious society" – by way of professional practice and matching data results. The personal half of the answer is surprising yet again:

My personal view is with all the accountability that we have in place and all of the standards that we have to meet, I have- personally, and I, maybe it's just me, I have really not seen where it has ever come to fruition that someone has negatively been impacted for not achieving those things. Does that make sense? Like it's on paper. It's a lot of talk and when we say all this stuff, but I mean other than public execution by, you know, by what people think- people aren't losing their jobs, we're not losing funding. Schools still has to happen. We're at the end- and I tell people this all the time, strip it all down. At the end of the day in, in the U.S. society at least I would say would probably be true outside of this: school is a societal component it cannot not be having parents have to work. Students need to be somewhere they need to be watched. So at the very base we are childcare for parents while they're, while they're working. So society can't not have us. We're public education, so we're

funded by the state through state dollars. (erm) there is no measure that we can fall short of that. (...) Now they can make it painful and make it hurt a little bit and make it more difficult for us. (...) That's why there's no, there's not really a whole lot of fear out of me and I'm confident that we're going, we're getting it right. (...) But, you know, we- I don't have a lot to be fearful of, I guess in that sense. (B, p. 31)

Not only was fear as a motivator rejected, but also the accountability measures on a whole were discarded as non-substantial to what goes on, being "fluff on paper" (G, p. 2) as another interviewee pointedly called it. Another principal characterized schooling as being about finding a place for each student in the school community:

And here I think, I think we're a, and I truly believe we're, we're successful here with overwhelming majority of kids is because of the variety of programs, activities that I can offer. Does that make sense? And I think that's really important on a campus that has 3000 kids and diverse population and extreme diversity in levels of kids academically. So I preach to my, my folks all the time, my staff that we, we have got to find something to have a, a kid um, whenever the kid's niche find something to make them part of a smaller community within a very large school community, if that makes sense. (H, p. 17)

The professional values expressed in all conversations are those of community and education that is based in decision-making for the benefit of the individual student: "This is where we start every conversation that we try to have as professionals in this building: we make decisions based on what's best for kids (...) because that's our ultimate goal, is what we're here for." (B, p. 27) One particular anecdote condenses all of the interviewees' confidence in their professional practice in the recounted moment of when an academic counselor changed their focus from monitoring data toward being there for the students:

And there was just a day, a moment where it clicked with me (..) where- and it was as simple as a teacher coming in my office and saying- we were talking about a student and she said: he's so handsome. And in that moment I realized I had no idea if he was handsome or not because I had not even seen the kid (...) I was so involved in his eligibility that I hadn't even looked up to notice like that he was a human being (..) and it was literally in that moment that I was like, (..) what am I doing? Like I've lost- I've lost who I am in this game of, like, eligibility and everything changed for me (erm) and it was in that moment when I started listening to their stories. (W, p. 5)

The effect of realizing that people get lost behind the documenting and reporting of data points changed this perspective onto the individual while making the administrative work a necessary task that no longer reigns over what is important. They emphasize yet again:

(F)rom that moment on it all just became- I just stopped worrying about the data. I mean, I still had to monitor and I still had to keep up and I still had to know what I was talking about when I walked into the meeting about eligibility, but as far as the players were concerned, if it came about their stories and where they came from- and then- and that's- in hearing their stories. (W, p. 5)

I find the openness in sharing these deeply personal experiences moving, and it just so happened that another interviewee brought up person W in their own account and unwittingly provided yet more credit to them:

(the person) is absolutely correct. I've had multiple conversations with *(the person)*. *(the person)* visited us on campus and I'm very familiar with that program and *(the person)* is a rock star. *(the person)* gets it. (H, p. 12)

Interviewees conveyed their insights with urgency and immediacy both with regard to their practice as well as to my work. Not one of the interviewees' attitudes was nonchalant or cynical, disinterested or formalistic in our conversations at any point in time. The interview structure would have allowed for them to easily cut our time in half and end the interview whenever they felt appropriate. Instead, they invested close to two hours of their valuable time and consistently exhibited confidence in their practice carried by an inordinate amount of clarity about their professional standards and the ability to explain and exemplify what they see around them as well as how to assess those observations.

Quality of teachers

Interviewees' accounts eventually arrived at descriptions of how they viewed and hired teachers and educators: There is an overall consensus on hiring on disposition first and ranking competencies second as all principals and superintendents express primary concern about teachers' education belief systems and their understanding of the community that they serve:

The interview set is more about the behavioral questions, like your belief systems as a teacher versus tell me how you teach reading. Right. Which is how we interviewed people. (...) How do you teach reading to third graders? Tell us about that. And we're really moving away from that because what we're saying now is our professional development will get you caught up on our program and our approach to that and to the technical parts of teaching, but we need teachers who possess this part of teaching- the core values, you know. Do you truly believe every child is capable of learning and do you believe it's your job to foster that learning? That's a whole different ask. You know, you ask any teacher and they say, yeah, I believe all children can learn. And then when you ask the next question, do you believe all children in your class must learn? And they go, ooh, hold on. And then the third question is: Are you accountable for that must that they must learn and that's when people start going, hold on now, wait a minute. You know, so we're moving away from the competency, if you will, of teaching to the technical pieces to that more of the dispositions, the beliefs. (Da, p. 19)

According to this account, hiring on disposition means having a sense of accountability about one's own quality of teaching and its effects. That is based on the idea that every child can advance and as a result, teachers hold themselves responsible for creating conditions in which students are able to and actually do advance. Referring to the account's example, there is not one way to teach reading in third grade, so asking applicants about technicalities will not generate the desired insight. Core values, it is supposed, are the starting point of effective teachers and professional development will fill gaps where they exist. Core values such as "empathy, awareness about where this child is coming from" (D, p. 5) are deemed more relevant than teaching knowledge as such, leaving "no excuses in terms of expectations" (D, p. 5) because what matters more than how much teachers and educators know their ability to ensure that administrators as well as students and parents "know how much you care" (D, p. 5). Forming relationships and growth mindsets on all levels of the school community is something that "some of our teachers have a hard time with" (D, p. 5) because the

administrations' focus is decidedly on facilitating learning (D, p. 6) rather than delivering content. Professional collaboration and continuous learning mirror what is asked from the students onto the teachers:

I don't care if you're the rockstar teacher, you cannot meet all the needs of these kids by yourself if you're not working collaboratively. And the whole idea is with the professional learning community focused on learning, collaborative culture and results. And we do try and push that to the idea of teaching is important. You've got to be good teachers. You got to do all that. But the bottom line is, are kids learning and can you clearly identify what it is you want them to learn and be able to do? How do you know what that looks like? Having a real clarity about that. And then what kind of strategies- what do you do as a team or whatever when kids aren't learning it, what do you do with the kids that do learn it. How do you push them further with enrichments and extensions (...). So in some ways from a pedagogical standpoint, that is hard, messy work, yeah, but it's fundamental work that we believe if it's done and done well will show the right kind of results, not quick fixes, but over time and be sustainable. (D, p. 7)

In progressing toward a high standard of professional work, teachers are granted flexibility and leeway to foster a collaborative culture and results while allowing for mistakes: "If you weren't successful that's okay as long as you're willing to do something about it and work with somebody else." (D, p. 9) The goal is to reduce defensiveness by actively creating a culture of openness and exchange about the different ways things can be done effectively. (D, p. 9) On the students' and the teachers' parts it is about formation rather than information, it's about relationships (G, p. 1) and that needs conversations, talk, exchange, coaching (G, p. 3). Teachers need to stand by their learners to inspire confidence because "good players (*athletes*) without confidence won't be good players either" (G, p. 3). Interviewees agree across the board that those who taught for a while do better because they gained maturity in life to deal with children and relate to parents empathically (D, p. 5). Interviewees' discussed the tendency of increasing expectations for teachers (D, p. 5) while decreasing resources that are needed. One administrator self-directed that criticism:

We're good about putting everything on the plate and saying let's do this and let's do this and we build this frustration that when you get to the user, in this case, a teacher or principal, we don't really look at that plate to realize how much is on it and we don't take anything off and we put new stuff, and in an education here, we're flawed that way. (Da, p. 11)

The frustration was tangible in their every word, and it is important to report that this passage was by no means spoken in a tone of cynicism. On the contrary, the person expressed their dissatisfaction and irritation with the status quo, exemplifying how they then worked toward reducing teachers' work load by having introduced nurses and social workers to each school instead of training the staff to be medical assistants in mini-hospitals called schools (Da, p. 11). This characterization stands next to the January 2019 press release of the Alabama State Department of Education: They announced their new training program for educators, administrators, coaches and other non-licensed personnel to administer a drug called Naloxone. It is applied through an auto-injector and reverses opioids' effects while causing no effects whatsoever in a body free of opioid toxins. The press release warned against aggressive reactions of drug using patients after the

injection of Naloxone due to immediate withdrawal symptoms. It was announced that all Alabama public schools with trained personnel would have access to one to five auto injectors. (Alabama State Department of Education, 2019)

Specifically in light of a long-standing teacher shortage throughout Alabama - a drop of 47% of students enrolling into college teacher programs (D, p. 17) - it seems yet more necessary to find ways to alleviate teachers' pressures by taking work off of teachers so that they can go teach. In a state where there were "something like 393 math teachers during that time period, 10 in chemistry, and I want to say one in physics" in the period of 2010 to 2014, worries are warranted that the ever-growing demands on the profession will exacerbate the problem further. The solution is given in unison: "Remove obstacles for teachers so they can teach and students can learn" (G, p. 3):

I guess locally we try to find the things that we can do to support all kids so that teachers can teach and then we try to- For us here, we try to be in touch with what, what all is in front of a practicing teacher or practicing principal and we have to start looking at going, okay, let's take that away from you. You know- Or if like if we throw a lot of reports, which is where a bureaucracy, so we do it, but we try saying, yeah, you have to get them done. There's a deadline, but on these we don't really care. Just get them done. Even if you're not late, you know, focus on being in the classrooms with kids, changing outcomes for students. (Da, p. 12)

The account connects the effort of freeing up time for teachers to looser accountability reporting responsibilities and it clarifies the sequence of priority at the same time. Another interviewee detailed how their six assistant principals are tasked with "just doing academics with me" (H, p. 21) and "it's the same way on the counseling side" (H, p. 21), referencing individuals responsible solely for counseling as well as college career preparation so to "try to take everything off the teachers and say go teach. Go teach." (H, p. 22) The school is organized around a seven-period day at 50-minute classes each, yet every teacher only teaches five (H, p. 21):

So that's, that's very helpful to us. It gives them time to, to collaboratively plan, through plcs (*professional learning communities*). It gives them a free period also to prepare however they want to do that. So uh, I think there are more (erm) easily available to, to reach those needs of individual kids than me telling them what to do all the time. (H, p. 21)

These accounts speak to the leaders' efforts to create conditions in which teachers can work effectively and undisputedly, focused on supporting their students' advancement. It is not in the least surprising that none of the people I spoke with supported any version of high-stakes, test-based accountability.

Wrongly accounted

Notwithstanding interviewees' clear stances and standards on being accountable for their work, there is an overwhelming sense of dissatisfaction and frustration with accountability policies and accountability measures, both with those of the past and with those of the present. Interviewees agree on the need for accountability in schooling and professional standards for all levels of schooling. However, the linear assessment logic and standardized tests of NCLB and to some degree

also the policy that is in effect today, were consistently opposed as being wrong by any standard of the profession, and sometimes even ridiculed as being short-sighted:

I can tell you right up front, I am not a fan, never have been, never will be a fan of judging a child on a standardized test. I think it's ridiculous. Ok. (H, p. 1)

It's authoritative, prescriptive, it made it difficult and just unreasonable, quite frankly, where you get testing and assessment in absolute place; it's about more than a tests core. You can't legislate education (...) very rarely talk to those in the classroom (G, p. 2)

Teachers hated it, it didn't work, it couldn't work (G, p. 1)

So you say, well, kids are kids and if you teach them it's going to be the same. And you say that-under your breath you're laughing because you know that it's not going to be the same. It's rigged. (L, p. 4)

Their stances were fundamentally critical, and so was their assessment of why accountability policy of the past decade has led to the observable results today: "Somebody is getting the short end of the stick and what we see now when we talk about test scores and these disparaging scores, is the legacy of that." (L, p. 1) When I spelled out my understanding of the rhetoric of linear accountability as providing the same to everyone so to make everyone equal, the response was equally clear: "The people who say that they don't believe that and they can't say that to you with a straight face, you know? And then they say that to you almost to embarrass you." (L, p. 3) The wrongfulness in the way schools are held accountable was quickly exemplified:

Many of our students deal with issues (.) that are brought about (..) from (..) generational poverty (..) and problems that entrenched middle class parents (..) would not experience with their kids. (..) Parents of kids who come (erm) from a lower socioeconomic background have to- (..) don't deal with those problems in the same way and these problems end up here (..) on our desk (hammers fist on table) and we have to help those (hammers fist on table) students (hammers fist on table) move beyond that, solve those problems, and (hammers fist on table) continue to try (hammers fist on table) to (...) (hammers fist on table) you know, be the best student they can have. The best life they can have. (...) A lot of the problems that we have are age appropriate. Many of the problems that we have are (...) (sighs) problems that (...) (sighs) I mean you know, you want to say things in a way that is not disparaging and is not condescending. (L, 5)

The dissonance in speaking about their constituents' circumstance manifests itself in the language above, as does the person's ambivalence when they elaborated on the effects of these conditions while at the same time trying not to discredit or victimize students and families in their narrative.

School rankings are published online on a regular basis and on a variety of websites, including schools' own online summaries and data representations. Yet once a year the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) publishes their Report Card²⁶ for the school districts and the schools based on a variety of indicators of their so-called achievement. It has become an annual focus point for schooling in Alabama. The interviewee soundboard is in agreement that

²⁶ For a summary of the most current one, visit: <https://www.al.com/news/2019/10/what-grade-did-your-alabama-school-earn-find-out-here.html>. For online data, visit: <http://34.221.240.10/Alsde/OverallScorePage?schoolcode=0000&systemcode=000&year=2019>

accountability to professional standards and their measures are essential and needed; however, comparing schools and districts so inherently unequal was repeatedly emphasized as being unfair because the conditions differ greatly and reflect the difference in opportunity caused in part by the effects of generational wealth and generational poverty.

Another interviewee spoke to the same issue from the other end of the spectrum of generational poverty and wealth: As a school placed in the very top of any ranking, it was almost impossible to maintain their growth, resulting in a skewed and deeply unwarranted public image:

If we were achieving at an average rate, which- if you are at 95%, but not growing than your average- by that measure (erm) we might be right alongside Birmingham city schools, which, you know- not as quality of an education, not their fault to some degree. (erm) but there's a different set of circumstances. But yet we're being compared equally. (B, p. 6)

Adequate Yearly Progress was the measure of improvement used in NCLB, suggesting that continuous, linear advancement of schools would be not only possible but a reliable indicator of increased quality of schooling that would lead to increased student advancement. This idea of steady improvement that was the core of NCLB and the principle idea behind it – steady attainment measures and comparisons between schools – remains in effect today, which causes a variety of problems not only for those schools that function "under a different set of circumstances (that are) not their fault to some degree" (B, p. 6), but the comparison of alleged progress worked against highly affluent, high-performing schools that attain at around 95% because when they inevitably drop even 1%, they receive an at-risk label, causing public outrage:

Our state unfortunately changes our testing measures every two to three years. And you're like, well, why can't we get consistent data from a student from third grade to twelfth grade to show growth? So that's frustrating. (erm) So for a school like us, so say we were at 95% (erm) we had to continue to show growth and improvement from 95%. That's really hard for an achieving school to be a 96% 97%, I mean attainably you want 100%, but I mean, there's no way, there's no way to do it. I mean, you're going to have students who aren't going to ever make that one, year in year out. But for a school that was at 70%, you know, how easy was it for them to show and obtain that growth rate so they didn't have to do quite as much or work quite as hard to show that growth. Whereas we did but when it came out in the newspaper or in the press release and we were graded, you know (...) an at-risk school. (B, p. 4)

The accountability measure tilted completely for "over the mountain school districts that far exceed state and national standards" (B, p. 7) and bred "frustration (of) having to pay attention to measures that pull us back" (B, p. 7) because the set community goals for the school were much loftier than the set expectation by mandated testing. On those grounds, any comparison of schools was rejected in unison as being a wrong accountability measure:

(...) those folks in those counties (*poor rural*) have no chance of ever reaching that standard. (...) But then you throw standardized testing back into the mix there. Okay. So as a school then you're forced then to take an 11th or twelfth grade that just came into (*that*) school. Okay. What I want to try to do at that point, I know in the back of my mind we could try, we could do it, but there's no way they're gonna make great grades on standardized tests. (H, p. 14)

Student transience was referenced throughout the conversations as one way of choice for families to ensure their children graduate from a supposedly better school in order to have more opportunity. I was told about a specific street in that area that functions as the effective threshold between the very affluent school district and an area of subsidized housing, i.e. government funded housing in areas of elevated poverty and unemployment rates. I was told that families waited for an apartment opening on that street so they could relocate and register their child in a more promising school of the affluent district (G, p. 2). As a result, the school faced the obvious challenge of integrating students in order for them to graduate. Given that schools are publicly ranked on the basis of standardized tests in the last two years, this created extensive pressures:

But what I can do and what I expect of my, of my faculty is to at least get those kids to where they have passed standards enough to graduate and I can hand them a diploma. I'm at least giving you a chance if I can get you to graduation. And that thing that drives me crazy when talking to people above me and at the state, well you just give them that. I'm not giving them anything. They have passed the standards of what you set as graduation standard for a high school in Alabama, okay, but I'm giving them, I'm giving them a chance, I'm giving them opportunity to do something with that because without that you have no chance. (H, p. 14)

The criticism leveled against this principal's helping students graduate is a mirror image of my Turkish student's case: I find it hard to fault this educator for offering students a legitimate way to earn their graduation. The phrase of 'just give them that' seems to suggest that the students' success of graduating was not their achievement but the principal's handout.

High-stakes standardized tests that rank schools effectively punish those who take on transient students in the last two years, or any other less well-performing subgroup, because they may reduce test results and create potentially impactful misrepresentations:

It penalized large schools like us to the- to the point where that year we're placed on remediation focus, everything else because of seven kids in special Ed. Now we're labeled as a focus school. I went crazy. I wrote every letter. (H, p. 7)

We might dip one percentage point and be at 94 and we would show as a, a not a failing school but an at-risk school. Whereas a school that was at 70% who had only earned 2% of the 72 showed up as a- it went by color. It was a green or a successful school and so you had this all over the state, or at least in Alabama, published these lists of schools who are in good standing, at risk and then failing schools. They have literally called them failing schools (B, p. 4)

Rather than submitting to a linear understanding of test-based accountability and interpreting rankings as a reflection of school quality, these leaders were critically distant and shared experiences of wrong measures and therefore wrong accountability conclusions that were drawn based on their data. They spoke in support of accountability but with a clear focus on professional practice:

So that's why you see districts like us: while we are accountable for our data in the assessments, really what we're focused on now is just quality teaching, quality learning. We kind of take the mindset that the quality accountability data will show if we're doing good work in the classroom as opposed to what we've been through with No Child and all these others were you just focused on the test teaching to the test and let's get a better look and test score instead of better educated children. (...) Because to me that's not what education is about (Da, p. 8)

In an environment where school rankings sway public opinion, they also have the power to influence the community's willingness to appropriate funds to extra teachers or social workers or literacy programs. For the schools and districts, it is therefore of utmost importance to ensure that the data reflect well. Communities simply demand that schools do well and that students go on to get a degree (G, p. 2):

We're going to do whatever (laughs) makes the data look good because that's how we get our funding. So it doesn't matter we're lying. We were just going to do whatever makes us look good. (W, p. 21)

And what that does, if you tied to test scores, obviously somebody comes in with an inherited advantage. Those who don't have an advantage are encouraged to cheat because if you, if you link this to the paycheck, people are trying to survive by any means necessary, you know, where they're going to do what it takes to keep themselves in good standing professionally, right? (L, p. 12)

The point reiterated here is one that has long been identified in research about high-stakes measures: Whatever is used as a measure of success is likely to become the target of influence by those whose stakes are high, as social scientists (e.g. C. Goodhart) and economists (e.g. D. T. Campbell) have affirmed in their work repeatedly over time. The following chapter delineates such data inconsistencies and argues that they are a direct, expected effect of high-stakes measures. Students experience this paradox when they take high-stakes test such as the ACT that are intended to be the same for everyone in order to guarantee equal opportunity access to college. In reality, however, test-taking conditions are starkly different and create damaging differences to students' opportunity:

In February the ACT test day was- we had about two weeks down South where we had below 32-degree temperature for like two weeks straight. (...) It's never that cold so our buildings aren't like-pipes bust and you know- Our structures aren't ready for that cold for that long. (...) There was no heat in the building and so they (erm) they are sitting in this dilapidated building with no heat. They don't have coats because it's an all black, all poor school and they're freezing and I have a friend who teaches there, that I went to school with, and he called and he was like, can you do something about this? Can you use your voice to get this message out there? And he said, our kids, like they were turning blue, like they were shivering, freezing, you know, and a lot of them like (*inaudible*) time to get finished to get out. But that test score will determine their entire future when seven miles down the road you have an affluent high school that kids walk in and there's- like the heat's on and they have hot chocolate sitting on their desk (laughs) (...) But then you have college admissions advisors and college professors and deans go on: Well, they took the same test. They have the same opportunity; they just didn't- (...) I mean, we just continued to create the gap between the rich and the poor (W, p. 22)

I quote this anecdote and others at such length to represent the immediacy and urgency of the interviewee's account as closely as possible. From the account, it is clear that the person is personally affected by the story. It shows not only the cynical exaggeration of hot chocolate on desks and the laugh but also in the amount of detail shared: The person was a friend, the conversation was reproduced at length, there are numerous tangible descriptions rather than abstract summaries and the point is made strongly and in the grammatical active, in a satirically exaggerated use of the pronoun *we* to emphasize the disparity yet more.

Existing gaps were affirmed and brought to the world's attention by a recent United Nations report based on a two-week investigation by a U.N. delegation investigating systemic poverty and human rights abuses in the United States. It identified the American South in general and Alabama in particular as strongly linked to economic inequality and racial discrimination as well as civil rights abuses. Special Rapporteur Philip Alston said he was "shocked at the level of environmental degradation in some areas of rural Alabama, saying he had never seen anything like it in the developed world." (Ballesteros, 2017) He further spoke to the hookworm outbreak in 2017 and the delegations' learning of "raw sewage that flows from homes through exposed pipes and into open trenches". (Ballesteros, 2017) The article ends on his call to those responsible, urging them: "Politicians who say, 'There's nothing I can do about that' are simply wrong." (Ballesteros, 2017) This is yet another account that offers immediacy and urgency in its message, addressing the active role of those responsible in a similarly unambiguously.

A last conceptualization of the difference between students and their advancement is based on cognitive and developmental differences that create the dynamics of cohorts: "Biology plays a role" (B, p. 19), a principal explains and immediately acknowledges the double standard: "You know, at one side of my mouth I say this and to the side of the other, I have to ignore this." (B, p. 19) The outside expectation is to speak primarily to every learner's ability to advance and succeed but this insight offers a two-step distinction between "students' ability levels and what they bring to the table" (B, p. 19) as well as the ways in which group dynamics function:

You'll have a group of students who have achieved very well in standardized testing from third grade all the way through twelfth grade for that group. I mean they just are a bright group. I don't know what happened in the year that they were born, that biology was- benefited them so well that their brains work better at, you know, whatever. (laughs) But the next group might not do as well, (erm) whether it's something environmental, whether it's something within the school or even just the students themselves. But I knew as a teacher that I could not compare this year to the next year (erm) because that's an unfair comparison. They are different. (...) really, we should be comparing is that student's growth rate ninth to 10th to 11th. But we're comparing this year's ninth grade with next year's ninth grade and the next year's ninth grade, three totally different sets of kids who should be performing differently you would expect. And so I just think that whole concept of accountability through standardized testing is limiting and difficult and somewhat unfair to the educator. (B, p. 19)

Several aspects influence student advancement and they reach far beyond what teachers can do because teaching takes place in groups, as the interviewee references, and it is therefore not only the individuals' varieties, but also the groups' dynamics that characterize teaching. As a result, it is faulty to compare student groups over time. These insights are hardly surprising to anyone who spent time in a classroom and they find clear expression in the material, pointing out the ways in which students and teachers, no less schools and so-called school performance are subject to labeling.

Labeling of students is a prevalent issue taken up in the conversations, specifically in the context of behavioral issues: "Define good, define bad, it's subjective, and anytime you label something, you live up to your standard, you're going to live up to the label." (W, p. 23) In this conversation, the

person acknowledged that while diagnosing ADHD or a disability is intended to benefit students and can be meaningful and helpful, massive disadvantages are attached to this practice: Too many students, especially male children, are too quickly diagnosed with ADHD when they are merely active and not used to a classroom setting of sitting and listening most of the time. Too many students are tested for disability and receive a mandatory Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is supposed to help them succeed in class by reducing the alleged challenges:

Before telling you his name, he said I can only take AB tests. I had no idea what he was talking about. I was like, what are you talking about? What is an AB test? He said in the third grade or fourth grade, I can't remember what grade it was- on my IEP I was told that I was too dumb to choose between four choices, I can only choose between two. (W, p. 24)

This example shows how labeling may become formative for a student and inform their education pathway through college, no less because IEP documentation is available to teachers in the student file and stays on record throughout the education biography of that person. The stigma of having an IEP and therefore having special test taking accommodations or test formats becomes a part of schooling for these children and damages their understandings of what they can do. (W, p. 24)

What strikes me most about the effects of labeling is the factual disconnect: Those labeled less able to learn consistently exhibit that they learn quickly and well that they allegedly cannot learn! They adopt that proposition immediately and lastingly, yet that in itself suggests that they would have learned just as well had they been presented with content in a way accessible to them. The example of the AB student above is a case in point of a football player who learned well that he was allegedly not capable of learning while at the same time excelling at football. Given the discipline that high school football demands, both physically and mentally due to the complexity of the game, it is inconceivable how students could be labeled less able to learn when they memorize game strategy and run countless varieties of individual plays, study more than one position in any given play and on top of all that, push their physical and mental ability to the maximum that any semi-professional sport demands:

They've learned it so well. And it's the same thing with schools, we start labeling them, you know, everyone's just going to live up to their label. And I mean (inaudible) had gone through this his whole life, living up to that standard of 'I can only take AB tests'- like he had lived up to the label, exactly lived up to it, until that day when I said to him, (*name*), that's a lie, someone lied to you, and you're going to take the same test that everybody else takes and you're smart enough to pass it. And guess what? (W, p. 24)

The student did well academically and earned a scholarship to college football at the highest level of play. (W, p. 24) It appears as though his experiences, among others, could serve as cautionary tales to education structures that create early labels as well as to build structures that guide students away from their label, as expressed here:

Why do you throw that out there to poor people and say, hey, he can be a great ballplayer. Anybody could be a good lawyer. Anybody can be a good doctor, you could be an engineer, but you have to be

genetically gifted for sports to be your way out of poverty. And I wish they would really just take it off the table." (L, p. 15)

Their case in point is an encounter of boxing legend M. Ali with a kid fan who wanted to follow in his footsteps:

And Mohammad Ali said, look man, you can be a great doctor, you can be a great lawyer, you can be a wonderful architect. It'll be 600 years before another athlete like me comes through, you know, a champion of my stature, you know, an Olympic gold medal, heavyweight titles. That is an anomaly, you know, you need to go to school and watch me on TV because it's not going to be another me for a very long time. (L, p. 15)

Labeling is a powerful tool that exerts its influence through longevity and resistance to new experiences and as such, it needs much more counter-experiences until it can be reframed and corrected. A principal reiterated the point by referring to their own athletic experience, their career as a coach and now as a principal who sees that "football is a lot of learning" (G, p. 3) and "support is temporary; special education keeps people on crutches" (G, p. 3) meaning that rather than blaming the student for not knowing and breeding frustration that hinders learning, a teacher or educator is responsible to take a moment and figure it out (G, p. 3). Labeling a student is not helpful it prevents individuals from advancing - the set purpose of the profession that is education.

Student athletics lends itself as an illustration of the paradox: There is so much learning involved in becoming a high school athlete (G, p. 2), yet students on athlete scholarships often struggle academically, receive much studying support and often are passed by teachers so that they earn the needed credits to continue to play and to stay eligible to be drafted for college athletics. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)²⁷ regulates high academic standards for eligibility of athletes, far beyond those for non-athletes:

You don't have the luxury of changing your major three times because then you're not going to make percent, you're not going to be eligible. It's also very hard for an athlete to have a minor (...) Well athletes don't really have the luxury of having a minor because if you're taking classes towards your minor you're not taking classes towards your major and you don't meet your percent (.), so they're held to this whole higher academic standard that the regular student body isn't held to. (W, pp. 35f)

The NCAA's progression includes 6 credits per term continuously throughout the study program, specifying 12 credits for the first year, 40% completion of degree by the third year, 60 and 80% degree completion respectively for years four and five. From the first year onward, students must maintain 90% of the GPA required for graduation, which varies greatly between a two-year community college and a four-year research institution and their academic rigor. That is a standard far above that of any non-athlete student.

Whatever the sport, college athletics are semi-professional, demanding and exhausting, time-consuming and preparation-intensive: Gymnasts, for example, spend hours memorizing their air-movements, drawing them, learning the counts, reiterating the coach's calls during their exercise.

²⁷ <http://www.ncaa.org/about/division-i-progress-toward-degree-requirements>

Recent pop-culture representations offer insights into the world of college-level cheerleading, for example, that puts undue strain on student athletes. It appears as though these students would be capable of applying those very same skills academically had they had the same excellent, fitted coaching that they receive in athletics. My material provides a stunning example of an Alabama school showing one of the highest poverty indices and serving a large number of students qualifying as homeless that is home to the best basketball team in Alabama with over a total of two million dollars in academic scholarships annually. A newly hired counselor had been very active and was credited with that achievement (F, p. 24). Accountability policy in its current form does not recognize these achievements and it also does not help communicate the message that everyone can learn in the varieties of learning that exist.

Wrongly labeling schools and their programs is exemplified in the material by the case of a school's data point on chronic absenteeism that was wrongly accounted for and decreased this school's ranking significantly, causing public distress over 16% of chronic absenteeism that turned out to include the school's homebound services program:

We actually have a suspension program, a school suspension program (...) for our students who are in an alternative setting for behavior- they're still in school. We also have students who are medically fragile and they're on homebound services where we send a teacher to them that may do some home learning. (...) They counted all of those in chronic absenteeism because they weren't sitting in a seat and counted as present. (B, p. 14)

It is a prime example of schooling being wrongly accounted for when a program that allows students who would otherwise drop out or take a temporary leave of absence to stay involved in their education through flexibly adapted conditions.

Deemed irrelevant under NCLB, opportunities for vocational education have resurfaced as another success story of the state and particularly the northern part of Alabama as communities grow back and nurture education pathways to non-academic advancement: Not everyone is college bound and policy makers realized the mistake of assuming so; skilled workers are needed (G, p. 1). I was told that it was "like socialism and communism! Teachers hated it, because it didn't work and it couldn't work." (G, p. 1) Unsurprisingly, the craft of welding is a welcome example for the value of vocational training in the state:

I mean, we've got a very low act composite for system because not all of our students- that's not all the trajectory, you know, some are choosing these other paths which are perfectly good for our college and career readiness indicators, our career technology academy, our students there- I mean if you pursue some of those paths, like welding, the intent is to go into the industry there and make great money and a great career with the credential they have from welding. (Da, p. 7)

We actually have a welding program here that we offer for the kids. (F, p. 15)

Turned around, this focus creates problems when students decide on a vocational career and underperform on the solely academic, college-relevant ACT which is one assessment measure for the Alabama Report Card. Similarly, college bound students may already have taken their college

entrance tests and show little effort in taking the state-mandated college readiness tests, such as WorkKeys:

We've been very successful with WorkKeys. Okay. Um, as a senior test, they take that to senior year. Um, but we've also had to be very very creative and motivate kids to take that because: I'm going to college, I don't need to take this. (H, p. 6)

A total of seven College and Career Readiness (CCR) indicators are offered within the current Alabama Plan 2020, one of which every student needs to accomplish as a part of their high school graduation requirement. More than half of the students opt for the ACT WorkKeys and the ACT benchmark measure. Slightly over 20% obtain a Career and Technical Education (CTE) credential as a result of being enrolled in a vocational training program alongside high school, such as welding or nursing or coding (F, 15). Only 10% or less opt for getting a qualifying score from Advanced Placement (AP) classes or college credit. Fewer than 2% and 0.5% of students are enlisted in the military at graduation or complete an International Baccalaureate program, respectively. (Powell Crain 2018) These data indicate that vocational qualification through WorkKeys and CTEs are most relevant in the state, with a strong fifth of students already being trained at high school.

Accountability in the form of NCLB did not receive much attention in the conversations other than in response to my fairly directed questions. There is a tangible pride in the current policy focus on vocational programs that is narrated as a contrast to the test-based NCLB era:

(...) as opposed to what we've been through with No Child and all these others were you just focused on the test teaching to the test and let's get a better look and test score instead of better educated children. (Da, p. 8)

(Change in) not just leadership. I think there's a change (erm) in federal requirements in some cases and then some are changes in state requirements are or what the State Board of Education puts in place. Some of it is a reaction to the requirements that we have to have, whether it's through No Child or now ESSA. So some of those you have like graduation, we were- the state (hammers fist on table) was reporting graduation rate in one way and then I think they got guidance from the federal department. They had to report a different way so they changed it. So. And the same thing with the assessments. We had a graduation exam and then when the federal policy change we put in common core here which changed the assessment material. So we got rid of the end of the graduation exam, which was a basic skills test essentially. Um, and it was very low level. (Da, p. 8)

Both passages show that NCLB was not the focus of concern. Rather, the issue was framed as a question of test focus and requirements versus what is relevant in education, i.e. better educated children and the complicating inconsistencies that upset fragile structures by frequently changing reporting systems. Alabama's high school graduation rates of 2016-17 are a recent example of a massive upset over reporting issues that drew national media attention: Initially ranked third in the nation, having increased 17.3% from 2011 to 2015, Alabama's success drew stark criticism because of the glaring disconnect between achievement and graduation rates. College students in need of remedial work, for example, were still 30% in 2015, down from 35 % in 2012. (Powell Crain, 2016a)

By December of 2016, it was clear that special needs students who were program completers had been wrongly accounted for and reported in the system as graduates. Then Superintendent Michael Sentance declared publicly that he could not state what the actual graduation rate was: "In some cases, local school systems misstated student records and awarded class credit, resulting in diplomas that were not honestly earned." (Powell Crain, 2016b) Another striking disparity was Alabama's initially claimed graduation rate improvement from 72% to 89% between 2010 and 2015 that appeared at odds with Alabama data's lack of improvement in other academic measuring systems such as the NAEP and the ACT. A federal investigation into the graduation rate inflation was opened in March 2016, the same month that Superintendent Tommy Bice retired who had been responsible for the time in question. (Powell Crain, 2016b)

By 2017, the federal investigation concluded that Alabama's 2015 graduation rate of 89.3% had been inflated. (Powell Crain, 2017a) Discussions on the following years' rates ensued and continue to the most recently published 2016-17 data on graduation and College and Career Readiness (CCR) indicators, lamenting a gap of 17.7% overall and between 8.3% and 53.9% subgroups' difference between their graduation rate and their rate of attaining one or more CCR indicator. (Powell Crain, 2019h) While high school graduation is awarded based on completed class credit, the CCR indicators only count students who progressed from ninth grade to graduation within four years, hence excluding multiple repeaters from the data set. As such, the data differences are interpreted to indicate potential inequities in students' advancements:

In a strongly-worded memo to superintendents statewide, former state superintendent Ed Richardson---then serving as interim---wrote, "This is one of the most serious issues facing our schools. Failure to address this issue immediately will only result in more high school graduates and their families being led to believe they are ready for the next step in their lives when they are not--- harm public education and depress our state's economic growth." (Powell Crain, 2019h)

The passage shows how linearly the situation is attributed to its alleged cause and how quickly the rhetoric turns to extreme formulations instead of acknowledging a structural, systemic problem that may be a reflection of more complex dynamics and out-of-school factors.

It transpires from the interviewees' description that education was wrongly accounted for on the level of students and schools as well as the administration level alike. Those shortcomings are relayed clearly and critically, leaving no truth spared, yet, interviewees are mostly concerned with and invested in today's policy and challenges rather than what happened during and after No Child Left Behind. It did not come up in the material much as a policy, because it is understood to be a backward approach and a closed chapter.

Policy

Education administration leaders report that in place today is a three-piece strategic plan for Alabama that "for us just guides everything we do" (Da, p. 1). The first piece is establishing and maintaining a standard quality of all schooling facilities, i.e. every building, no matter how old or new, equipped with the same technology, the same lighting so to create a standard quality environment for schooling as concerns the physical quality of it (Da, p. 13):

That's the easiest one to explain because it's about bricks and mortar and we just we're midway through 175- \$170 million dollars worth of changes to our buildings. And that's either every building being renovated (hammers fist on table) or brand (hammers fist on table) new building. (Da, p. 2)

Dilapidated buildings and disparities in the quality of schools' infrastructure are a significant challenge that concerns rural Alabama and its cities and counties alike. Conventional wisdom might attribute the problem to old and outdated buildings, yet it is systemic, chronic underfunding that creates lacking schooling environments:

And now the, even if you look at even, um, two schools within this county, um, you would see their facilities was built for white kids and our facility were built for black kids and we have, you can tell the difference in our buildings and their buildings (...) We have constant issues with rest rooms because the plumbing wasn't done correctly. Um, some of the classrooms, just, just, there's a, there's a difference even though there are no white kids at, at, that school was built for- even when you go into the principal's office, you'll be able to see the difference. Yeah. It's a difference. And you can tell that (erm) we're separate, but it wasn't equal. (F, p. 27)

Schools like the one above often lack reliably functioning toilets, suffer from disrupted lighting due to incorrect wiring with some students learning in classrooms without windows. I have witnessed these conditions in Alabama as well as in St. Louis, MO, and these same problems disrupt schooling in Vienna in places of continuous financial strain too. The patterns are not unique to any place but characterize the contexts of disadvantaged schooling in general. As for Alabama, the interview material reflects persistent budget problems in the distribution of even basic support but also in supporting those schools that want to do more and do better. Yet they cannot be granted the additionally requested funds because too many schools need the bare minimum. As long as third grade reading standard measures are met at just below 40% of the students, I am told, there is simply not extra to be given away (Da, p. 2).

The second piece to the strategic plan seeks to ensure human resources structures that provide the same quality of teaching in every classroom. It addresses problems with teacher retention that causes worries, even at 86% retention rate, because "we're still hiring about 100 teachers a year out of 850." (Da, p. 2) The set goal is to increase retention through development opportunities and higher pay in order to make more effective use of the support structures for retained teachers:

So we do that through professional development, mentoring, paying our teachers more than the state, and just a kind of a multifaceted approach to getting teaching done right. But one big piece of it is get the culture of the schools right now, have these strong supportive school cultures where

teachers say, I want to teach in the school system and at this school because we believe that's actually the most important part. So there's a leadership development piece there. (D, p. 2)

Leadership toward a positive, engaged school culture shows in interviewees hiring teachers on their professional and personal disposition rather than on teaching skills and teaching knowledge alone. Teacher quality, as a result, is viewed more broadly, reaching beyond teaching methods or students' grades: Teachers' contribution to the school community is "the most important part" (D, p. 2).

The strategic plan's third piece capitalizes on elevating the quality of teaching and learning, specified as being viewed and understood "through the lens of equity" (Da, p. 2) as resources are scarce. So the current approach is to invest into structures that support effective teaching and learning: "Libraries are lifted to an exemplary standard so that we have high, high interest books in all of our schools" (Da, p. 2). The digital transformation also includes providing students with chrome books for learning outside of school, offering electives in foreign languages and fine arts as well as career technology and International Baccalaureate options regardless of where students live so that opportunity is not tied to access. (Da, p. 3) The surrounding business community supports these measures actively and consistently, thereby helping the education administration leadership to address the challenges of providing access in a way that is taken up by students and parents alike:

So it's about access and it's about making sure access is there for every kid and not only an option for access, but access to success. Right? And I think that's been different for us and that's what's, that's what we have been focusing our work on is making sure that the access is there and that the success comes with access. (Da, p. 3)

Given their commitment to creating equitable offers, interviewees report frustration with the disconnect between making those offers and not seeing them being taken up by the intended audiences:

We have a parent academy, we have a parent teacher leadership coming through the university with parents and teachers- awesome programs, but they're not good if you don't have them there, if you don't have the ones that you need there. So we do have to kind of keep challenging ourselves to say, okay, what we're doing is good, but it's just not reaching who we needed to reach. (...) We have to start challenging our own traditional delivery. (Da, p. 5)

The question is what creates this disconnect between opportunities and the rate at which they are taken up when, for example, parents do not engage with the various high-quality, free offers available to their own benefit and to that of their children. The complexity of the issue lies in rejecting the easiest position: "(I)hey say, well, we got an- access is there, they're just not taking advantage of it." (Da, p. 5) Rather, it is made clear that "that remains our challenge" (Da, 5) i.e. not stopping but addressing why intended audiences do not take advantage of offers. A principal in a rural setting shared a similar phenomenon: Their 21st Century Program offers afternoon tutoring and a snack five times a week for elementary students and twice a week for high school students (F, p. 11). During that time, students do academic work on the chrome books or sometimes complete

homework under the supervision of a teacher. When the school was able to provide bus transportation for all students, participation grew rapidly:

Some of the parents look at it more so as a babysitting, you know. You're babysitting my child to 6.05 and they only have to pay \$20 per year. And they get, they get a snack. (F, p. 11)

Alongside the implied criticism of the parents' misdirected motives, I was told that almost all elementary students take part in the program while only a few high school students do: "Once they get to grade six, I don't know what happens, but the participation drops." (F, p. 12) Turned around, it appears that the program is successful in providing at least the younger students with a learning environment while meeting the parents' needs at the same time. The program is also a success for teachers who receive extra pay for these hours and are able to afford students extra credit if they do particularly well. In the spring, invited artists work with the students for some sessions. (F, p. 11) Teachers are not assigned but apply to be part of the 21st Century Program and while all students are invited to participate, those who are at risk of failing and received an academic watch letter are recommended to join the program. (F, p. 12) This case exemplifies that while a program might not function in the intended ways, it may still fulfill a variety of existing needs for a variety of people involved in it: It offers the parents affordable child care in a place where they may otherwise not be able to be home with their children or provide them with transportation to go to school in the afternoon. Teachers are able to supplement their income and potentially struggling students have extra credit opportunities; homework and tutoring and extra-curricular contents are offered flexibly for students. Successfully meeting a community's needs may indeed be key to engagement.

In summary, the three-piece plan characterizes core aspects of Alabama's "Plan 2020: Every child a graduate. Every graduate prepared." which was created under Dr. Bice's leadership in 2012. Available on the U.S. State Department of Education's website²⁸, the 400-page document consists of 27 pages of a Plan 2020 presentation, followed by 20 pages of process documentations, nearly 100 pages of the Alabama Continuum for Teacher Development and Instructional Leader Development, respectively, and further letters, memoranda, legal acts extracts and strategic plans for individual aspects of the Plan 2020 policy. Together, the full document presents a concise and compact insight into the parts and processes of Alabama's Plan 2020. According to Alabama's succinct summary of the plan's aims, a prepared graduate:

Possesses knowledge and skills needed to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing, first-year courses at a two- or four-year college, trade school, technical school without need for remediation.

Possesses the ability to apply core academic skills to real-world situations through collaboration with peers in problem solving, precision and punctuality in delivery of a product, and a desire to be a life-long learner.

²⁸Official materials submitted by the State of Alabama, retrieved from: www2.ed.gov/policy/eseaflex/approved-requests/alapprovalattach.pdf

Table 16 represents the plan's language in addressing specific objectives for each of its four priorities - learners, schools and systems, professionals and support systems - complete with indicators and projected targets for each indicator:

Table 16

Priorities, indicators and projected progress, Alabama Plan 2020

Priority	Objectives	Indicators	2012 baseline, 1-year, 4-year, 8-year targets
Learners	1. All students perform at or above proficiency, show continuous improvement (achievement/growth). 2. All students succeed. (gap closure) 3. Every student graduates from high school (grad rate). 4. Every student graduates high school prepared (college and career readiness).	• 4-year cohort graduation rate • Students who are college and career ready • Students requiring remedial courses in Reading and Math in two- and four-year colleges. • Graduates holding industry credentials	• 65% baseline; 68%, 75%, 85% • 18% baseline; 20%, 26%, 40% • 34%; baseline 30%, 20%, 10% • 50% by 2016
Support Systems	1. All students will attend school daily and be engaged in rigorous and relevant learning environments. 2. All students will develop a sense of personal and civic responsibility to ensure a learning environment that is safe and civil. 3. All students will be provided with individual and group counseling services. 4. All students will enter 9th grade prepared and with a 4-year plan that addresses their individual academic and career interest needs. 1. 5. All students will be provided with healthy meals, physical education and health instruction supported with needed medical and related services.	• Unexcused absences • Disciplinary infractions • 9th grade failures • Student visits to school nurse	• 126,615 baseline; 120,000, 105,000, <i>no 8-year target reported*</i> • 126,615 baseline; 120,000, 105,000, <i>no 8-year target reported*</i> • 4,786 baseline; 4,000, 2,500, no 8-year target reported • <i>not reported</i>
Professionals	1. Every child is taught by a well-prepared, resourced, supported, and effective teacher. 2. Every school is led by a well-prepared, resourced, supported, and effective leader. 2. 3. Every school system is led by a prepared and supported visionary instructional leader.	• Effective teachers and leaders as measured by EDUCATEAlabama, LEADAlabama and multiple measures of student performance • Percentage of effective teacher and leader preparation programs as measured by EDUCATEAlabama, LEADAlabama and	• <i>not reported</i> • <i>not reported</i>

		multiple measures of student performance	
Schools and systems	1. All schools and systems will receive adequate funding to meet the individual and collective needs of their students. 2. All schools and systems will be resourced and supported based on identified need as determined from the state's accountability plan and additional indicators at the local level. 3. Schools and systems will be granted flexibility to innovate and create 21st century learning environments to meet the individual and collective needs of their students. 4. Schools and systems are resourced to create a 21st century learning environment for their students including infrastructure, building renovation/improvements, and technology.	• Schools/systems rated above standard on the Revised Alabama Accountability System/Report Card • Systems designated as an Innovation School System	• baseline: TBD 2013 • 2 baseline; <i>no targets reported</i>

Table 16 reads left to right and provides four priorities with the original policy language on each priority's objective and each objective's indicators. The far right column is a summary of the presented baselines and projected growth measures for each indicator. It remains unclear how the particular percentages were calculated; the collected materials in the document do not elaborate on the stipulated linear development of the percentage measures.

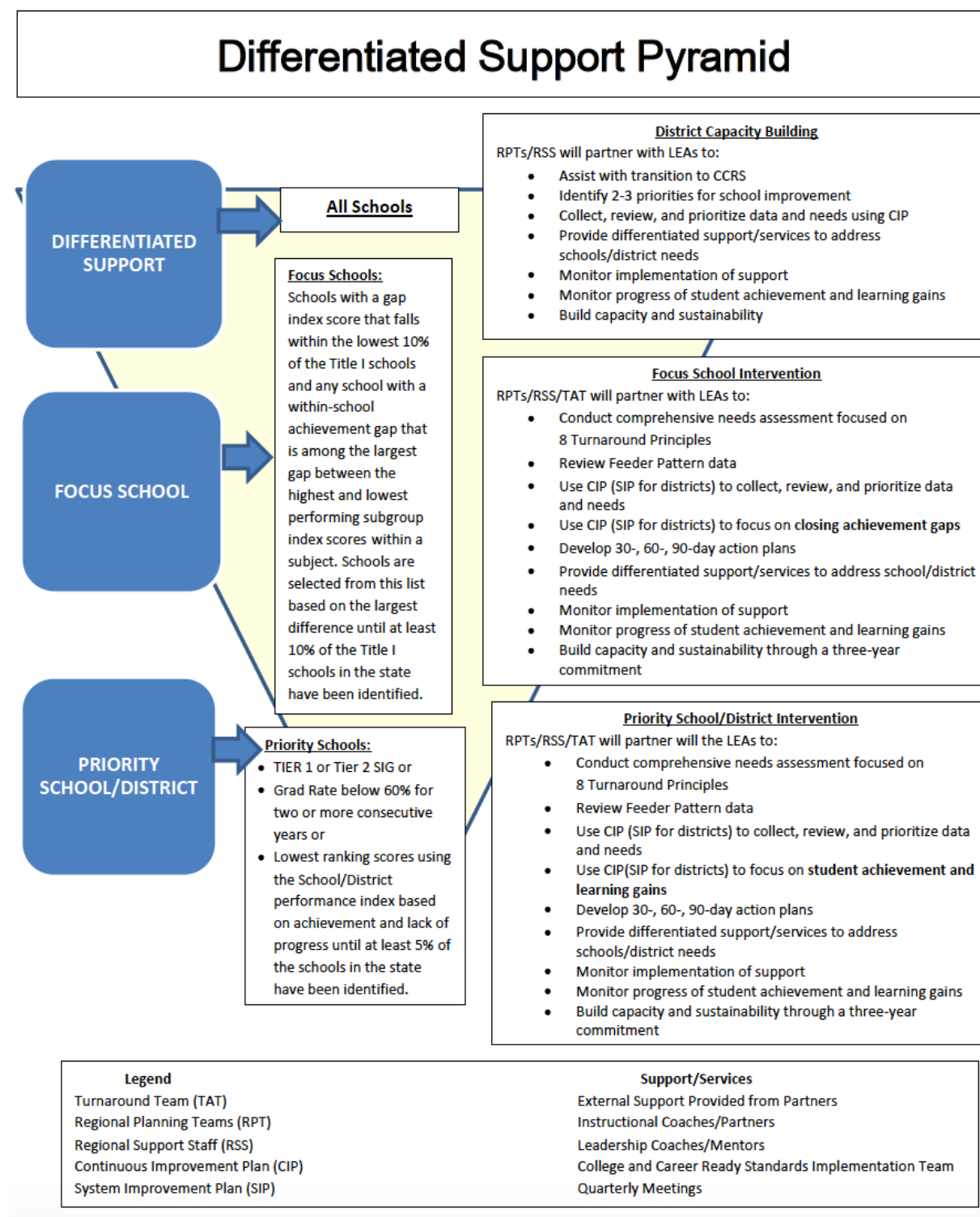
Annual measurable objectives (AMOs) are derived from each of the indicators and function much in the same way as NCLB's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measure did, as Dr. Bice elaborated in a 2012 Memorandum addressed to city and county superintendents.²⁹ Similarly, schools and districts are subject to consequence measures if assessed in the lowest 10% or 5% performance bracket. Figure 13 summarizes those Differentiated Support measures for all schools, such as capacity building, including transition assistance regarding College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) and data management. Schools are classified as focus schools based on performance gaps, including subgroups, "until at least 10% of the Title I schools in the state have been identified" (Figure 13). Schools are classified as priority schools if they receive federal Tier 1 or Tier 2 School Improvement Grants (SIG) or graduate too few students or based on their performance gaps "until at least 5% of the Title I schools in the state have been identified" (Figure 13). As such, Alabama's Plan 2020 represents a newly worded version of NCLB at its structural core: It plots measures on a continuum and qualifies the lowest performing as those in need of support.

²⁹ Official explanatory materials produced by the State of Alabama, retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/eseaflex/approved-requests/alapprovalattach.pdf>

Figure 13

Differentiated Support Pyramid (Plan 2020, 359)

ATTACHMENT 33



Alabama 2020 remains in place and in accordance with Every Student Succeeds Act's (ESSA) requirements, Governor Ivey submitted Alabama's 74 pages Consolidated State Plan in 2017. It is available on the U.S. Department of Education's website merged into one document together with

another 36 pages of further reports, letters, memoranda and data documentation concerning Alabama's education accountability policy. The Consolidated State Plan proposes two calculations for each school and each district's summative score under ESSA (Consolidated State Plan, 2017, pp. 31ff):

Schools without a Grade 12:

1. Academic Achievement as measured by proficiency: 40%
2. Growth as measured by Learning Gains: 40%
3. Progress in ELP³⁰: 5%
4. School Quality/Student Success: Attendance (Chronic Absenteeism): 15%

Schools with a Grade 12:

1. Academic Achievement as measured by proficiency: 20%
2. Growth as measured by Learning Gains: 25%
3. Graduation Rate: 30%
4. Progress in ELP: 5%
5. School Quality/Student Success: Attendance (Chronic Absenteeism): 10%
6. College and/or Career Ready: 10%

The Plan delineates the various stages of support provided if measures should be below target: Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools and Additional Targeted Support schools are identified and subject to "evidence-based strategies, approaches, and interventions" such as "data-driven instruction, high quality teaching and leadership, culture of high expectations, frequent and intensive tutoring/targeting remediation, extended school day and year." (Consolidated State Plan, 2017, p. 35) In order to exit the status of Comprehensive Support and Improvement School, they "must perform above the bottom 5% of schools receiving Title I, Part A funds and have sustained improvement for two consecutive years." (Consolidated State Plan, 2017, p. 36) Additional Targeted Support schools exit that status only if they are no longer eligible for targeted support or three years have passed, or if it demonstrates student improvement in the originally lacking areas for two consecutive years. Former Priority Schools that are identified as Comprehensive Support schools under ESSA will immediately be subject to rigorous interventions by ALSDE-appointed "external partners to conduct the needs assessment (for) unbiased, objective assessment of the schools and districts (Consolidated State Plan, 2017, pp. 36f).

Letters of extensive and detailed criticism by a group of stakeholders and Governor Ivey are included in the document, yet the specific points of contention and the lines of reasoning are left unclear (Consolidated State Plan, 2017, p. 96). Equally, the documents do not illuminate whether the points of contention were addressed to satisfaction – or at all. What does emerge is the fact that Secretary DeVos granted Governor Ivey's request for an extension of the initial submission deadline, yet only 30 of the requested 90 days were approved. It is questionable whether any of the seemingly substantial disagreements could have been resolved, or addressed, in one month.

³⁰ English Language Proficiency; only applicable to the largest language minority of 17,160 Spanish-speaking students (Consolidated Plan, 2017, p. 12)

Both Plan 2020 and Alabama's ESSA Consolidated State Plan are starkly similar to NCLB structures, including seemingly more indicators while 80% or more of the assessment of schools, districts and the state are based on academic achievement indicators and the same system of consequences, ensuring that a consistent number of schools are placed under scrutiny for years. Note that only Title 1 schools, i.e. those receiving federal funds, are subject to these regulations. While all schools and systems are graded by Alabama's own letter grade Report Card, financially independent systems are potentially excluded from federal ESSA assessment procedures.

In summary, this reconstruction of Alabama's genealogy was based on interview material and further elaborated the state's most recent policy structures. They are immediately intertwined with past education policy and the history and development of Alabama's education administration leadership and as such, Alabama politics. The brief overview at hand resulted from tedious reconstruction efforts based on the fragmented data available through the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) as well as ample reporting in leading Alabama newspapers. Their articles, collected at al.com, have proven helpful for filling the gaps that the official reporting and the interviewee material left open. Any summary of Alabama's education policy history must therefore remain an incomplete mosaic. Based on the interview material, the fast-paced moving policy targets led to only fragmented information about policy development because only few interviewees remembered past education policy measures, no less their detailed requirements set by the state administration. The following passage briefly illustrates the state's administration structure from its governing body to the student population it serves.

Education policy in Alabama is directed and administered by the Alabama State Board of Education's nine members: Eight elected members of each state region and the Governor as its president provide leadership on all education decisions in the state. In a recent push to change these traditional structures in Alabama education administration, Amendment I was put before voters to cast their ballot on whether the Alabama School Board would continue to be elected or instead be appointed by the Governor, currently Republican Kay Ivey. On 3 March 2020, a 76% majority of Alabamians rejected Amendment I, reportedly because of a general mistrust of any government, including that of their state (Johnson, 2020). State Superintendent Dr. Eric Mackey and some of the Board members expressed gratitude and supported the outcome, publicly rejecting the idea of political appointment of Board members.

The 3 March 2020 vote was decisive: If affirmed, Amendment I would have transferred all appointing rights to the Governor, expanding to nine members on the Board of Education with Seven Congressional district members and two at-large-members. The Senate would have affirmed the individuals and their service would have been limited to six years. That in itself would have marked a historic shift in Alabama education administration, given that the two longest-standing

Board members currently have been serving consecutively since 1994 (Powell Crain, 2020b) – a total of 26 years. Any tenure of office can be renewed any number of times; in the case of an election year with no challenge to the sitting district representative, the election is cancelled and the representative's service is extended to four more years by default.

Table 17 summarizes the major State Board of Education's appointments³¹ during the NCLB timeframe as reported through ALSDE's annual "Alabama Quick Facts" publications available on their website.³² Table 17 lists the Board's President and the district representatives in the four-year terms, recording the year of reelection and the successor's name. Rather than offering a detailed record, Table 17 indicates how long some of the district representatives as well as the State Superintendents have served. The time frame covers the intended NCLB policy and data beyond the 2014 mark was added for completeness. Current information is reported below the table. Data from before 2004 were not available due to reporting changes and lack of public reporting: Aside from ALSDE state reports and white papers as well as singular visualizations and data sheets, there is no consistent official reporting. Reports are consistent for some years and then change form, report on different sets of indicators and change the way the same indicators are reported, e.g. drop out rates by ethnicity changes to drop out rates overall, then change to high school completion rates. More examples will follow as I discuss the reported information in more detail below.

Table 17

Overview of Alabama's State Board of Education, Alabama Quick Facts 2006-2014, as published by ALSDE

District	Members	Appointments								
President	Bob Riley	2007	2011			Robert Bentley	2015			2019
1	Randy McKinney	2009		2013				Roberts	2017	Brown, J.D.
2	Betty Peters	2007	2011			2015				2019
3	Stephanie Wolfe Bell	2009		2013				2017		
4	Dr. Ethel H. Hall	2007	2011			Richardson, Ed.D.	2015			2019
5	Ella B. Bell	2009		2013				2017		
6	David F. Byers Jr.	2007				Elliott, M.D.	2015			McCarty, PhD
7	Sandra Ray	2009		Warren	2013			Newman	2017	
8	Dr. Mary Jane Caylor	2007	2011			Hunter, J.D.	2015			2019
AL Superintendent of Education, Secretary and Executive Officer		Joseph B. Morton, PhD, 2005-2011					Thomas R. Bice, Ed.D., 2012-2016			

³¹ Interim appointees are left out intentionally for readability of this visualization

³² I received the downloaded files in May 2018 from an acquaintance located in the U.S. as the ALSDE website is not accessible for users located outside US territory.

The State Board of Education hires the State Superintendent of Education, currently Dr. Eric Mackey. His predecessor Michael Sentance from Massachusetts served from 2016 to 2017, following the interim appointee Dr. Philip Cleveland who had taken over from Dr. Thomas Bice. The interviewees view Michael Sentance's work critically. After his departure, local newspapers reported Alabama Senators Craig Ford and Dick Brewbaker voices describing Sentance's tenure as suffering from "the cloud he came in under" and "the go-driven conflict at the top" (Powell Crain, 2017b), referencing a variety of alleged inconsistencies in the way the State Superintendent's position was advertised and filled. Rather than reiterating these allegations, the point here is the interviewees' perception of how fundamental the knowledge of place and context is at this level of education administration: They describe Michael Sentance as having been professionally unprepared and culturally lost while at the same time crediting his work for creating alignment between policy and standards, and for fixing inconsistencies between testing and curriculum:

We had a gentleman from Massachusetts who is as smart as he can be for little over a year, but he'd never been a teacher, a principal, assistant superintendent, superintendent. And he was so culturally lost in Alabama. Um, that it just really threw us totally the works. Right before him we had state superintendent for four years, Tommy Bice (erm). Dr. Bice brought us some good things in terms of he came in with the idea of we are going to be as flexible as the law will allow us, uh, if (erm) there's something that we're doing that gets in your way for doing something right for kids, let us know (...) So he brought some very, very good things to it. Tommy was probably more creative, flexible, innovative. (...) The one thing I will say Michael Sentance did really, really well and I appreciate him doing this, is he would look at (...) patterns of the test we've been using, ACT aspire and all that. He was saying (...) where's your validation that these are actually aligned with your standards? That was never done. We can't look at that. It's system level. We're not allowed to. When there's a certification we do (laughs), only they can do that at state level and you know, like Mr. Sentance said, I can't tell you they're not, but I do see problems when you got across the state high performing districts and it's all seventh grade math. Something might not be right here. (D, p. 11)

The state of Alabama typically moves very slowly through legislation. We don't, we don't change fast. And then State Department of Education, once they fall into a pattern, they just want to stay in that pattern, and it's improved greatly. (erm) We had a new state superintendent, Tommy Bice. I'm trying to think when he came in. Very forward thinking, very progressive. Wanted to really move things forward in the state. (erm) Understood these difficulties with federal accountability and um, was trying to address those things. And then- we've had some bumps since him (laughs) (erm) but I think progressively we are, we are doing a lot better, but for a long time we had a very consistent leadership and governing body and it did not- It was slow to- to respond. (B, p. 8)

Both interviewee's descriptions of the State Superintendents and their work characterize Michael Sentance critically and Thomas Bice favorably overall. The endearment 'Tommy' used for Dr. Bice is only a small token of the lasting and across-the-board appreciation that the person and his work enjoy to this day. One reason for the recurring praise might be Dr. Bice's experience as a former teacher who progressed through all roles in education administration to his Superintendence from which he retired in 2016 after four years of service. As such, it is little surprising that his legacy of adapting to context and providing flexibility in doing so is what educators know from their own practice to be the relevant key aspect to engaging people.

The flexibility, however, came at the price of lacking oversight and missed alignment with standards by looking at the patterns of tests and identifying the mismatch between high graduation rates and low advancement (D, p. 11), which the federal investigation then found in 2016:

And they were already on him (*Sentance*) before he even got there but apparently things never happened that was supposed to be responded to. So we went through this ACT Aspire thing for four years and now they've changed this to another test for two years and then we're going to have another test year after next. So how do you even compare one task to the other so you get any specific longitudinal pattern trends, you can do some statistical analysis with it and you can try and make it reliable and violet and there's some degree of competence in that, but a bunch of researchers will tell you can't do that very well. (D, p. 11)

The level of frustration is tangible in the repetitive language and the satirical simplification of complex and serious matters. The recording documents the interviewee's intonation became more intense, the sequence of words being sped up. There was a perceptible impetus of impatience that I found in other conversations when it turned to moving targets (D, p. 12), a metaphor for the frequent changes in Alabama leadership and in policy.

Notwithstanding issues of alignment, the interviewees and local newspapers alike praise Dr. Bice's work and its impact for successfully alleviating the conditions of schooling that strain educators. In August of 2019, for example, Dr. Bice led the opening ceremony of a new charter school in Birmingham in his role as the i3 Academy's Board's chair, giving an extensive interview to local newspapers (Powell Crain, 2019a) about the expectations and promises of the new school.

State Superintendents' work is appraised publicly every year, given extensive attention in local newspapers. If successful, the assessment prompts an upward salary adjustment that is formally reported by ALSDE as well as in the local news. Dr. Mackey's latest assessment was reported in great detail in December 2019. The School Board's review found his work to be of above average quality, raising his annual salary by 3% to \$252,350 per year (Powell Crain, 2019b). Indeed, all district superintendents' salaries were elevated by 3% as well, totaling an average raise of \$144,000. Superintendents' salaries reflect Alabama's disparities as well, however, showing a wide gap in annual compensation ranging from \$74,500 to \$235,700, excluding benefits and other compensatory agreements. While some superintendents are appointed and negotiate all terms of their contract, others are elected on the basis of a fixed term of service, only potentially negotiating their salaries. All district superintendents' 2019/20 salaries were reported in the local newspapers in the form of an interactive data tool based on the ALSDE memorandum FY20-3010 (Powell Crain, 2020a) that includes available data on each district's Alabama Report Card score, their number of employees, their current student enrollment and the median household income as of its last official report in 2017.

The following four tables were created using that interactive tool, each comparing the three leading and trailing districts by category: Table 18 is a comparison of the three highest and lowest paying school districts.

Table 18

Alabama School Superintendents' Salaries 2019-20 by highest and lowest income.

District	Salary	Employees	Enrollment	Median household income 2017
Alabaster City	\$235,707	758	6,213	\$74,383
Mobile County	\$235,586	7,136	53,020	\$45,349
Mountain Brook	\$225,824	640	4,320	\$132,825
Choctaw County	\$93,600	192	1,176	\$32,122
Lanett City	\$91,342	118	921	\$31,925
Linden City	\$82,407	68	471	\$34,871

Data source: Interactive data chart available on public tableau³³, sourcing data from the Alabama State Department of Education memorandum FY20-3010.

Counterintuitively, the highest paid superintendents are not those leading the wealthiest school systems and their salary does not correspond to either employees or enrollment numbers. Each system above counts a steady number of between 6 and 8 students per employee, with the superintendent earnings placing between \$4.4 and \$99.1 for each student enrolled. It seems reasonable to assume that district wealth, indicated in this database by median household income, might factor into superintendents' pay. The data in Table 19 reject that proposition, showing that while salary clusters, there is a wide range of difference within the clusters.

Table 19

Alabama School Superintendents' Salaries 2019-20 by highest and lowest median household income 2017

District	Salary	Employees	Enrollment	Median household income 2017
Mountain Brook	\$225,824	640	4,320	\$132,825
Pike Road City	\$186,550	220	2,183	\$102,500
Vestavia Hills	\$202,540	858	7,092	\$98,653
University Charter School	\$74,586	36	346	\$21,663
Sumter County	\$117,260	196	316	\$21,663
Greene County	\$106,080	179	125	\$20,954

Data source: Interactive data chart available on public tableau³⁴, sourcing data from the Alabama State Department of Education memorandum FY20-3010.

³³ public.tableau.com/profile/alabama.school.connection#!/vizhome/2020SuperintendentSalaries/DBFY20salaries

³⁴ public.tableau.com/profile/alabama.school.connection#!/vizhome/2020SuperintendentSalaries/DBFY20salaries

The wealthiest district pays best overall, yet the assumed correlation falters with the second and third wealthiest districts, collapsing at the bottom three districts: University Charter School in Livingston is located in Sumter County which explains the identical household income data of the charter school and the county. Greene County is its direct neighbor, placing the bottom three districts in the east part of the Black Belt, Alabama's poorest region. Tables 20 and 21 show the same six districts that result from an inquiry that controls for school size by number of employees and student enrollment, respectively, to clarify the relationship between salaries and school size.

Table 20

Alabama School Superintendents' Salaries 2019-20 by highest and lowest number of employees

District	Salary	Employees	Enrollment	Median household income 2017
Mobile County	\$235,586	7,136	53,020	\$45,349
Jefferson County	\$199,000	4,326	35,695	\$53,590
Baldwin County	\$212,940	3,763	30,041	\$52,562
LEAD Academy	\$100,000	28	346	\$44,985
Legacy Prep	\$121,074	24	125	\$33,770
Acceleration Day and Evening Academy	\$132,000	20	316	\$45,349

Data source: Interactive data chart available on public tableau³⁵, sourcing data from the Alabama State Department of Education memorandum FY20-3010.

Table 21

Alabama School Superintendents' Salaries 2019-20 by highest and lowest enrollment

District	Salary	Employees	Enrollment	Median household income 2017
Mobile County	\$235,586	7,136	53,020	\$45,349
Jefferson County	\$199,000	4,326	35,695	\$53,590
Baldwin County	\$212,940	3,763	30,041	\$52,562
LEAD Academy	\$100,000	28	346	\$44,985
Acceleration Day and Evening Academy	\$132,000	20	316	\$45,349
Legacy Prep	\$121,074	24	125	\$33,770

Data source: Interactive data chart available on public tableau³⁶ sourcing data from the Alabama State Department of Education memorandum FY20-3010.

Controlling for both measures identifies Alabama's largest public school districts and individual charter schools that form their own district. Alabama's first charter school in the state, Acceleration Day and Evening Academy in Mobile, had opened just before the 2018/19 academic year. The

³⁵ public.tableau.com/profile/alabama.school.connection#!/vizhome/2020SuperintendentSalaries/DBFY20salaries

³⁶ public.tableau.com/profile/alabama.school.connection#!/vizhome/2020SuperintendentSalaries/DBFY20salaries

following year, LEAD Academy resumed their first school year as Montgomery's first charter school and Legacy Prep was the first of its kind in the city of Birmingham.

The comparisons show that superintendents earn two to five times the median household income of their constituencies, making between \$4 and \$969 per student enrolled, a figure that drops to \$849 when excluding charter schools from the dataset. Districts' employee-student ratios are between 5 to 16 students per employee, with superintendents leading between 7,126 and 20 employees as well as between 53,020 and 125 students. Superintendents' terms of contract, including salaries and extra-contractual agreements, are negotiable as are school funds in general: Responsible entities such as cities and counties, the industry and business representatives, may advance funding for hiring more teachers or to lift their superintendent's salary. The emerging picture is one of great heterogeneity through disparate contexts in Alabama schooling administration expressed in widely differing compensation for superintendents' work.

To summarize, Alabama's education administration body consists of the Alabama State Department Education, its Board of Education, the State Superintendent and the districts and school leaders, and together it is responsible for a stable number of students over time, with student groups shifting toward more Hispanic students.

Table 22 documents a steady number of total student enrolment over a decade, shifting from 2.8% Hispanic students to 6.1% while at the same time reducing the share of black and white students by 3% and 2.7%, respectively.

Table 22

Alabama K-12 student enrolment by ethnicity, 2006 – 2014

	Total	White	%	Black	%	Hisp.	%	Asian-Pac. Islander	%	Pac. Islander	Am. Indian	Multi-race	Un-known
2005-06	743,604	440,235	59.2	267,236	35.9	20,795	2.8	7,658	1.0		5,817		1,863
2007-08	742,789	436,426	58.8	263,380	35.5	26,105	3.5	8,436	1.1		6,018		2,424
2008-09	745,668	436,909	58.6	261,913	35.1	29,099	3.9	8,903	1.2		6,175		2,669
2009-10	748,889	437,457	58.4	261,031	34.9	31,795	4.2	9,385	1.3		6,105		3,116
2010-11	749,084	436,579	58.3	258,381	34.5	33,807	4.5	9,516	1.3	135	6,072	2,447	2,147
2011-12	744,621	432,707	58.1	254,503	34.2	34,722	4.7	9,943	1.3	328	6,179	6,239	0
2012-13	744,637	429,179	57.6	252,397	33.9	37,685	5.1	9,920	1.3	471	6,136	8,849	0
2013-14	746,204	425,302	57.0	251,078	33.6	41,340	5.5	10,095	1.4	553	178	11,658	0
2014-15	744,106	418,823	56.3	247,286	33.2	45,692	6.1	10,198	1.4	606	6,338	15,163	0

The dynamic reflects larger national tendencies of growing non-white student bodies that today make up the majority of students in three Alabama counties: Jefferson, Barbour, and Russell. White population shares have dropped 8%, 5% and 10%, respectively, between 2000 and 2018. In that

same time frame, only two counties nationwide experienced becoming majority white: Calhoun County, South Carolina, and West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, each with a population of around 15,000 residents. (Krogstad, 2019) Table 23 delineates these trends based on nationally reported data that reflect of a changing student body toward more hispanic and fewer white students in the next decades.

Table 23

Changes in U.S. and AL K-12 enrolment 2002-12 and 2012-24

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/ Pacific Islander	American Indian/ Alaska Native
US 2002-12	-8.5	-2.1	6.5	0.9	-0.1
AL 2002-12	-2.6	-2.4	3.3	0.5	0.0
US 2012-24	-5.40	-0.80	4.90	1.4	-0.3

Data source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education.

In fact, long-term projections see a continuous trend toward 30% of Hispanics in 2050 compared to 14% in 2005 (Passel/Cohn, 2008). Alabama mirrors national dynamics in growing heterogeneity in education in other indicators as well: Students eligible for free and reduced price lunch (FRPL) and homeless student numbers will continue to rise as Table 24 shows in a comparison between the state of Alabama and the nation.

Table 24

Total number of students, number and percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch

	2000-01	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
US	46,579,068	48,941,267	48,995,812	49,084,316
AL	728,351	730,427	731,556	740,475
US	17,839,876	23,544,479	24,291,646	25,118,294
	38.3	48.1	49.6	51.3
AL	335,143	402,386	420,447	429,604
	46.0	55.1	57.5	58.0

Data source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2000-01, 2010-11, 2011-12, and 2012-13.

While Table 24 shows a slight rise in the poverty measure of FRPL per student, Table 25 documents a similar rise in breakfasts served overall and fairly steady numbers of lunches and snacks, adding the numbers from 2009-13 and 2013-14. The percentage of meals served for free climbed steadily.

Table 25*Number and percentage of breakfasts, lunches and snacks, by FRPL status, AL*

	Breakfasts	Lunches	Snacks	% Breakfasts			% Lunches			% Snacks		
				Free	Red. price	Paid	Free	Red. price	Paid	Free	Red. price	Paid
2004-05	29,521,341	92,533,053		67.7	7.8	15.5	52.3	8.9	38.8			
2006-07	32,770,332	971,821,639*		74.2	8.6	17.2	51.3	9.3	39.4			
2007-08	33,886,845	96,904,536		74.2	8.5	17.3	51.8	9.1	39.1			
2008-09	34,732,366	96,609,668		75.8	8.2	16.0	53.5	8.9	37.6			
2009-10	36,071,393	97,019,530	1,602,540	79.0	7.0	14.0	57.0	8.0	35.0	89.0	1.0	10.0
2010-11	35,976,378	95,282,434	1,641,091	81.0	6.0	13.0	60.0	7.0	33.0	90	1	9
2011-12	37,250,539	94,678,425	1,770,441	81.0	6.0	13.0	62.0	7.0	31.0	91	0	9
2013-14	41,379,248	87,585,930	2,015,526	83.0	4.0	13.0	70.0	6.0	24.0	92	0	8

Data source: Alabama Quick Facts 2006-2014, ALSDE

Note the two reporting errors contained in Table 25: The number of lunches served in the 2006-07 academic year contains one too many digits and the percentages of breakfasts served in the 2004-05 only add up to 91%. While reporting errors are unfortunate, they are certainly a part of any elaborate, large-scale reporting structures, no less those that are subject to frequent change. Note also that these FRPL data show a difference in reporting between ALSDE state level data and NCES national level data: While the national comparison seems to suggest a steady rise in FRPL offerings, the state data show a steeper increase of 20% in free meals served to students. Given the 2010 federal regulation providing FRPL for all students in a qualifying school, the report becomes questionable altogether. It may point to clustering there too with some schools not having any FRPL students at all and other schools serving having an increasing number of them. Different aggregate levels provide more precise and more faceted information for inquiries into complex indicators such as poverty, measured by student homelessness, for example. Table 26 seems to suggest that while poverty increased steadily nationwide, it remained stable in Alabama.

Table 26*Number and percentage of homeless students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools*

	Number of homeless students and percent of total public school enrollment					
	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
US	910,439	1,047,397	1,128,503	1,216,117	1,285,641	1,260,721
	1.8	2.1	2.3	2.4	2.6	2.5
AL	16,254	18,910	17,670	29,749	19,266	19,373
	2.2	2.5	2.4	4.0	2.6	2.6

Data source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *EDFacts* file 118, Data Group 655, extracted October 14, 2016, from the *EDFacts* Data Warehouse); and Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education," 2009-10 through 2014-15. (This table was prepared March 2017.)

Table 27 presents national and state data alongside each other, seemingly reassuring trends of overall stable poverty thresholds and slightly decreasing poverty rates in the past five years.

Table 27

Poverty Factsheets Alabama 2017 - 2019

	One person	Two people	Three people	Four people	
Annual poverty thresholds by family size	\$12,082	\$15,391	\$18,871	\$24,257	2017
	\$12,228	\$15,569	\$19,105	\$24,563	2018
	\$12,488	\$15,887	\$19,515	\$25,094	2019
	United States		Alabama		
Poverty rate	15.9		19		2012
	15.8		18.9		2013
	15.5		19.2		2014
	14.7		18.5		2015
	14		17.2		2016
	13.4		16.9		2017
Median household income	\$51,371		\$41,610		2012
	\$52,250		\$42,882		2013
	\$53,657		\$42,917		2014
	\$55,775		\$44,833		2015
	\$57,617		\$46,309		2016
	\$60,336		\$48,193		2017

Data source: alabamapossible.org

The data is sourced from publications by Alabama Possible, a non-profit organization dedicated to the mission of "removing barriers to prosperity through education, collaboration, and advocacy" (alabamapossible.org). According to the summary of data presented in Table 27, median household income has increased nationally as well as in Alabama, implying that raised income alleviates poverty. The data do not reflect "pockets of poverty" (L, p. 1), or clusters, so what may initially appear as affirmative data on controlled levels of poverty only seems so on that aggregate level. On the level of individual school districts, poverty state data reveal clusters of poverty in the Black Belt as well as further clustering dynamics over time. Because these data representations characterized the relationship between poverty and schooling in ways that contested what I thought I had learned previously, I embarked on the following brief descriptive inquiry into U.S. Census' SAIPE³⁷ poverty data.

³⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates Program, full data interactively available here: https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/saife/#/?map_geoSelector=aa_c

During an earlier stage of my research process in which I chose my interview partners, I had utilized SAIPE data to learn about poverty rates and distribution in Alabama. Both Alabama Possible data and nation-to-state-comparisons seemed to contradict earlier conclusions, so I reopened and broadened my initial inquiry from the intended NCLB timeframe to the most current data to identify the five poorest school districts where over 50% of 5-17 year olds live in poverty. I extracted their population and poverty rate from 2002 to the most current data of 2018, finding continuously negative population changes in the five districts depicted in Table 28.

Table 28

Population change of school districts with highest poverty rate in 5-17 year olds, 2002 – 2018

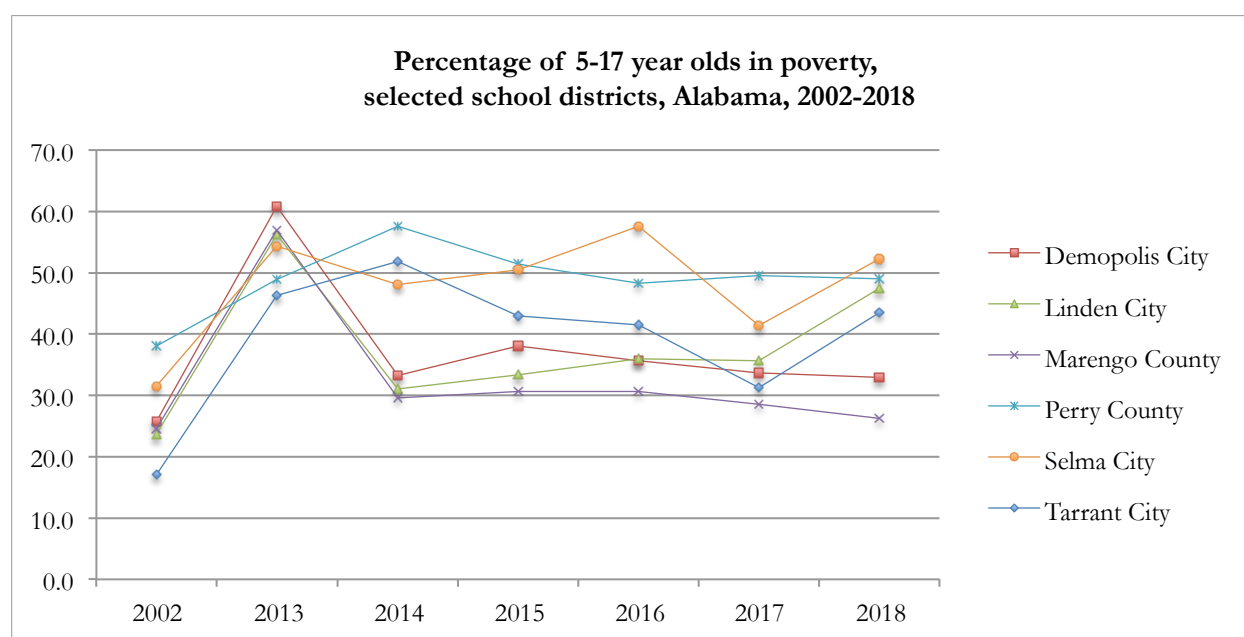
	Population change	% Population change
Demopolis City	7,491 to 6,778	-9.5
Linden City	5,166 to 4,275	-17.3
Marengo County	9,684 to 8,013	-17.3
Perry County	11,707 to 9,140	-21.9
Selma City	19,896 to 18,149	-8.8
Tarrant City	6,981 to 6,414	-8.1

Data source: SAIPE

Given the declining population, I extracted these districts' poverty rates and plotted them on a timeline. Figure 14 documents growing poverty rates for those five districts between 2002 and 2018, rising from 25.7% to 32.9% in Demopolis, for example, including spikes of 60.8% in 2013. Linden City's poverty rose from 23.7% to 47.4% including a similar spike of 56.2% in 2013. Marengo County reduced its increase to 26.3%, almost to the initial 2002 value of 24.6%. Perry County and Selma City school districts serve significantly larger populations despite their number declining, sustaining growing poverty rates from 38% and 31.5% in 2002 to 49% and 52.3% in 2018, respectively. Both of their highest rates placed at 57.6% in 2014 and 2016 each. Tarrant City lost relatively little of its population but experienced significant poverty growth: A 17% in 2002 increased to 51.8% in 2014, decreasing to 43.5% in 2018. Collectively, these data show that school districts that serve students in poverty at the highest rate are shrinking, yet they experience overall steady poverty levels between 2002 and 2018.

Figure 14

Percentage of 5-17 year-olds in poverty, selected school districts, Alabama, 2002-2018



Data source: SAIPE

Poverty rates of 5-17 year olds consistently increased in the 11 years between 2002 and 2013, the intended NCLB years, and then adopted varying dynamics. It is worth reiterating that between 30% to 50% of these districts' 5-17 year-old-students live in poverty; a striking number for any school district and yet more so for small districts with starkly declining populations in the Black Belt where poverty clusters.

Thus far, I have summarized Plan 2020 and given a brief overview of the education administration structures in the state before arriving at an analysis of enrolment and student body characteristics. The inquiry documented how data reveal different insights depending on their aggregate level: Existing and increasing problems of "pockets of poverty" (L, p. 1) characterize school and school district contexts of schooling. This thesis' exploration of Alabama's NCLB genealogy struggles with erroneous and inconsistent, hence unreliable reporting due to the many requirement changes and the "moving targets" (D, p. 12) of the past two decades. ALSDE's Alabama Annual Reports (1999 – 2007), the Quick Facts (2006-2018) and the State Report Card (2008/09 - 2014/15) are therefore only a beginning basis that is then supplemented and completed by the interviews I conducted and media reports that document public statements and meetings, rationales for decisions and at times individual opinions of leaders. The entirety of this collected material forms the fragmented mosaic of knowledge about policy developments during the intended NCLB period.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports were the central piece of NCLB's accountability rationale that tracked the progress each state had committed to making after the policy took effect in 2002.

Alabama's documentation of AYP begins in the academic year of 2004-05. Table 29 reports the number and percentage of schools that met specific portions of the set policy goals each year

Table 29

Number and percentage of schools meeting AYP goals

% of goals met	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2008-09*	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
100	729	1,194	1,137	1,193	1,035	1,016	1,027
90-99.99	227	99	162	104	212	196	180
80-89.99	223	43	35	41	73	87	95
70-79.99	81	6	8	17	31	40	29
60-69.99	34	5	9	13	13	18	22
less than 60	72	17	7	8	11	26	12
% of goals met	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2008-09*	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
100	53.36	87.54	83.73	86.7	75.27	73.46	75.24
90-99.99	16.62	7.26	11.93	7.56	15.42	14.17	13.19
80-89.99	16.33	3.15	2.58	2.98	5.31	6.29	6.96
70-79.99	5.93	0.44	0.59	1.24	2.25	2.89	2.12
60-69.99	2.49	0.37	0.66	0.94	0.95	1.3	1.61
less than 60	5.27	1.25	0.52	0.58	0.8	1.88	0.88

*2008-09 data only reported in the 2009-10 report

Data source: Alabama Annual Reports, 2004-2012, ALSDE

Reporting these data in ratios as well as in absolute numbers offers a more tangible insight into the scale of schooling taking place in Alabama's approximately 1,370 schools. AYP development in the top 10% of goals met showed a steep increase in schools that meet the AYP goals completely, holding at over 83% of schools that met 100% of set goals for three consecutive years. Equally, the number of schools that met less than 70% of set goals dropped initially and remained low for the same three years. This can be explained by the way Alabama's progression toward the 100% goal was set: Beginning low and increasing the expectation over time allows for strong results in the first years that are likely to deteriorate as the performance expectation rises. Indeed, Alabama's initially positive trend reversed, showing fewer schools reaching 100% of goals and more schools falling into middle and lower ranges of goals met. No less because of the 2008-09 reporting gap, the data prompt critical inquiry.

In July 2012, local media reported that the U.S. Department of Education had granted Alabama's freeze request, effectively halting the state's NCLB progression at the 2010-11 level and assessing the 2011-12 and 2012-13 tests at that previous threshold as long as Alabama continued to work on its new AYP system. Under NCLB, any subgroup of students was required to perform at standard, i.e. level III, on the Alabama Reading and Math Test (ARMT) or graduate through the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) to earn their school a passing AYP assessment. (Powell

Crain, 2012a) Figure 15 visualizes Alabama's Annual Measurable Objectives (AMO) progression of thresholds.

Figure 15

AMOs Percentage of proficient students

ANNUAL MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES Percentage of Proficient Students (ARMT & AHSGE Baseline Standards)											
READING											
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Grade 3		73	73	77	77	81	85	88	92	96	100
Grade 4	68	68	73	73	77	77	82	86	91	95	100
Grade 5		73	73	77	77	81	85	88	92	96	100
Grade 6	74	74	78	78	81	81	85	89	93	96	100
Grade 7		63	63	68	68	74	79	84	89	95	100
Grade 8	43	43	51	51	59	59	67	76	84	92	100
Grade 11	81	81	84	84	86	86	89	92	95	97	100
MATHEMATICS											
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Grade 3		63	63	68	68	74	79	84	89	95	100
Grade 4	61	61	67	67	72	72	78	83	89	94	100
Grade 5		59	59	65	65	71	77	82	88	94	100
Grade 6	39	39	48	48	56	56	65	74	83	91	100
Grade 7		40	40	49	49	57	66	74	83	91	100
Grade 8		48	48	55	55	63	70	78	85	93	100
Grade 11	68	68	73	73	77	77	82	86	91	95	100

Retrieved from: alabamaschoolconnection.org/2012/07/19/nclb-amo-requirements-for-ayp-frozen-for-al/

In August 2012, then State Superintendent Dr. Bice confirmed schools increasingly not meeting AYP requirements due to below-standard special-education test scores (Powell Crain, 2012a). For example, 22 of 91 Mobile County schools had failed to make AYP, half of those due to special-education results. In contrast, that district's superintendent gave an unfazed comment to the press, expressing her gratitude for the achieved results given the rising difficulty level of the test of that year (Havner Philips, 2012). Later in the same month, schools' growing inability to reach proficiency standards because of special education students' test scores prompted the introduction of Plan 2020 as a way forward to a policy tailored to Alabama (Powell Crain, 2012b). The embedded criticism of NCLB and the following emerging argument in favor of Plan 2020 focused on after-school readiness skills, student growth and continuous feedback.

Figure 16

What is AYP? Original slide of work meeting presentation in August 2012 (Powell Crain, 2012b)

WHAT IS AYP?

AYP is ...

- A measure of academic proficiency set at a level for attainment by all students.
- A comparison of last year's 3rd grade student achievement to this year's 3rd grade student achievement.
- A method used to rank and assign status to a school or a school system based on a requirement of 100% attainment of all goals for all students.

AYP isn't ...

- A measure of academic mastery against a standard of college and workforce readiness.
- A comparison of the academic achievement of the same group of students over time against standards of increasing complexity and rigor.
- A method of identifying areas of student learning in need of improvement at the point of instructional delivery to be used to adjust instructional practice.

 **2012** Adequate Yearly Progress

The above slide utilizes the rhetoric tool of parallelism to problematize the cohort-to-cohort comparison embedded in measuring AYP and the core idea of one measure for all. It does so by repeating and thereby emphasizing the phrase *all students*. Note also the parallel information structure of the slide: Both sections contain three identical sentence beginnings, creating unity and coherence in the language and the message it drives: AYP lacks relevant measures. A 2005 to 2012 chart with improved ARMT scores supported the argument that improvement had taken place.

Further along in the meeting, a discussion ensued about why special education scores were not improving and how the state had initially chosen a subgroup sample size of 40 or more students as one of only eight other states. Factually correctly, Dr. Bice stated that "no one in this room" had chosen that number (Powell Crain, 2012b) yet of course the responsible state officials at the time had chosen that aspect of Alabama's NCLB policy version. In comparison, most states opted to report on subgroups if fewer than 15 (6 states), 20 to 25 (8 states), 30 to 35 (16 states) or 40 students (14 states) of one group were present at any one school in an academic year (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 40). The vast majority of Alabama's school systems are small in size, so choosing a high requirement number for a subgroup lowered the likelihood of a school or a system having to report on any given subgroup: In 2018, Alabama reported 138 school systems, 92 of which served between 1,000 and 4,999 students, followed by 26 systems including between 5,000

and 9,999 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). All other sizes, from fewer than 1,000 students to more than 50,000 students are in the low single digit range. Notwithstanding that built-in advantage, disability subgroup reports deflated AYP rates effectively. Dr. Bice's response to a Board member's question about whether schools may have had incentives to keep the special education student count below the n-count:

He felt certain that our school systems would not do that as it is their responsibility to focus on all children and not on the “n-count”, but acknowledged that yes, that can happen when folks look at children as numbers and not children. (Powell Crain, 2012b)

It appears that earlier AYP documentation had been based on scores from alternate achievement standards that fewer than 10% of students with disabilities had taken (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 39). By the 2007-08 school year, Alabama had received federal guidance to apply a proxy method for calculating AYP for disability subgroups:

If a school misses AYP solely on the basis of students with disabilities, a proxy that is equivalent to 2.0 percent of all students tested will be added to the percentage of students with disabilities in the school that were proficient. Alabama will use this adjusted percent proficient to re-examine whether the school or district made AYP for the 2007-08 school year. The actual percentage proficient will be reported to parents and the public. (U.S. Department of Education, 2008)

Even with the proxy measure added, AYP numbers dropped and became one of the arguments for introducing Plan 2020 and its growth measure that documented and credited students' progress, especially for the disability subgroup:

Bice acknowledged that the one subgroup where, as a state, our schools struggle is proficiency of students in special education. While Bice said he “could spend an hour” on this subject alone. (Powell Crain, 2012b)

The core message of the meeting was the movement away from federal, across-the-board guidelines and toward Plan 2020 as the Alabama-specific policy focused on college- and career-readiness and growth measures. It was carried by the team's extensive collection of input from education administration as well as local business and industry representatives. (Powell Crain, 2012b) Dr. Bice's broad involvement of the stakeholders as well as the specific focus on the Alabama context earned him praise not only in that meeting but also for years to come.

A preliminary conclusion presents itself at this point: Meeting NCLB accountability policy requirements challenged policymakers to change reporting structures, to collect different data large-scale, and as a result of these demands, data reports are erroneous at times, including delayed reporting of data long after its due and wrong data due to what likely were typing errors, inconsistent use of indicators and forms of reporting. For example, dropout rates were reported last for the 2010-11 school year before the Alabama Quick Facts changed to reporting graduation rates only. Similarly, reports of ethnicity changed from simple white and non-white categories to the variety recognized today, yet still underserving families that would need more than one of the available

markers to represent their ethnicity: "My children are as much white as they are black, but I can't select biracial. I have to choose." (L, p. 17)

Teacher quality opens interesting insight into Alabama's NCLB experience given its chronic challenge to educate and retain teachers in the necessary numbers. The required progression toward 100% of classes being taught by highly-qualified teachers in content and teaching ability represented an added challenge. Still, Alabama data in Table 30 show a gradual teacher quality increase over the NCLB period.

Table 30

Percent of classes taught by highly-qualified teachers

Percent of Classes Taught by Highly-Qualified Teachers										
	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
All schools	81.8	90.8	94.5	94.3	94.8	96.2	91.3	96.1	96.9	96.5
Elementary										
High-poverty	75	89	95.2	95.9	96.8	97.7	85.9	96.1	97.7	97.4
Low-poverty	85.1	94	98.1	96.4	98.3	98.3	91.8	98.1	98.7	99
All elementary	85	94.5	97.1	96.4	97.7	97.9	92.3	97.1	98.2	99.2
Secondary										
High-poverty	66.5	78.4	79.3	83	80.8	89	79.6	89.4	90.2	89
Low-poverty	83.6	89.6	93.2	90.2	93	95.7	88.7	96.7	96.8	96.8
All secondary	77.9	84.2	90.1	90.1	90	94.2	89.2	94.6	94.9	94.4

Data source: Annual Reports 2004-2014, ALSDE

Measures dip in the 2010-11 school year but increase strongly overall. There were more highly-qualified teachers in low-poverty indicated secondary schools, yet the difference shrank from 17.1% points to 7.9% points. Elementary school students in low-poverty indicated schools experienced highly-qualified teachers at higher rates in 2004-05 and at almost no different rates in 2013-14.

Table 31

Percent of classes taught by non-highly-qualified teachers

	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
All schools	18.2	9.2	5.5	5.7	5.2	3.8	8.7	3.9	no longer reported
Elementary									
High-poverty	25	11	4.8	4.1	3.2	2.3	14.1	3.9	
Low-poverty	14.9	6	1.9	3.6	1.7	1.7	8.2	1.9	
All elementary	15	5.5	2.9	3.6	2.4	2.1	7.7	2.9	
Secondary									
High-poverty	33.5	21.6	20.7	17	19.2	11	20.4	10.6	
Low-poverty	16.4	10.4	6.8	9.8	7	4.3	11.3	3.3	
All secondary	22.1	15.8	9.9	9.9	10	5.8	10.8	5.4	

Data source: Annual Reports 2004-2014, ALSDE

Parallel to that, classes taught by non-highly-qualified teachers decrease from over 18% to under 4%, yet reporting on this aspect of teacher quality was discontinued early. Initially, the state had reported more poverty characteristics of classes taught yet discontinued that particular data stream after four years.

Table 32

Classes and percent of high-poverty elementary and secondary classes

	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	no longer reported
Total classes	141,286	153,492	158,496	159,210	
Total high-poverty classes	29,430	29,456	42,805	33,866	
%	20.8	19.2	27.0	21.3	
of those elementary	23,134	18,590	25,681	25,286	
%	78.6	63.1	60.0	74.7	
of those secondary	6,296	10,866	17,124	8,580	
%	21.4	36.9	40.0	25.3	

Data source: Annual Reports 2004-2007, ALSDE

It is important to keep in mind that these teacher quality data are not presented for analysis but rather to exemplify the practical difficulties in documenting and reporting large varieties of data in the way that was required by NCLB. Both Alabama state report structures - the Report Card, previously Annual Reports, and the Quick Facts - document teacher education and qualification over time. Having plotted the data next to each other over time, inconsistencies in the numbers and the reporting structures appear.

Table 33

Education and Certification Levels of Teachers (AL Quick Facts)

	2005-06	2007-08	Reported as 2007-08*	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2013-14 (in 2015)
Not specified	402	473	415	379	376	274	331	783	849
BA	21,894	22,922	21,707	20,635	19,836	18,635	18,781	20,616	20,743
MA	22,910	23,717	24,324	24,744	24,913	24,728	25,461	28,062	27,929
6-year	1,891	1,971	1,961	2,056	2,087	2,146	2,208	4,479	4,642
Doctorate	222	281	353	351	361	291	308	---	---
Alternative								550	635
Emergency								236	324

*in the 2008-09 report, --- not reported; data no longer reported after 2013-14

Data source: AL Quick Facts 2005-06 to 2014-15

Table 33 includes an error in the 2008-09 report and shows no available data for alternative and emergency certifications until 2013-14. Table 34 provides those same data and also more detailed information on career and technical certification, alternative BA qualification and on teachers who do not hold a certification at all.

Table 34*Education and Certification Levels of Teachers*

	2004-05	2005-06	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Not specified	---	---	---	660	459	760	734	762	381	1,282
Career / Technical Certification	444	569	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
BA	20,345	---	18,785	22,191	21,263	20,376	19,495	19,978	19,435	21,276
Alternative BA	559	679	762	899	680		---	---		
MA	23,266	29,222	22,418	29,238	31,076	29,777	29,187	26,648	30,446	23,799
6-year	2,236	4,388	2,855	4,214	3,953	4,408	4,520	4,607	4,253	2,549
Doctorate										
Alternative certificates	---	679	---	---	---	1,043	678	585	595	644
Emergency certificates	302	489	600	519	308	187	159	268	291	339
No current certificate	562	650	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Data source: Annual Reports and Report Card, 2004-05 to 2014-15

Table 34 contains two unexpectedly high numbers – not specified certificates in 2014-15 and alternative certificates in 2010-11 - and neither table depicts discernable patterns. The reported numbers differ strikingly across the board and along categories and years even though all data stem from the same reporting agency. The reader is left wondering not only about the gaping differences in numbers, but also about the difference between reported categories: Holding no current certificate may signify a teachers' ongoing renewal process or the lack of any certification; it is unclear what an alternative BA is precisely and how that is different from alternative certificates, for example. Both tables exemplify how such data reports can neither provide the insight into schooling's working nor offer transparency to the public.

Together, AYP and teacher quality data served as examples for accountability policy manifesting itself in reports and reporting structures over time that are inconsistent. This irregular reporting may have resulted from multiple changes in reporting structures and created data that cannot sustain analysis and therefore informs neither policy nor practice reliably. Too many changes introduced too quickly and too repeatedly likely strained existing capacities until finally overstretching them. Reporting then became busy work outside of what interviewees understand to be their pedagogical practice (Da, p. 8) as a direct and unsurprising result. The reported data characterized as "dead data" (D, p. 13) that was of limited use if any. In an effort to generate so-called evidence, accountability turned itself on its back, undermining its own standard as the reports become futile and unusable for their intended purposes.

Erroneously reported, unreliable data are a direct and foreseeable result of NCLB's own accountability construct and not a matter of individual fault or liability (Hopmann, 2008). The argument at hand accentuates the need to recognize the fundamentally systemic nature of the issue: Where proper reporting is not possible due to lacking capacities, such as reporting infrastructure and

data expertise, policy expectations cannot be met. The scope of capacity building necessary for NCLB would have required an "unprecedented scale of intensity, focus and comprehensiveness" (Mintrop, 2008, p. 147) or a significant reduction of the policy's focus onto meaningful comparisons within the state along a multiple-step, multi-indicator process to be able to properly assess conditions and resources of individual contexts (Mintrop, 2008, p. 148) – none of which happened in Alabama. Instead, the interview material shows how those in charge of schooling maintained the dissonance between policy expectation and the immediate needs of their pedagogical standard and practice. Their continuous gap management used the discretion available to them in order to translate policy into the day-to-day pedagogy (Donaldson/Woulfin, 2018, p. 1), thereby satisfying formal requirements while keeping schooling functional:

We are as teachers and educators rule followers and so we're going to make sure that we do right and do what we're supposed to do and be accountable to who we're supposed to be accountable to as best we can. And (erm) so that year in, year out, and then the fact that they wanted to continually change the game (erm) And they should, I mean they want to improve the process, but it just wasn't improving it. We witnessed it within the state of Alabama. So the federal law really didn't change much over time. Um, but Alabama kept trying to figure out how we're going to deal with it. (B, p. 6)

The interviewee's comment on not much having changed over time seems to contradict the numerous different policy changes. However, understanding the maintained distance between policy and pedagogical practice as a successful example of gap management clarifies that confusion: The leader's exertion of school-level decision-making is beneficial (Donaldson/Woulfin, 2018, p. 4) because it provides the needed stability to the school and its constituency to focus on quality pedagogical work against the frustrating background of moving policy targets and accountability data focused on testing (Da, p. 8). Similar frustrations of gap management exist in environments with very good conditions for schooling where accountability requirements are reached easily but experienced to limit the community and the school (Knapp/Hopmann, 2017, p. 238) in their aim toward much loftier goals for their students than the set policy targets (B, p. 7).

The interviewee soundboard echoes agreement that accountability to professional standards and their measures are essential and needed, however, there is significant criticism on policy timing and content:

And I know we got graded down on areas that we knew already had shown in other reports that we'd made great improvements in if they just would have you use your same (hammers fist on table) judgment (hammers fist on table), whatever you want to judge me, but put it all together (hammers fist on table) at the same year. The ScanTron data, the test, we just went to his computer adaptive. We took it in April. We're supposed to do- You're going to get your results quick (hammers fist on table) , you know, end of may (hammers fist on table) early June (hammers fist on table). We got an email last week saying hopefully you'll get it second week in October. (D, p. 13)

The problem of having had unconnected data points as a result of data reported months after the fact are criticized as being unhelpful and not aiding growth at all (B, p. 11). Consistency in reporting and locally fresh data are needed to inform instruction meaningfully and fairly:

We need some consistency you know, and for teachers- that drives them crazy when they're already working themselves to death and then every time something changes we're starting this whole new deal. And that's not fair to them either. (D, p. 14)

The interview took place end of September of 2018 and the Report Card was published by the end of October, surprising everyone by having added a measure for absenteeism and the results of the 10th grade ACT Aspire that had been taken for the first time. There had been significant issues administering the test as it was taken digitally for the first time. The change of the assessment criteria relevant for the Report Card had not been communicated, leading to some schools and district scoring surprisingly low, in turn causing them to justify themselves to their communities. (B, p. 13)

The more fundamental challenge lies in the time it takes to make lasting changes:

Some of those key things at the state level and thrown us out of mix. So really it's not something you just correct the next year. It's okay, it is a three or four-year deal before you get back and how long does it take to really get a pattern and data and research to show this is reliable information. So we've just had a lot of that stuff going on top of the other stuff. (D, p. 11)

Another issue with the moving target (D, p. 12) in education policy is not only the change in requirement but the change in the level of the requirement, as exemplified before with the high school graduation requirements:

(F)or so many years we had a high school graduation exam, right. (...) as soon as I took that away, the graduation rates went through the roof. So you had an unexpected, you know, anomaly with that. (D, p. 11)

I think there's a change (erm) in federal requirements in some cases and then some are changes in state requirements are or what the State Board of Education puts in place. Some of it is a reaction to the requirements that we have to have, whether it's through No Child or now ESSA. So some of those you have like graduation, we were- the state (hammers fist on table) was reporting graduation rate in one way and then I think they got guidance from the federal department. They had to report a different way so they changed it. And the same thing with the assessments. We had a graduation exam and then when the federal policy change we put in Common Core here which changed the assessment material. So we got rid of the end of the graduation exam, which was a basic skills test essentially. Um, and it was very low level. So it was, we were good to get rid of it. But then we replaced it (erm) like here recently, the ACT, which is not necessarily- I mean ACT is a college going assessment (Da, p. 7)

Both passages indicate that moving targets (D, p. 12) based on shifting requirements themselves as well as the academic levels of those requirements are problematic. The interviewee continues to exemplify that through the current mandatory assessment that is the ACT. It yields some predictive value for college success, but it is not designed to assess what students have learned or trace any kind of academic growth for the individual student, and it ignores the fact that some students may not be college bound but looking to join the industry. (Da, p. 7) A concerning effect is that it deflates teacher morale and makes a tax referendum hard to argue:

It affected us quite a bit. (...) Public perception, which is huge. (sighs) (erm) Some of it too has to do a finance, you know, if you want to go out and say let's increase tax referendum to get more taxes and the public says, well y'all are failing at what you're doing now. It is teacher morale in terms of when you get continually hit. (D, pp. 12f)

Given these challenges, the interviewee soundboard characterizes the current direction as more fruitful in terms of tracking movement of individual students and overall more positive than previous tests and scores, yet, businesses don't care for the ACT (Da, 10), so rebuilding the career technical programs is viewed as essential to provide students with more options, a wider horizon and opportunity (D, p. 9):

Then we've progressed at least where the A to F report card now it's based on movement of kids, which I think is a lot better and a lot of ways. Okay. Now that's not total, but it's like it's Scan Tron at the lower levels is what they use as a test too and it actually allows you to track a kid starting in eighth grade and see how far you moved them forward individually and I think that's a much better process measure. (...) Okay, you make a school average of 22 on the ACT this year. You make a 20 the next year. It's two separate sets of kids. So, so what they're doing now, it's kind of a combined thing. Okay. The Scan Tron, you're talking about movement of kids. ACT, which is part of that, is still the way it was, okay. Work keys still the way it is for our twelfth grade. Okay. Attendance is thrown in there. That's something that you can control. So it's, it's a better system than it was under No Child Left Behind but it's still not perfect. (H, p. 8)

I think in Alabama and across our nation, you're seeing more of a shift and the idea that assessment is not as important as it used to be. And I thought, I know parents, (laughs) I know teachers and parents, there's some tired of assessments. So there's some of these numbers that, you know, it's, it's what are really key things that define what a good graduate is, a prepared graduate from school that's going to be prepared and able to do, have a good productive life, whether that's college or the workforce or whatever they're doing. (...)Um, and uh, but it gives us an opportunity to be more open and flexible with what we offer for kids to know. And for a long time especially No Child Left Behind and we didn't have the ability to do it. (D, p. 9)

The first passage references the new Report Card structure and the recent change to digital testing through Scan Tron³⁸, a private company that administers various state-mandated online tests across the nation. The point made above is that tracking through individual growth measure and attendance as additional measure seems meaningful, yet there is still significant room for improvement. The second passage adds to that sentiment and connects it to the larger point of test-based accountability as such: The question at hand today is what schooling does for someone's life in whatever direction that person might want to take it: "Everything for everyone sounds good but sometimes isn't; be wary of data" (G, p. 3). As a result, the mandatory ACT test does not help fix problems but passes them on to the next level, however, gaps need to be filled. Before that, however, much more fundamental questions need to be answered first: Is there food to eat? How is that student's home life? Can they see properly? Do they have hearing or visual aids if they need them? (G, 3) Interviewees' awareness of the complexity of schooling is sobering and leaves no room for doubt about the professional standards they commit to.

³⁸ <https://www.scantron.com/>

Their standards, their accountability

There is a prevailing tone of seriousness and sense of care across the interviewee material, and that expressed itself in the intensity with which every person addressed my request to educate me on what I needed to know to understand schooling in Alabama. Interviewees explained how they counter structures of labeling in their practice and often offered distinct examples of the structure of the problem they seek to address. One memorable reason for this interviewee's policy of letting students show up without judging them on what they did before is captured in this narrative about graduation day in third grade:

Well then the teachers go back to their classroom (...) talk about the year (...). We go in the classroom and the teacher's just up there talking to the parents. Everyone's taking pictures of their children and their awards, and there is this little boy sitting at a desk with his back to the room by himself, just sitting there. (...) And it's that, you know, it's that moment where I look at the thirdgrader and I think: that will be one of my kids that I'm working with in ten years because of moments just like this, where we're all hugging and bringing them in and taking pictures and walking around telling all of us how great our kids are. And no one is even aware that he is in the room, like it's he is invisible. He will take this moment and he will carry it for 10 years and 10 years from now, like there will be something academically that will come out because of this very moment. And I would see it over and over and over again. And I walked over to him and I sat down beside him and he looked up at me and the minute- and I said, I said hi, what's your name? And said Jordan. And I said: Are you sad today? And- tears. I mean just crocodile tears, you know, and he was like: Yeah, my mom didn't come. But that right there summed up for me- I looked at that kid and I thought that is every single one of the football players that I work with. That is them. That is what they went through on a daily basis. Moments like that. (W, p. 15)

Being connected to what happens in school is viewed as being one of the most basic preconditions for students so they can have a place in schooling and a purpose in being there. Offering students the opportunity to show up anew every day means affording students a new opportunity to do well, regardless of their history, thereby creating spaces without judgment that allows for new developments:

When you show up, (...) today's your first day of the rest of your life. What are you going to be, you know, became my attitude. (...) I didn't know. I didn't look it up. I didn't- And I think that alone really gave me the ability to help them. (...) Like today, all of you in the room are on the same starting level. You know, it all starts over here. Now. What do you want to be? What do you want to do with the opportunity? Let's go do it. And I think just having that mentality of I'm just gonna allow him to show up and be who they all are and go from there. They saw that, you know - she's not judging. She is not talking to me or doing what everyone else in education has always done. So immediately there's a trust, I trust her. She's different. (W, p. 27)

This passage characterizes a clear stance on this person's professional standard. It followed an anecdote about a student athlete who had been released from a previous college. The interviewee had inquired about the transfer student at their previous college, being informed that "(y)ou're not going to be able to do anything with them. He's not going to listen to anything you say. He's anger management issues, he doesn't like white people. He doesn't like women. You shouldn't be alone with him in a room." (W, p. 26) The negativity and fear immediately transferred onto the

relationship: "I was terrified of him." (W, p. 26), the interviewee remembers and also recalls losing that athlete as a result:

Well, he ended up flunking out of our- you know? I mean, it was the same cycle because we- I treated him like the criminal that I, you know, I had made up in my head that he was. And after that I realized like I can't- he wouldn't leave my brain, you know, I kept thinking like how that worked- That wasn't good. And so from that moment on, I said, I made a deal with myself that I would never- I call it, I would never google a player. I would never go back. (W, p. 26)

The case is another prime example for the argument that education is about forming relationships (G, 3) and believing that all students can learn (Da, p. 20). Interviewees start every conversation by asking what is best for their children (B, p. 27) and often the answer is connectedness to the community as exemplified above by Jordan's story above as well as this principal's leadership exemplified here:

And I think that's really important on a campus that has 3000 kids and diverse population and extreme diversity in levels of kids academically. So I preach to my, my folks all the time, my staff that we, we have got to find something to have a, a kid um, whenever the kid's niche find something to make them part of a smaller community within a very large school community. (H, p. 8)

On the bigger scale of accountability policy, the interviewees take issue with the fact that whatever the measure, "(w)e're in a community that has for too long, regardless of the policy, and regardless of the leadership, both the local and state, probably national level, we've not been successful for all students." (Da, p. 1) That is clearly identified as a problem and by the same token, "because of (...) maybe our community and the history of this community (erm) I think there's a history of it being tough to really focus on getting education done right." (Da, p. 1) While there is criticism about the state's changing requirements and leadership issues, the commitment to professional standards is unambiguous: "We've all kind of said, you know, it's time to get it right and we do care about the state because there's an accountability piece. (Da, p. 1) This sentiment is reflected in other conversations as well:

Our achievement is not anywhere near where we want it to be. (D, p. 2)

I'll be honest, our attitude here is our test scores aren't where we want them to be from a summative part. (D, p. 9)

There is no rejection of accountability at all. In fact, interviewees voice a lot of self-accountability, carried by the full realization that "it's fine to have a measure, it's fine to have accountability. It's fine to judge us." (B, p. 5) because educators "are rule followers (who) make sure that we do it right and do what we're supposed to do and be accountable to who we're supposed to be accountable to as best we can." (B, p. 6) The quality work that happens in the classroom will eventually show in the measures (Da, p. 8) and that is different to NCLB because, the interviewee feels, it is no longer focused on teaching to the test because "that is not what education is about" (Da, p. 8). Dissatisfaction is also voiced regarding teacher evaluation that is tied to test scores:

(O)bviously somebody comes in with an inherited advantage (and) those who don't have an advantage are encouraged to cheat (..) because if you, if you link this to the paycheck, people are trying to survive by any means necessary, you know, where they're going to do what it takes to keep themselves in good standing professionally. (L, p. 12)

I don't know that we care: I have worked with kids that do not eat when they are at school, football players that are freaking homeless, live on a park bench and we're worried about passing the state math test. (W, p. 7)

Interviewees distinguish clearly between their commitment to accountability and quality practice on the one hand, and test-based, single-indicator policy on the other hand. Interviewees capitalize on identifying students' interests (Da, p. 3) so that schools are better able to guide students within their talents (G, p. 2), specifically emphasizing vocational opportunities and consequently, industrial careers that the surrounding communities in North Alabama offer. Some schools bring in welders (G, p. 3) while others offer students to learn a trade in double-degree programs with local community colleges (F, pp. 14f). Whatever the specific route, any "diploma has to have value and meaning (...) it needs to be a currency" (Da, p. 10) and that is specified as students being able to meet demands of local businesses and industries so to have "those traits we identify" (Da, p. 10). Changing education means changing that philosophy of being "consumed (...) with money and data" (W, p. 6). It is about "the stories of our kids that walk in our doors" (W, p. 6) and supporting them instead of blaming them and breeding frustration that makes teaching and learning impossible (G, p. 3).

Interviewees emphasize the histories and contexts of students as relevant to their education and they prioritize those over academics. Basic needs such as having food and living in acceptable domestic and health conditions "have got to be attended to (...) before you can even attempt to get to the academics" (D, p. 2; G, p. 3). These problems end up becoming the interviewees' job to deal with:

"(A)nd we have to help those (hammers fist on table) students (hammers fist on table) move beyond that, solve those problems, and (hammers fist on table) continue to try (hammers fist on table) to (...) (hammers fist on table) you know, be the best student they can be. The best life they can have. (L, p. 5)

Note the level of intensity in the above passage and the reference to students' future lives. When the interviewees discuss schooling, they do so in view of their specific purpose of advancing students, through school and specifically into their individual pathways while acknowledging the specific interests of the community they serve:

If we start with what's our purpose and work backwards from there, I feel like there is some policy and some larger decision making that is beginning to do that (...) I think locally and I think to some extent through policy at the state level here, you're beginning to see a good balance (...) Instead of pointing our finger and saying you're doing it all wrong, there's a better position now to say how (hammers fist on table) can (hammers fist on table) we (hammers fist on table) help you? And I think educators are getting better saying how can we work together. (Da, p. 9)

Concretely, that local Chamber of Commerce sponsors a Workforce Academy for principals through which site visits are organized at, for example, the Mercedes plant and a local steel mill to gain "a better perspective of what students need to be successful" (Da, p. 10). Those relationships are stronger today and there are now tables for people to sit at (Da, p. 10).

The efforts put forth inside of schools and together with the community that surrounds them aim to shape minds and ideas and thought patterns about what schools should look like (D, p. 7). Part of that is creating an "active learning environment (that is) flexible toward diverse needs and includes virtual learning, dual enrollment, good career pathways" (D, 7p.), and part of that is the realization that at the core of it, "education is not difficult: it's read, write and think." (G, p. 2) On the principals' side, that includes fostering growth mindsets and wanting to be better and not working in fear of things (B, p. 31) and overall, "if you're doing the right thing for somebody and you're really trying to educate, I think we're going to be ok." (B, p. 31) Part of that appears to be providing recognition and praise to the people involved in the day to day of schooling:

I think the teachers and faculty and staff and thing, we always say our school system is not well funded, um, when we lack a lot of resources, but I honestly truly believe on our biggest reasons if we're successful at anything, it's our people and they really go above and beyond to do things for their kids (D, p. 2)

Our Ribbon teacher, the year process in the state of Alabama's it's actually a competition. Um, which is, it's, it's, it's a good thing. I think it's a very positive thing that we do. So our candidate for teacher of the year this year as a science teacher and we hired her three years ago from St Clair County and she had taught at St Louis County in a more rural district for 15 years, but we are as soon as she was available and I knew she was available I wanted to hire her because she's tremendous and she just does a great job with inquiry learning and we, we needed more of that. (B, p. 23)

The passages exemplify that interviewees express gratitude and appreciation for team members' contributions. They praise their teams often because they realize that they have hired well and actively engage in keeping them around (B, p. 26). Acknowledgment of faculty's and staff's work leads that effort: "(In the first faculty meeting) I said, I can't believe you guys have succeeded based on the set of circumstances that you've been thrown about other people. And I think they appreciate that." (H, p. 20) Both superintendents stressed appreciation for their cooperation being as close and as successful as it has been while a principal stresses: "(W)e are good as a school (...) I want to be around people who are we-people. (...) I could not do what I do without all of these other people" (B, p. 31) and the community's support as well as the commitment to a growth mindset (B, p. 31).

Insiders and outsiders

Communities embody mindsets that are strongly rooted and have generationally grown, and they represent a particular understanding of what education is, and whom it is for. These mindsets are constitutional for the ways in which public schooling is understood to relate to the public, hence those it is supposed to serve (Hopmann, 2008, p. 425). The disparities that characterize Alabama

seem to be mirrored in the differences between such local community mindsets and one piece of that is the intentional creation of difference to validate one's own community, its history and its values. *Five Dollar Words*, for instance, is a semi-humorous expression for the elevated language used at university. The metaphor is a financial one, referencing the cost of higher education for each learned word. Years ago, when I lived in the Midwest, I was lovingly teased for speaking the way I did and because I was welcomed as a family member and not a guest, it was explained to me – semi-humorously – that those *five dollar words* were not the language people used in that house. It became a recurring theme over years to come, and I understood the difference immediately. The distance between their day-do-day and life within higher education was too wide to bridge constantly³⁹, and it was important to the family to have me be one of them. They were blue-collar workers and proud owners of land, construction vehicles and expensive, historic guns that each told its story from generations of military service. Having grown up with a military service member and among first-generation immigrants, I could immediately relate to and adapt the notion of emphasizing one's roots rather than one's ambitions.

Mindsets such as the ones exemplified above are sometimes discarded as non-academic, or non-appreciative of and hence distanced from education. I find that generalization unwarranted and uninformed; those who value service, family and hard work may just as much value education, yet their understanding may not coincide with institutionalized public education and traditionally academic pathways that lead to college degrees. Mindsets may also be a direct result of generational poverty interwoven with practical circumstance: Having no reliable transportation and sharing a car among many people creates dependencies that cannot be risked by attempting to move outside of what the others one depends on do. I remember a mother of four who told me of her aspirations and the restraints of her dependencies: The neighbor who watches her children and the car shop owner who gives her broken cars for free are not only helping hands but needed resources that cannot be forfeited by relocating or by implicitly challenging the prevailing mindset that education is something for other people, the richer or the smarter, the more entitled, in any case someone else than oneself and one's community. As with everything, there are more explanations than one. The GearUp program is one example manifestation of the phenomenon of the insider-outsider-dichotomy, similar to parents' academies described above.

The Gain Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GearUp) is a federal program funded by the U.S. Department of Education⁴⁰ that is adapted to each state⁴¹ and run through schools and communities to include children and parents in parallel activities at school and outside

³⁹ I took up this phenomenon in my Master's Thesis and showed how university drop outs in the first two years of college in St. Louis, Missouri, are a result of that very gap.

⁴⁰ <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/gearup/index.html>

⁴¹ GearUp Alabama: <https://gearupal.com/>

of school, during the summer and on the weekends. Students enroll in dual-degree programs run by the University of Alabama in Birmingham that offers a variety of online classes as well as presence units:

We have students who are in the nursing program through Wallace⁴². They are dual enrolled. (erm) and a coding, we have students who are in coding. They're dual enrolled, here, but none of our parents have taken advantage. (F, p. 14)

So even though parents of GearUp students receive free college credit to obtain a degree⁴³ and even though almost all students of that particular are enrolled, not one parent of the interviewee's school takes up this opportunity (F, p. 13). It is one of many characteristics of an area that lacks in opportunities to work and children's exposure to educational experiences:

It's different because there's industry in those areas (*in the north of Alabama*) and there's nothing here. There's no, um, no, nothing for kids to do after school. There are no options for them. If they want to do something, they have to travel out of state. For some of our kids, they don't get a chance to go to Selma and that's 30 minutes away unless we take them. (...) A limited exposure to different things. (...) Um, I can't really explain why it's been like that for years, but I guess the biggest problem is no industry. There are no jobs. So with no jobs, you have individuals who are stuck in wherever they are. They're stuck with without a job, depending on government assistance. (erm) We don't have a lot of parents- we're, we're part of Gear, but we don't have a lot of parents to take advantage of (erm) going to college. (...) I think my parents believed that their college going to college would be an option for them to better themselves. But think for some of our parents they don't feel like that's an option for them. (F, p. 2)

It may seem counterintuitive at first to acknowledge that the very few offers available are not accepted by the community, yet that expectation is already part of a different mindset and hence a different way of conceptualizing education aspiration and the effect one's own education may have on one's children: Parents seem to not realize that bettering themselves will put those children in a better situation in the future because many parents do struggle (F, p. 22).

The passage above is embedded in a school community that has maintained close relationships through generations with most teachers at the school being from the area and knowing the families personally (F, 20). There is ongoing communication with the parents through monthly Parent-Teacher-Association meetings, the school's Facebook page and their own website, robot calls and messaging services with callback option. Many parents have taken up after-school recommendations in the academic watch letter, even if more like a care service of sorts for the afternoon rather than an academic program aspect (F, p. 12). The conclusion was that the school and its community are well connected, and still parents do not engage in GearUp.

Rural poverty affects not only the school's options and infrastructure but it also affects people's mindsets and the expectations they hold for themselves: "(A) lot of those kids were very capable of going to college because of those traits that they've had passed down to them. That was very, very frustrating because again, you're at a very, very rural part of Alabama. Incomes and jobs there are

⁴² A community college located in the Black Belt, about 30 minutes driving distance from the school.

⁴³ College-educated parents are excluded from that provision.

not well paid whatsoever. Students have the opportunity to move on. I see that in you, but you have no interest in doing it." (H, p. 13) Having rich and meaningful, extensive programs on offer that are not nearly used to capacity is by no means a singular phenomenon:

We have all these things for parents, we have a parent academy, we have a parent teacher leadership coming through the university with parents and teachers- awesome programs, but they're not good if you don't have the ones that you need there. So we do have to kind of keep challenging ourselves to say, okay, what we're doing is good, but it's just not reaching who we needed to reach. (...) We have to start challenging our own traditional delivery and saying, okay, how do we start to reach parents who, um, it's not that they don't want to be reached, it's not that they don't care about their children, it's not that they don't want their children to be doing well in school. There's still something that's keeping that parent from engaging. (Da, p. 5)

Parents send their kids to school with the sincere (hammers fist on table) dream (hammers fist on table), hope (hammers fist on table) and belief (hammers fist on table) that we (hammers fist on table) can give (hammers fist on table) them the tools (hammers fist on table) to be successful (hammers fist on table) members (hammers fist on table) of society (hammers fist on table). Every (hammers fist on table) parent (hammers fist on table) that sends (hammers fist on table) their (hammers fist on table) child (hammers fist on table) here by and large wants the best (hammers fist on table) for their kids. They want their kids (hammers fist on table) to be successful. They want their kids to have opportunities to be successful. (L, p. 4)

Note how both descriptions do not blame parents but acknowledge them in their role and responsibility. Consistently throughout the conversations, parents and grandparents are referenced as desperately needed positive role models (D, p. 2), involved and supportive toward the work of educators and therefore sources of stability regardless of the specific family structure (D, p. 1). This instance shows how something outside of any school's and any educator's bears heavily upon their work and their tasks. That fact is met with acceptance and a positive attitude.

Being positive and active about issues needs clarity about problems that exist, and they do: Some student issues are age-appropriate (L, p. 5), yet many are problems that "entrenched middle-class parents would not experience with their kids" (L, p. 5), brought about by generational poverty:

Parents of kids who come (erm) from a lower socioeconomic background don't deal with those problems in the same way and these problems end up here on our desk (hammers fist on table) and we have to help those (hammers fist on table) students (hammers fist on table) move beyond that, solve those problems, and (hammers fist on table) continue to try (hammers fist on table) to (hammers fist on table), you know, be- (...) have the best life they can have. (L, p. 5)

The passage is exemplary of that positive attitude, willing and ready to find small spaces for mitigating the circumstances and turning them to the children's benefit. Indeed, there seem to be lots of problems from outside of school that end up on educators' and administrators' desks for gap management, a quasi-translation job for educators between the student and the family and schooling with its requirements. For example, student transience, the phenomenon of students and families moving and therefore moving schools, has quite significant bearings on any given school. The intention seems to be clear: With the better residential area come better schools and parents make every effort to move into the one affordable street so that their children can attend at least their last

two years of high school and graduate from there (H, p. 4). That makes the school transient and creates problematic results on their accountability measures:

We have a lot of kids move in from both of those. (...) I think one, looking for better opportunities because the programs that we offer here, but also, um, there's also affordable low-income housing here. So they- and you can't blame those (...) but then that creates a tremendous challenge for us as a school, especially on standardized tests because when a kid comes in (inaudible) hasn't gone through, which I think are very good elementary and middle schools that feed into me- haven't had that background. Then you come as an 11th grader and you take the ACT, which is now part of the state standardized testing program. That's tough. (H, p. 5)

Again, the account acknowledges parents' good intentions and relentless efforts to get their children into the best school possible while at the same time pointing out how hard it is for the school to make up for lost time and content in order to meet ACT standards that they are measured by, and to graduate students. Another principal describes his situation similarly, leading a school that receives a third of their student population three years or less before they graduate (G, p. 1). Some of that is attributed to the fact that there are surrounding school districts that are small, self-sufficiently funded schools that can pick off the teachers from the other systems and act independently of federal monies (G, p. 1), thereby not being a realistic choice for those students who seek to move before graduating. There are many ways in which education leaders manage and bridge gaps, be it as a receiving school preparing students to graduate in a very short amount of time or be it a translator between the mindsets from home and the ones demanded for a continuing education pathway.

The insider-outsider-dichotomy emerged also in relation to the communication structures that exist between school leaders and the community. The core of the matter seems to come down to trust that is built on being from the same place:

Um, I think I know the teachers here and I know the students and parents here so it makes it easier when something comes up. (...) I don't know if I would have some of the support I need being an outsider coming in somewhere else. (...) We have two assistant principals; both are considered outsiders – from Alabama, still not from the area, as in the county. (...) I know there's a difference in how they treat him and how they treat her because she's been here and he hasn't. I don't know if you would say suspicion, but you would, it's weird- (sighs) as if they're looking at them from a different- they were more comfortable with somebody who's from here. (F, p. 19)

I asked about how parents' behavior toward the two assistant principals, one having taught at the school for a number of years and the other having moved into the assistant principalship directly.

The difference shows in the quality communication:

But um, yeah, I know there's a difference in how they treat him and the way they treat her. There's a difference. (erm) Respect, respect. It shows up in respect. (...) When he asked them to do something (...) they would be lollygagging when they're supposed to do it or they give him some mouth and they don't give her mouth or say anything to her. (F, p. 21)

Similarly at another school, 46 of 223 teachers have graduated from that school and at some point returned as they were felt to be a good fit:

We want the best. I mean when we hire, we want the best person, the best fit for our community. But certainly what we also feel is that we (erm) lack of a better word, we put out a good product so

our graduates are prepared and they were very smart and intelligent and they also understand this community. And so when they want to come back and seek a job here, they typically are the better candidate. (...) their understanding of what a classroom should look like and how we value the education experience. So yeah. And so I think that maybe plays in, that they'd probably have a leg up (erm) because of their understanding. (B, p. 23)

The same person then shared their own experience and contrasted it with the ones who were at the school before them:

It took me a little bit of time just being an outsider. I mean I grew up in the area. I grew up six miles down the road, but I didn't grow up in (*place*). And so I am very much an outsider when I first got here and it took me a little bit of time to gain a foothold and some trust with the folks here. But I say that to say the last person who had longevity in this role here- (...) He went to high school here. (...) He understood (*place*). He was from (*place*) and it was a very good thing for the district they felt. (erm) and then we just had that turnover because they couldn't find that right person and all three (*following him*), I would say, were from somewhere else. (B, p. 24)

The insider-outsider difference appears on multiple levels in these passages: Principals' insider roles are characterized to be what elevates the quality of their leadership and its recognition with the community. Teachers are also described to have more standing, be a better fit, if they are knowledgeable insiders. Note how these accounts stand on the ideas of the purpose of school and schooling for a given community: "Understand your community to be a good principal" (G, p. 2).

Alongside parents and school leaders, however, it is students who experience their place in that insider-outsider-dichotomy most immediately, especially if they come from low-income environments, and especially if those are in rural areas: "Urban poverty is different than rural poverty " (L, p. 4), as poverty rates are higher in rural areas, employment is less available, generational structures tend to be more persistent, making generational employment and generational poverty prevailing phenomena.

Somewhat counterintuitively, a particularly vulnerable group of students are student athletes who distinguish themselves in high school and create college opportunities for themselves that would otherwise be unattainable. Student loans are formally available to every student, as is academic counseling and access to ACT and SAT training. Yet formal access is oftentimes not enough, as the GearUp example as shown. Given that college education in the U.S. is expensive and a high-risk endeavor for any young person who effectively mortgages their future (L, p. 7), it is particularly so for students from poverty where jobs are missing, specifically qualified work for a college graduate. Biographies of poverty, especially rural poverty, may also include substance abuse and violence, resulting in hopelessness and low self-expectations:

Most of them come from poverty-stricken areas. And what I saw was if you take somebody that doesn't have a past worth hanging their hat on, they don't have a presence, they don't have anything in the present that's firing them up. How in the heck can you motivate them with their future? (...) And you take all those kids that come from that area and put them in a school that is- the buildings aren't up to par, the teachers aren't- you know. Everything is- How do they even dream? I mean, when you've never seen anything other than that, how do you even know what to hope for? And that's what I would see. I would see so many kids that didn't know the opportunities that were out

there for them to go get because they had never seen opportunity. Everything around him was hopeless, you know, because they lived in these areas of poverty, or of poverty and crime, you know, where they were literally scared to walk to the bus stop because they could get shot. (W, p. 7)

Their parents are, you know, strung out on drugs, you know. (...) I mean we had a player one time that kept failing the drug test. And it was like, you know, you're sitting there and talking to them but you know (laughs) we have a drug policy, you know, and you can't fail (laughs) you know, I mean like you're going to get kicked out of school, you know. But the kid had grown up smoking pot in the living room with his father. (...) How do you take someone who is 18 and that the only thing he knows. That is the only stress reliever that he knows and now at 18 you're going to tell him, you can't do that anymore and we're not going to tell you or help you figure out another way. Like, we're not going to show you, I mean, that there's other solutions for you to relieve stress. Just don't do that and figure it out. Well I mean, it's impossible. (W, p. 8)

The account given is yet another example of the wide differences between the contexts of the most vulnerable students and the expectations set for them that are often impossible for them to understand, let alone meet.

The experience of college education differs for students: What is a matter of small talk at the dinner table for some is a foreign lifeworld filled with feelings of inadequacy and exclusion from peers and the college community for others. One student might quickly search for unknown terminology on their phone, but another might not have those tools of self-guidance and quick solution-finding skills. Reacting quickly might already be beyond the self-organization skill of students who need a personal, practical explanation of, for example, what a syllabus is, or how to distinguish relevant information from irrelevant co-text in a document. Those who command these skills seem to do so effortlessly, yet vulnerable students struggle as the interviewee exemplifies: Some students need to have it explained that the course books will be available for sale at the campus bookstore that neatly organizes the assigned readings by class. Some students need to be told to take notes based on what is important and relevant to them and their thinking, because their only previous experience of note-taking has been to copy diligently from the board. (W, p. 33)

Experiences in schooling shape further education pathways significantly by continuously creating a sense of belonging or alienation. The growing body of scholarship that tracks and maps the way students travel through schooling addresses dynamics in the context of demographic lines of difference along segregation and self-segregation, mostly in metropolitan areas (e.g. Cordes et al., 2019; Pogodzinski et al., 2018). Increasing research interest also focuses on delineating the pathways of school disengagement and eventual drop-out (e.g. Pyne, 2019; Tomaszewska-Pekala et al., 2019), arguing for less punitive and more empathic ways of guiding and directing student behavior (e.g. Okunofa et al., 2016; Gray et al., 2017) in ways more along pedagogical actions, i.e. those that do no harm and advance and educate the students.

Interviewees' share their insights into the character and dynamic of the insider-outside-dichotomy as it manifests itself in schools and schooling. Lines of difference are sharp and consequential; they form the other side of the coin of organizing schooling around community values and purposes. It is

the school's community that school leaders serve, and being immediately interwoven with it yields potential for localized, directed service as well as being limited by the specificities of the contexts and histories of a given community.

Community and kids

When interviewees speak about community, they assert its respective characteristics as being constitutive to their practice:

I think for me here right now it's rooted in this community and it's knowing the (erm) not only the community value because that can be a good thing and a bad thing like local community norms can be dangerous. Right. But, but at least knowing the context of the community and kind of working with the community, but what's our vision forward. (Da, p. 17)

As emerged above, community values may also be limiting, creating lines of difference and boundaries of trust that need focused effort on the part of administration and leadership, specifically given the fairly recent history of "separate education systems (we are) really working to trust education and trust teachers (...) there's still an automatic distrust for some." (Da, p. 22) Lack of trust also affects communication with the community:

I feel like we constantly fight in Alabama- maybe other places but I've never lived in other places (erm) that we trust a professional. Like I trust my doctor. I trust my lawyer. (erm) We went to the school for the same amount of time and have similar certifications in our content area as they do. I mean, I've, I've been through more school than a medical doctor (...) the mastery isn't anything else. I'm, I'm well versed, well studied and well certified, but yet professionally they don't trust that we know what we're doing within our content. And so (erm) but it's saying that also they are professionals in some other way and they- they don't know the complexities of what the education system is or the legislative system either in Alabama. And so for us to either we have to explain that to them and bring them in on the conversation or ask for their trust that we're doing the right thing. (B, p. 16)

A sense of disappointment in the perceived mistrust is tangible and may very well be a testament to the wealthy, well-educated community of that school that "expects us to be in the top three" (B, p. 15) and be accountable for anything less than excellence (B, p. 15). That task is exacerbated by moving-target back-and-forth policies (B, 4) that result in a press release of that very school being at risk (B, p. 4). Public perception "is huge and has to do with finance" (D, p. 11) and the soundboard testifies to the fact that managing their public visibility affects all of them directly.

One aspect of community involvement is the closer cooperation between schools and surrounding "businesses and industry (that) don't get what they need from employees (who) don't do grade level math" (Da, p. 1), resulting in administrators' and leaders' focus being on "work skills, cooperative learning, critical thinking-type skills (because) that's what our employers and our industry all tell us." (D, p. 6) In view of changing and new jobs in the future, the need for "good learners to adapt (and) life long learners" (D, p. 6) is being voiced. The Birmingham area is a case in point with a focus on the medical and the car industry:

Ethnic diversity here is huge. Um, uh, you know, we're, we have obviously a large Caucasian population, a large black population on campus, but you also have a large population of Asian and Middle Eastern here because uh, because of- Birmingham is kind of a hub for the medical industry in the state. Okay. Uh, and it also has a Mercedes plant here in Tuscaloosa, you have Honda in Lincoln, Alabama, which is only about 30, 40 miles from here. So you have all those opportunities. And you have a lot of influx from (inaudible) countries that are coming in. (H, p. 4)

The focus on and breadth of knowledge about interviewees' communities is a constant in the material, and so is their nuanced understanding of the students and their characteristics as they are "different year to year, but it's different from class to class" (H, p. 21), not only in view of ability levels but also of cohorts' dynamics that changes from one to the other, making them incomparable (B, p. 19), creating a variety of issues in the context of past and current accountability policy as elaborated before.

Yet again, the soundboard is outspokenly critical in viewing the contexts of some of the children and the ways in which these contexts affect the work of educators:

We have seen a definite challenge or decrease in family values and I'm not trying to say one family value over another, but in terms of responsibility and I think some of the challenges we're dealing with an education and we see societally around here, uh, kids don't have as much of a stable environment and I'm not one of those, whether it's one parent, two parent- I have great kids, great families that have one parent, I have no problem with it. I have no problem with orientation of one person or the other. Um, but kids need stability. They need somebody in their lives. Um, and a lot of our kids are raising themselves. (D, p. 1)

Stability in childrens' lives reappeared in a variety of ways in the material: Positive role models are needed and grandparents often take on that responsibility well (D, p. 2) in counteracting and balancing, for example, "the pressures of social media" (G, p. 2) and the constant unprotected exposure of children that today's technology provides (D, p. 1). Self-medication is a growing concern (G, p. 2), specifically in view of the larger, more fundamental worry about childrens' basic social and emotional needs not being met (W, p. 6):

(Y)ou're so stressed out with the pressures of your life because the only way out of your situation is to get this scholarship and you're so stressed out by- that you are smoking massive amounts of weed every day, you can't learn, you know. (W, p. 6)

Mitigating the pressures of life means offering stability through sustainable structures, which is also needed for transient students who either move within schools or among school systems (Da, p. 12), be it between city and county districts or to rural areas where students live with a guardian and are thereby eligible to attend school there:

We've gotten students from Tuscaloosa with felonies and because they have somebody's grandma living here and grandma said she's going to take care of them, you know we have to keep them, and we don't have an option not to say no, you can't come to here. We don't have that option. (F, p. 8)

High levels of student transience is yet more of a task in areas where students transfer in 11th and 12th grade in order to graduate from a better high school than they were able to attend before. (H, p. 4) In some schools, a third of children join high-profile high school schools three years or less

before they graduate (G, p. 1). Other schools and districts experience student transience both directions:

(I)n the city we have a pretty high number of students who are transient within the city, but then sometimes they go outside the city too. Public housing is more so done from a county perspective. So that sometimes means in the city zone and sometimes in the county, so families will move potentially to a home in the county and then moved back into the city, sometimes a couple of times within a year, sometimes throughout the course of a K-12 career. (Da, p. 6)

In this particular context, the city limits are interwoven with those of the county and create unique circumstances that lead to the respective administrators cooperating closely – something that both assert is up to those who happen to be in charge:

The last couple of years we've actually joined our work together in some areas because we also share students. (...) the city county relationship- and it's, it's left to whoever's in leading the two systems. There's nothing structurally that, that necessarily has them operating together. (Da, p. 6)

Interviewees' view of students transpires to be one of professional care and interest and also some degree of worry about the missing human factor that includes teacher-student face time and their personal connection (D, p. 2) that would need to address "a whole lot more of those kinds of things before you can even attempt to get to the academics of where you're trying to do for achievement." (D, p. 2) Interviewees call for exchange and coaching that builds confidence: "Teachers need to stand by their learners." (G, p. 3) and the material provides ample examples for that overarching tenor:

I don't have a ton of rules, but I tell every kid that comes here, I'm going to treat you and my staff is going to treat you like a young adult. Okay. I'm not gonna chase you around. Okay. Our expectations are very high, but if you don't take advantage of everything, we have to offer here- (shrugs) (H, p. 3)

Nobody wakes up wanting to be a failure, you know, they want to succeed, they don't know how- Right. And so until you start really, you know, paying attention to (.) everything else that's going on in their life, I just think they are just keep running into a brick wall. (W, p. 6)

Who wakes up in the morning wanting to be a failure? Nobody. They need things to be proud of. (G, p. 2)

The point here is that interviewees consistently exert a fundamentally positive attitude towards and belief in their students. Even in light of admitted difficulty, the specification of those issues is "age-appropriateness" (L, p. 5) as well as the abiding belief in helping children move beyond their issues and support them to "be the best student they can be" (L, p. 5). Part of that is to realize that disruptive behaviors are rooted deeply:

You know, moments where they were called to the board to do a problem and everybody else knew how to work it but them and they stood there and the whole class laughed at them. So then when they are 20 and 18, 19 and they're in a college class, and they feel that moment of anxiety where they don't know how to do something and they feel like they might get called on. What did they do? They flip a desk over and do something to get them kicked out of the class so they don't have to experience that shame, you know. It happened over and over and over again to where I started realizing that the discipline issues, the academic issues, we're all about something else. You know?

They were all- they all came from (...) oppression, you know, like us just not caring about them at some point. (W, p. 14)

This passage is a case in point of the difference between outwardly disruptive behaviors and an interpretation that acknowledges the experience embedded in such an outburst. It shows an experienced professional who, rather than to label and clinically classify the student on the basis of their outward behavior, is willing and able to understand and read a student's behavior in its biographical context:

I have to meet them where they are, meet some of their emotional needs, treat them like human beings and the rest will come, the education, the learning will happen because they don't want to be failures. (W, p. 6)

Exploring students' wants and needs is at the forefront of interviewees' concerns and it includes not wanting them to be conforming to a set of rules but instead thinking freely and for themselves in the frame of schooling's rituals such as timeliness and responsiveness (B, p. 40):

You know, we have a few outliers, but for the most part they aren't. But what they start to do in high school is they start to question why, and so I really think that's fun to see their minds starting to work and think about why are you asking me to be compliant in that way. They're not questioning your authority and they're not saying they're not going to do it, they're still going to do it, but they want to know why. (erm) I think that's pretty awesome. Yeah, it is a good sign it. (B, p. 49)

Critical thinking and questioning are welcome and distinctly prompted student traits that the interviewees commit to and encourage:

I've got dealt a set of cards and I played the hell out of and continue to play the hell out of them and will continue to play the hell out of them. (...) Well, that's the only message you can give them- you don't get to pick your parents. It is the accident of birth and you just have to go as hard as you can with what you have. And as long as you stay in the game, something good will happen. (L, p. 18)

The positivity and the power with which interviewees stand for and behind their students is a constant in all conversations, and a palpable, fundamental energy that the interviewees exert in speaking about the communities they serve as well as their students and their practice. Keeping the wants and needs at the forefront, they address student issues and challenging community contexts in ways that appear resourceful and focused on benefiting those who constitute school and schooling. On the part of the interviewees themselves, the impression forms that at the core of their practice and their beliefs lies involvement and engagement that is deeply personal.

It's personal

The material provides a rich repertoire of biographical references in which interviewees exemplify how they are interwoven with and personally affected by the intricacies of school and schooling in Alabama. In delineating their histories and contexts that way, it shows how it is their own formative experiences and the ways they assign meaning to them that make interviewees reach beyond their job descriptions today. For instance, a principal of a high-poverty indicated school with great rates

of homeless students shared the experience of their students of doubling up in a home: "I have, uh, my little cousin lives with me. He's in twelfth grade this year. He's classified as homeless because I'm not his guardian." (F, 22) In this way, that person is interwoven with the community of that place that experiences student homelessness at soaring levels. When asked about how they became a principal, more connectedness surfaces:

Um hmm. I don't know if I'll ever become one (laughs) I guess through- I initially was an English teacher and um, (laughs) mhm, yeah my dad had gone into administration but it never, he was a principal like years ago, but it was like a really very small school in rural- probably didn't have 50 students. Um, but the principal at the time encouraged me to go and get my certification in education administration. So I went and did that. Um, I got the Masters in that and um, from there, maybe not, not even a year later, actually as soon as I've finished, he made the recommendation to the superintendent that I become principal and that was in 2002. So I've been here since 2002. (F, p. 17)

On the back this interviewee's now 16 years of service as a principal, I asked if it would be an option to return to teaching and indeed, the person expressed great interest in teaching college in some capacity in the future:

I want to teach at the college level. I don't think- (laughs) I don't think I could, could, (erm) sanely go (laughs) back to the classroom. Teaching high school and be sane (laughs) Yeah. So yeah. But I really want to teach again. I miss teaching. (...) It doesn't matter where- oh English or History. I have degrees in English and History. Masters in both. So yeah, I love history, but English is okay. They kind of go hand in hand. (F, p. 18)

Bettering oneself through one's own education is a wish that principal uttered for their parents and children previously, and it is a wish shared by another principal who plans to obtain another postgraduate degree in the future (L, p. 6). What these interviewees want for their students they also seek for themselves, congruently upholding the value of education as the opportunity to advance oneself:

I was born here and I, I can say that my life and education in this state is this, this served me well. You know, and it's probably what I made of my opportunities, not so much as you know- I've got dealt a set of cards and I played the hell out of and continue to play the hell out of them and will continue to play the hell out of them. (L, p. 18)

The mental orientation toward growth and possibilities, this idea to reach for the impossible to achieve the best results possible, is found in all interviewees' personal stories, past and present. A senior principal reflected on their career path in the Air Force, which they then advanced by obtaining a degree in education. After 14 years of principalship, a corporate opportunity presented itself (H, p. 2):

But I can say that was, um, that was probably the best thing that happened for me because when I was out there, you know, I tell people all the time, I made more money than I'll ever make in education as an administrator. But after three or four years I really hated, I really hated not being in school, not being around kids, not being able to make a difference in your job. Okay. Um, and I've been back 18 years since then and I've been principal somewhere for (erm) 17 years now. (H, p. 2)

Interviewees' own experiences seem to have equipped them with an intuitive, fundamental understanding for what students experience, be it in aiding them in their education advancement or be it in troubling matters such as that of race:

My children are as much white as they are black, but I can't select biracial. I have to choose. And we went to the school, said this is his mother, I'm his father like for real, why does he have to choose? But that's just the way it is, but it's Alabama, you know? (L, p. 17)

Speaking as a parent here, the principal's lack of opportunity to represent their children's race fittingly in the reporting system is no less troubling than an account of attending a small private, expensive institution as "such an outcast going there" (W, p. 2), not having the resources that everyone else seemed to command. In that environment, the person soon realized that most of the peers came from significantly different contexts, for example when peers pointed at the bulletin board on the dorm room's wall that showed a diverse group of high school friends and prompted questions about why there were black people in the pictures:

They were like taken aback by people that were different and I remember thinking like, what is- how did you grow up your whole life and you had no- you're not aware that other people are not like you? You know, where do you live? (W, p. 2)

The realization of difference manifested in their own education history that is described as being "an average student (...) in honors classes" who struggled to make good grades by working harder to achieve what most others seemed to have less difficulty doing:

So you know, I understood like people not just getting it, you know, or people not really knowing what to do and that stress of like, oh my gosh, what if I fail this, you know, I mean I understood that because it was a reality in my world. (W, p. 2)

Yet even before the interviewee attended college, the experience of needing help and being left to their own devices had created an urgent sense of care and loyalty that eventually formed their career in academic counseling and public speaking:

I really, I started, well I guess- I guess in- at Clinton, at High School (erm) I guess it was my junior year. (...) (erm) Our school- there was some bullying, you know, that went on and I was bullied and I wanted out. My parents had met with the school and we had done everything we could do to stop the bullying and it wasn't stopping and so I just- there came a time where I just said, okay, I'm going to have to figure this out on my own. (...) I noticed this guy sitting in the back row (...) and he never really did anything. He never turned in his homework, like, he just kind of hung- he was just there. And I knew he played football, but he was older. He was a senior. I was a sophomore and I just thought I'm going to make friends with that guy and he's going to protect me because no one will mess with me. (...) I found out in short conversations with him that he was a football player and had college scholarships and wasn't going to make the grades and he told me he was going to have to go to a junior college before he, you know, he was going to have to turn down all these scholarships and go to a junior college because he didn't have the grades. And I remember thinking like, that's terrible, you know, like how disappointing for him. And so I told him, I said, well, I'll make you a deal: if you'll walk me to class every day, like, you'll walk me down the hallway, I'll help you, I'll help you study and maybe we can pull your grades up. (...) I mean we became very good friends. We're still friends. (W, pp. 3f)

Coaching and advising struggling students then became this person's nationally recognized career of academic advising and later public speaking. Advising those administrators and political voices who have the opportunity to change contexts on a larger scale is an example of the figure that emerges in various forms in the material, grown from a root of experience that matured into a professional responsibility grounded in the belief that things can be done better:

To your question as what drives me is- there's this desire always to wanting to make it better because it needs to be a lot better and it can be and I think it's our job to see that it can be better and then also see a path to that place. Not to see a path, like it's (sigh)- the blueprint's not there. It's just knowing that we can get there and then at least know how to work with people to get there. (erm) And especially like in this community here, what drives me is that we can be a lot stronger. We can be a premier school district that does what is- what education is supposed to do for kids. And we're not for all kids, right? We do a lot of things really well and I don't, let me, don't let me sell us short. Okay. We are a good school system, but we're just, we're not going to be a great school system until every child succeeds. So the part that puts me here is that belief, like at the core of it is that we can do this. It's doable. And (erm) it's just working with people to get there and all of us having that kind of like vision that we can make this happen. (Da, p. 16)

I intentionally quote this at length including all the repetitions to illustrate the voice and the intensity of its expression because it is those manifested values that in turn affect the ways in which the person positions themselves vis-à-vis policy and its effects:

(W)e have schools that are not successful. They've not even had the failing school list label- like I own- That's mine. Like I can't- I don't- I take that personally, right? So I'm also going to take it personally to get off that list and to make sure it's successful school. (Da, p. 18)

This personal level of responsibility is reminiscent of the moral component of Education Debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that tasks all involved in education to stand accountable for their part in ensuring equitable student experiences in education that do not make students liable for the contexts in which they operate, but rather call on those who create those contexts.

Toward the end of our conversation, I asked my interview partners whether they saw things differently now after decades of service and leadership in education. The gist of their answers is that they indeed do not: Even though their experiences have been educational and formative, the core remains the same:

But you know, embedded in my character's a certain rebel nostalgia and I just can't in good conscience, whatever I have to give up, you know, in order to sort of be honest and forthright, maybe that's the price I'm willing to pay. (hammers fist on table) (L, p. 10)

This passage follows the person's explanation of the cognitive dissonance necessary in order to be successful as a person of color in Alabama and in the U.S. (L, p. 9), particularly as an African American doctoral student, and it exemplifies how alertly aware interviewees are of the way histories and contexts create circumstance:

You don't want to be pushed into that corner of the angry African American academic who is here to (erm), you know, uncover the conspiracy. So you sort of play along, - maybe in the future if you get an opportunity, you may do something to change the way things are. But it sure ain't gonna do you no good right now to go in and start kicking up dust. And these are the people that have to, you know, accept you into the learning community and make you a doctor, you know, you have to work

with these people. So of course you don't want to offend them. You are not going to go in and start asking those questions about how messed up the situation is. Because they're not going to want you around. They much rather deal with somebody who's going to know their place and accept the tradition and the heritage, you know. (L, p. 10)

By the same token, being aware of the difficulty is not weighed against the professional core values expressed in the material, but they stand next to one another, sometimes in stark dissonance, but clearly held at bay and not at one instance collapsing into weakening either the values or the difficulty. Optimism prevailed:

I'm probably a little more mature in my thinking through the course of time. Um, but change. No, I mean (um) when you use the word naive and I don't think, I mean it that in the sense of naive, but there's a, there's a, that optimism I had when I began teaching I still have today and you know, I haven't- (...) it's been challenged, but it's- to what you said, I believe that that's kinda what I brought to the profession as a teacher and now, what I do now. So I think those are the core values that, that kind of get tested but don't change and you know, maybe there's core values strengthen with the situations that you experienced through the course of time in different positions. But I don't think it changes. (Da, p. 18)

The wisdom of experience is valuable and, it seems, necessary to sustain individuals in these trajectories and so some change is acknowledged over the course of time:

Yes, it has a different and (erm) for different reasons. (erm) I think one the experience alone, just having done the job for several years, you learn the pitfalls, you learn where the holes are and not to step in them. (erm) you learn when not to open your mouth. It'd be opinionated, which I unfortunately am. And sometimes I say things that get in my own way. I'm a- this expression was used with me years ago by one of my mentors is: Don't give them the bullets to shoot you with. (B, p. 42)

Learning from experience is reiterated yet again as it was previously phrased as becoming a reality in one's world:

And also I know the rules better. I mean you can study them all you want, but until you live through them and understand making a phone call at the State Department meetings or you know, having to talk to a child through a suicide situation or you know, dealing with a safety issue on campus. (B, p. 44)

It seems that much of what is done can be traced back to memorable experiences that were lastingly intense and guide interviewees' actions today. Incidentally, even giving me the interview itself followed this structure for one person who said that they only met with me because their own PhD research was recent: "Somebody helped me. So let me help somebody." (F, p. 27)

My own experience of having these conversations was exhausting and uplifting at the same time, every time. Each meeting left me feeling that the conversation had been meaningful to the both of us, and they all left me with a fundamental sense of hope and trust in education and its profession as well as the wish to return and learn yet more. Each person gifted me with a unique and tremendously knowledgeable, critical perspective onto their world of school and schooling in Alabama in the way it manifests itself in their specific contexts, and from their point of view. Every conversation partner drew me in. It was odd to have to come to an end and leave that shared space

of our rather intense conversation. Curiously, some interviewees wondered whether they had told me anything at all:

I feel like I'm rambling here- (D, p. 4)

Did you get- (laughs) I feel like I didn't tell you anything (laughs) (W, p. 35)

I probably rambled on and wasted a lot a lot of your time. But it's been a neat story, I mean, really. (H, p. 22)

I wonder if these statements originate from the explorative openness and intensity of our conversations. Sharing one's own experience for almost two hours must have been intense as well, even more so as to them, their own stories are immediate and unmitigated. That may be one reason why some felt less relevant to the interviewees themselves. They certainly were - and are - golden to me.

It may also be the case that explaining complex subject matter tends to feel banal to those who command the contents; familiarity and experience in discussing education may form the self-impression of simplicity while factually, our conversations covered a broad variety of not only complex but also deeply personal matters. I was glad to hear some interviewees, too, expressed appreciation for our conversations:

I love this- so much fun for me by the way. I'm enjoying this conversation. (laughs) I don't get to do this often. (B, p. 30)

I appreciate the opportunity to have a conversation about these topics because it's like what's really important, but it's all swept under the rug and you're supposed to act like this injustice is not occurring every day. And you know. I don't know. Something like some good Europeans to come on, (erm) you know, (erm) dust things up in the States. (L, p. 19)

I cannot stress enough how gracious all interviewees were in extending their time and effort, going against their pressing schedules, for free and without any benefit to them. I recognize that my work stands on these individuals' commitment to the issues at hand, to representing matters in clear view of the existing dissonances and complexities. In many ways, these are personal matters to them that take them far beyond their job descriptions: It is the mix of a deeply-rooted connectedness to their respective communities and to their profession together with formative experiences embedded in their biographies that sustain school and schooling in Alabama, especially in the context of accountability.

A status quo of accountability policy in Alabama

This section closes the case of Alabama with a brief overview of current accountability policy in the state. Recall that public schooling accountability in the form of reports and rankings of schools and districts existed in the state long before NCLB. The Education Accountability Plan of 1995 mandated reporting on finance, safety, discipline and achievement (Kinnucan et al., 2012, p. 20). The

latter was based on various standardized test scores. The Annual Reports from 1999 to 2002 resemble the current ones in form and content: School categories changed from *alert* and *clear* to *priority* and *watch schools* but followed the same rationale of monitoring school quality through a mix of standardized tests such as the Stanford Achievement Test, the Graduation Exam (reading, language, math, science), the Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing, the ACT and multiple indicators of safety and discipline measures such as average daily membership, i.e. attendance, and numbers of dropped out students. Those declined from 4,192 to 3,200 females and 6,126 to 4,511 males, respectively, but dropout rates are missing, leaving unexplained what portion of students drop out. Other differences in reporting show as well: The older reports focused on descriptive fiscal information such as expenditures and revenues and school funding details. In 2002, for example, Alabama schooling was financed through 9.74% federal monies, 29.07% local tax, 55.99% state tax and 5.2% others (Alabama Department of Education, 2002). A decade later, fiscal reports provide only the allocations per percent tax revenue. Similarly, descriptive data of student characteristics diversified significantly: Before 2002, Alabama had reported only white and non-white data across the indicator board which created relevant blind spots for analyzing ethnic disparities and institutional issues of race that are reminiscent of today's challenge to report children of parents who identify black and white (L, p. 17).

A year before the intended ending of NCLB in 2014, Alabama had been granted an NCLB waiver and established Plan 2020. The Annual Report for that academic year specified no AMOs and promised to present a new, more rigorous assessment structure in the following years (Alabama Department of Education, 2014). The Graduation Exam (AHSGE) would no longer be administered after the 2013 school year. What remained for the following years was resonant of some of the structures in place before NCLB: The ACT Aspire (grade 8 math, reading and grade 10 English, reading, writing, math, science) and the ACT Plan (grade 10 English, math, reading, science) remained in place together with the Alabama Alternate Assessment (grades 3 to 8 and 11 reading, math) and the Alabama Science Assessment (grade 5 and 7 content study). The Alabama Comprehensive Assessment Program (ACAP) included the Summative Assessment Test for grades 2 to 8 that first measured benchmarks by which then student growth in reading and math, later also science, were tracked. The ACAP test suite consisted of these numerous standardized tests and matched the Alabama course of study, i.e. the curricula that were taught in various subjects. The goal was to measure individual students' growth.

Federally, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) is the law in effect and the U.S. Department of Education under Betsy DeVos granted states significant leeway in their state-specific accountability policy. Alabama submitted its latest Consolidated State Plan in 2017, in essence extending Plan 2020 to 2030 along the same set of indicators. Progress measures were adapted to the new timeline and

new baseline measures were announced to be collected in the following academic year. Two aspects stood out during the close reading of the plan: the reported discussion about N counts for subgroups and the elaborations on the teacher quality indicator. Alabama's stakeholder discussions about how to choose the new N count number centered on whether N should be set at 20 or 30, i.e. requiring schools that serve either more than 20 or more than 30 students of any subgroup to be required to report AMOs of that subgroup. The debate eventually settled on the former. The state included its comparative calculations between those options in the Consolidated State Plan (2017, p. 15) represented in Table 35.

Table 35

N Count Comparison, 2015-16 data

N Count = 20				N Count = 30			
Subgroups	Schools with a Subgroup	Schools without a Subgroup	Total	Subgroups	Schools with a Subgroup	Schools without a Subgroup	Total
All students	1,325	0	1,325	All students	1,325	0	1,325
American Indian	73	745	818	American Indian	56	762	818
Asian/Pacific Islander	139	866	1,005	Asian/Pacific Islander	90	915	1,005
Black	1,072	218	1,290	Black	1,024	266	1,290
Hispanic	666	607	1,273	Hispanic	500	773	1,273
Multi-Race	251	911	1,162	Multi-Race	111	1,051	1,162
Special Education	1,265	59	1,324	Special Education	1,176	148	1,324
White	1,149	153	1,302	White	1,112	190	1,302
Poverty	1,313	6	1,319	Poverty	1,309	10	1,319
English Learners	310	801	1,111	English Learners	224	887	1,111
Grand Total	7,560	4,369	11,929	Grand Total	6,924	5,005	11,929

Data source: Alabama Consolidated State Plan, 2017, p. 15

Table 35 shows that many more schools would be required to report subgroups under the lower N=20 count as Alabama's predominantly small schools are more likely to have at least 21 than at least 31 students of any of the listed categories. Two aspects of this table raise questions about what the data show: Given the 1,325 schools reported in the state, it is surprising that not one subgroup arrives at a total of that number of schools. For example, reporting English learners at N=20 is calculated to arrive at 310 schools with that subgroup and 801 schools without that subgroup, totaling 1,111 schools. The difference to Alabama's 1,325 schools is now 214 schools that are not accounted for. It is unclear from the table and it is not clarified in the text accompanying this table if these 214 schools failed to report on those students or if they do not enroll any English learners.

Alabama's measures of teacher quality in the Consolidated State Plan reveal issues of capacity building and reporting challenges in the state: Alabama provides the following data in response to ESSA's requirement to assess teacher quality along the three characteristics of out-of-field teachers, inexperienced teachers and ineffective teachers yet only providing data on the first two.

Table 36

Alabama teacher comparison by school and type

Out-of-Field Teachers		Rate	Disparity
Low-Income students	Title I Schools	0.7%	0.0%
	Non-Title I Schools	0.7%	
Minority students	Title I Schools	0.9%	-0.6%
	Non-Title I Schools	1.5%	
Inexperienced Teachers		Rate	Disparity
Low-Income students	Title I Schools	4.9%	1.4%
	Non-Title I Schools	3.5%	
Minority students	Title I Schools	5.0%	1.9%
	Non-Title I Schools	3.1%	

Data source: Alabama Consolidated State Plan, 2017, p. 38

The state does not indicate the source of the data used for creating Table 36. In order to address the matter of inexperienced teachers, the state references the Alabama Teacher Mentoring (ATM) funded at \$3 million dollars annually for teacher support and retention, especially in hard to staff schools (Alabama Consolidated State Plan, 2017, p. 38). In terms of the teacher effectiveness measure, the state reports having no reporting structures in place yet working on their development, announcing that

(...) every district receiving Title I funds will be asked to analyze school-level data to see if low-income students, English learners, and students of color are being taught at disproportionate rates by ineffective teachers, and, if so, create a plan for how they will eliminate those gaps. (Alabama Consolidated State Plan, 2017, p. 39)

Considering that the state tried and dismissed a variety of data collection and reporting versions of that indicator, any school district will likely be challenged by that task, especially those that already operate under various pressures and limitations. Developing policy on this scale appears a daunting task given expertise and time, even more so for district and school leaders whose primary focus lies elsewhere. Data collection was announced to commence in the 2018-19 school year (Alabama Consolidated State Plan, 2017, p. 40).

Related to teacher quality is the ongoing discussion about Alabama House Bill 502 that would extend superintendents' ability to grant emergency teaching certificates and hence increase the number of teachers available across the state. Superintendents may grant such certificates to teachers with incomplete qualification or missing certification. Reports vary, claiming 447 (Powell Crain,

2019a) and 481 such certificates (WSFA, 2019) having been conferred in the 2017-18 academic year. It remains unclear whether those certificates would remain valid for four (Powell Crain, 2019e) or six years (Moseley, 2020). According to Superintendent Dr. Mackey, the bill would be a "lifesaver" in alleviating Alabama's growing teacher shortage. (WSFA, 2019) As of May 2020, the bill is awaiting authorization by Governor Kay Ivey (Moseley, 2020).

Three impactful policy decisions spearhead Alabama's recent accountability efforts: First, the 2010 Common Core standards in math and English were repealed in June 2019 and exchanged for new standards. Supporters argue that the new standards are aligned with the federal NAEP testing standards and promise to fix Alabama's problem of the last-ranked states. Critics find little difference to the Common Core that had been tailored by Alabama teachers to Alabama needs and argue them to be unnecessary. The new standards become mandatory in the 2021/22 academic year together with newly-aligned books and test materials as well as teacher training programs for math teachers. (Powell Crain, 2019c) Second, the Alabama Literacy Act (2019) mandates 3rd graders to be held back if they do not read at grade level. The policy affects limited proficient English learners and students with disabilities disproportionately.

Table 37

Student groups and percentages of 3rd graders not proficient in reading

Group	3 rd graders not proficient
Student with Limited English Proficiency	87%
Students with Disabilities	83%
Migrant	81%
Homeless	73%
Hispanic/Latino	71%
Foster	71%
Black or African American	69%
Economically Disadvantaged	65%
Male	55%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	54%
All Students	52%
Female	49%
General Education Students	47%
Two or More Races	44%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	43%
Military Affiliated	40%
White	39%
Non-Economically Disadvantages	34%
Asian	34%

Data source: ALSDE

Table 37 (Powell Crain, 2019d) shows that half of all students would be at risk of being held back. Fixing literacy was identified multiple times by the interviewees and there appears to be substantial hope being attached to the policy: State Superintendent Dr. Mackey acknowledges "lots of anxiety" that disappears progressively as details of the policy emerge. English language learners and students with disabilities pass if they had two years of intense support and failed once, or if they failed twice. Eight other states allow but do not require retention of failing students while 17 other states mandate holding back students. Since the end of 2019, Alabama's 20-member task force provides practice tests for reading assessment along with a structure for training teachers in reading science. They developed a list of core readings and intervention programs by January 2020, which was around the same time when schools commence their summer program planning. (Powell Crain, 2019f) It is a borrowed model, adapted from Mississippi's 2013 literacy program that produced nationally recognized gains in NAEP reading tests while at the same time holding back increasing numbers of students. While a large-scale effort to improve literacy resonated among the interviewees, the construction of the policy's timeline combined with the large amount of preparatory work remains daunting: As of the end of 2019, 2,700 teachers were in their first year of training and 250 in their second, having completed more than half of the required 100 hours of the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS). It is not a curriculum, but skills and practices that can be adapted to individual requirements of each child (Powell Crain, 2019g). Much conceptual work on the part of the task force remains to be done, such as creating or choosing the literacy test itself, providing training material, making it possible for enough teachers to receive training in time, create guidelines for schools' mandatory intervention plans and tutoring, summer camps and continuous monitoring of K-12 literacy. Piloting any of these newly created measures does not appear anywhere in the sources yet would be highly recommended given the potential impact of this state-wide policy.

The final, highly impactful policy to date is the Alabama Accountability Act (2013), which aims to offer choice of school to students who have been rezoned to so-called failing schools and whose family income meets the poverty threshold. Students then carry their scholarship to a participating public or private school so long as students maintain testing and grade requirements. The act is funded by donations for which direct text credit in the full amount of a donation is provided. Alabama's seven Scholarship Granting Organizations (SGOs) collect and distribute the funds as scholarships to receiving schools. The act initially appeared as a questionable policy in an interview:

What is the intent of that? Is it really to help a poor performing school and students that a poor performing school go to a higher performing- or is it to take money out of a high needs school and give it over here to a private school that may or may not even need it. So you know, it makes you question decisions that are made in state politics. (Da, p. 22)

This worry of funneling public funding away from public schools that need it most is not new (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 247) and these worries turned out to be well-founded: The two Alabama Accountability Act evaluation reports that were commissioned by the state (Barth/Quenneville, 2016; Barth et al., 2018) concluded that scholarship students "fall below national norms and benchmarks on standardized tests as do their counterparts in the public school system" (Barth/Quenneville, 2016, p. 17). Scholarship recipients did not meet benchmark proficiency scores and "results are especially poor for African-Americans who make up 65% of recipients." (Barth et al., 2018, p. ii) However, ACT results are nearly the same between scholarship recipients and their public school counterparts. (Barth et al., 2018, p. ii)

Both evaluations outline severe limitations: The available data cover 52% and 76% of recipients of the 2014-15 and 2016-17 cohorts, respectively, and that means that any description of those data cannot be extrapolated to all scholarship recipients or used to fulfill the state's comparison requests. Without a baseline of achievement indicators through, for example, prior test scores, potential cannot be shown. Similarly, inconsistency in testing presents a challenge as the total of 18 different tests that recipients took in their various schools cannot form the basis of any conclusions. (Barth/Quenneville, 2016, p. 3) That makes basic insights, let alone calculating gains, impossible no less for the "litany of possible confounding differences among students and schools" (Barth et al., 2018, p. 34). The reports' descriptive data present the following characteristics of those respective 52% and 76% of recipients: Over 90% qualify for free or reduced price lunches, a standard indicator for poverty. Of those 52% of the 2014-15 cohort, 43% were zoned to attend a so-called failing school, 65% were qualified Black/African-American, 22% White/Caucasian and 5% Hispanic (Barth/Quenneville, 2016, p. ii). Two years later, the report analyzed the data of 76% of recipients and found 34% of those zoned to a so-called failing school, 65% Black/African American, 20% White/Caucasian and 11% Hispanic. (Barth et al., 2018, p. ii)

Data issues aside, the Alabama Accountability Act (AAA) effectively reduces the funds available to public schooling as tax monies go to the SGOs instead. Donations are capped at \$50,000 annually and fully tax-deductible from state income tax as well as federal tax. That means that "a \$100 donation under the AAA can lead to more than \$100 in tax cuts", effectively losing the state tax revenue that would also fund public schooling. Carl Davis from the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy calculated that those \$30 million donations potentially cut state and federal taxes by up to \$41 million. Donations increased over time and by 2018, the \$30 million donation cap was reached within the first months. (Johnson, 2018b) By 2019, however, donations dropped by half and raised a mere \$16 million, exacerbated by the income tax deadline extension that delayed donations and put scholarship recipients at risk of losing funds and having to transfer back to their original school. Especially the private schools were called on to do everything to retain scholarship students

and Governor Kay Ivey as petitioned to emergency fund the SGOs. A decision is awaited for June 2020. (Powell Crain, 2020)

Alabama has struggled to increase public school funding on a large scale and even small initiatives such as creating a state lottery that would dedicate its proceeds in large part to funding education has failed consecutively over more than twenty years. When the bill came to a statewide public vote, Alabamians opted against. (Lyman, 2020) The current government and a strand of public interest support school choice and the increasing numbers of charter schools in the state as well as the AAA pay tribute to the foothold of this particular aspect of accountability policy. Supporters of the AAA point to scholarship recipients now attending private schools in nurturing environments, being given an opportunity that they would not have had otherwise (Johnson, 2018a). The claim cannot be addressed given the lack of insight into the act's effects, both on the recipients as well as on the schools that lose students to choice programs. The concern remains that

schools cannot improve if charter schools siphon away the most motivated students and their families in the poorest communities from the regular public. (Ravitch, 2010, p. 227)

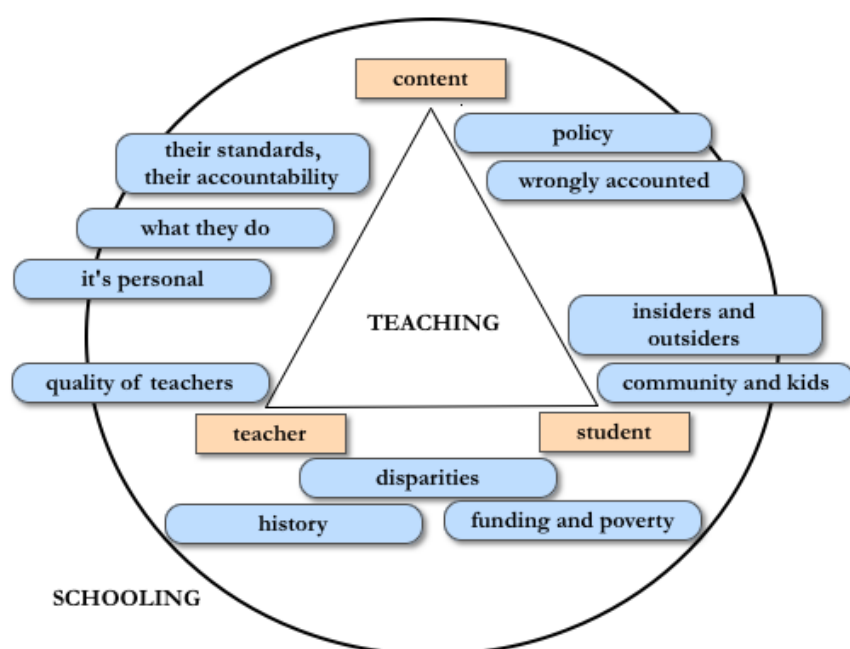
It also seems counterintuitive to increase pressures on already struggling schools by creating a structure that reduces their student numbers, and hence available funds and teachers and infrastructure. However, these positions seem to carry the idea of school choice: “We want to make sure these schools are giving these children a proper education. These schools that are getting the scholarship, if they aren’t making the grade, they don’t get the students. But in the public system, there’s nothing to force them to correct the problem,” said Alabama Senator Marsh (Johnson, 2018a) and assigned the responsibility to obtain good grades to the school instead of the student. The AAA has resulted in scholarship recipients attending private schools at high rates as SGOs cooperate mostly with private schools, some rejecting public districts altogether (Johnson, 2018a). Funds are therefore redirected from public to private schools in a place that has struggled with funding schooling for more than a century. It remains unclear whether this rationale of choice and the AAA benefit Alabama students at all and what other effects the policy might have long-term on scholarship recipients and those students who remain in public schools that are judged to be failing. The status quo of Alabama education policy is one of 'accountability continued', tying pre-NCLB and post-NCLB eras together in the state's long-standing effort toward more accountability for students through continued high-stakes standardized testing (e.g. Literacy Act, graduation requirements) based on a growing set of indicators (growth measures, non-academic readiness tests), for schools through limited funding and growing options outside of public schooling (e.g. charter schools, AAA) and for school districts through increased reporting (e.g. smaller subgroup sizes, teacher quality measures). Turned around, accountability efforts neither began nor ended with NCLB and seem embedded in schooling itself.

Accountability in schooling essentially means answering to the degree to which its purposes are realized and expectations are met - whichever those may be. Ensuring that schools do what they are supposed to is foundational to schooling itself. Discussion of accountability may vary according to places and their specific histories and contexts embedded in local communities, yet the standard for these discussions might then become the degree to which the rationale for a given position is made transparent.

Figure 17

Interview results plotted on conceptual framework of schooling

Whatever is proposed needs to stand on reasoned ground so that it may become accessible to public debate. Who is accountable for what and to who is then no longer a matter of metrics and test



construction but a question of what schooling is supposed to be, whom it is supposed to be for and what entity ensures that purposes are met. Explicating that rationale makes its fundamental reasoning accessible to debate and challenge. Against this background, this study collected patterns of reasoning about schooling

and accountability in the interview material to understand the constitutional mindsets, the common understandings, which schooling in Alabama rests on. Figure 17 plots the interviews' themes on the conceptual framework of school and schooling of this study: The interviewees elaborated on what they felt I needed to know to understand school and schooling in Alabama and I then used that material to research details and connected aspects to explore the dimensions of that case. Eight conversations evolved around this visualized core, offering narratives that form the same story.

The interviewee soundboard concurs that accountability to professional pedagogical standards and their measures are essential and needed. However, publicly ranking schools and districts on fast-changing and ambiguous indicators is inherently inequitable and further exacerbates the inherited generational disadvantage of those in less desirable conditions and with fewer resources than others. Existing disparities are rooted in the state's history of segregation and result in structures of

generational wealth and poverty that are well-known. They manifest themselves in schooling funding structures that mirror lines of societal difference: Socio-geographic and demographic patterns permeate every aspect of schooling today as they did more than a century ago during Reconstruction. The disparities in schooling quality influence, for example, student and educator transience, leaving areas such as the Black Belt and downtown Birmingham in constant need of teachers and administrators and students. Today's visible disparities are rooted in inequitable funding and the history of separation with each single aspect – the 1901 Alabama Constitution, multiple failed tax referenda, moving policy targets, clustering poverty and opportunity – of the phenomenon being immediately intertwined with the others. Separating them in this study is an analytical separation for the purposes of creating a readable narrative, but they are inseparable in the empirical world.

Interviewees express their frustrations openly and without hesitation, but they never cast blame onto people for their lives' circumstances. They maintain a clear differentiation between the contexts and histories and the individuals that find themselves constrained or at an advantage, exerting substantial levels of sustaining this dissonance. In the same spirit, they hold themselves accountable to their profession's standards and goals, their job descriptions and their community's mandate, which they specify to be providing education for all students at consistent quality and with their best interest at the forefront of their every decision. They apply those measures to teachers and hire based on those attitudes. At the same time, they focus on easing teachers' every-day workload so that teachers can focus on advancing the students.

Accountability policy is viewed as an additional task outside of interviewees' core job descriptions, often times distracting from the pedagogical matters at hand. Such distractions include ill-informed public opinion that results from public accountability rankings as well as Alabama's moving-target policy of unclear goals and miscommunicated Report Card indicators, and delayed data reports. NCLB policy was only mentioned in response to my questions and it was discarded as a failed and long-gone relict of the past. As such, schooling was and continues to be wrongly accounted for, impacting schools directly and negatively. The soundboard reflects clear acceptance of accountability and measures based on pedagogical standards, yet continuously moving targets for measures are not only frustrating and unfair but misleading and in effect threatening the functioning of schools because funds are tied to published results.

The interviewees express appreciation for the recent policy focus on growth measures and welcome opportunities to track students' progress over time rather than in comparison to one another. They resist and counteract forms of student labeling while supporting ways to make students' differences fruitful for advancement by offering clubs and sports, differing social contributions to the school, so that students can inhabit and explore on their own terms (H, p. 9). Interviewees discuss students'

future pathways beyond making grades in view of their academic careers just as much as their non-academic achievements and contributions. To that end, interviewees praise current policy for aiming at better quality infrastructure, more education personnel and richer learning opportunities across the state.

Interviewees extended their discussion beyond their own school or community and exhibited awareness and knowledge of the spectrum of conditions that exist for schooling. It indicates their level of care and attention as active members of the education community of principals, superintendents and academic counselors. Their standards are high and their accountability is directed toward the community and the students that deserve environments that are conducive to advancement. In clear view of persisting differences between insiders and outsiders in all aspects of schooling, interviewees develop ways of activating community resources to mitigate lack of funding and inconsistent student access, and they seek to engage parents and connect teachers to community bases. They successfully utilize their specific contexts to the benefit of the students, be it by acquiring local business funding for literacy programs, homebound services and libraries, or by accepting secret backpacking, using homeless student federal funds for clothes and utensils and extra school buses, or be it by offering life skills support to students who need it to find their education pathway. Relationship building is at the core of all interviewees' standard for the quality of their work, including rooting students in their school communities by creating a sense of belonging and mitigating pressures of life so that students can advance their education.

Interviewees' work is personal to them; they are fully invested in schooling. Some of their biographies are tied to the communities they serve, some others are connected through their own difficult education pathways or their experience as parents involved in schooling. They all carry a sense of urgency and immediacy in relating that they have a stake in schooling: Their standards drive their vision and their commitment, their frustration as well as their belief in school and schooling being able to do better for their constituents.

The case of Alabama served as one example manifestation of the age of accountability that I explored through multiple collected constructions of the phenomenon to understand the ways in which it affected the people addressed by accountability policy. Secondary context data of federal agencies and official education data reporting offer different and at times differing readings because they encapsulate the phenomenon of accountability constructed against different horizons and fulfilling differing functions. It shows how no construction – data or otherwise – can speak to the empirical reality but instead is but one construction based on a specific intentionality against a specific horizon. My approach to the case of Alabama sought to collect and contrast such constructions, enriching them with experience accounts of principals and superintendents and academic advisors whose in-depth elaborations on schooling in Alabama created a rich, saturated

soundboard of their interpretations. In this way, this study stakes no claim on being representative or revelatory in any way that would be new to Alabama or Alabamians. The study represents an attempt to systematically explore how the issues that NCLB sought to address manifest themselves today and how those involved in schooling conceptualize accountability and the nature of their work. As such, the case exemplifies how NCLB – by its very structure - could not mitigate and indeed exacerbated the forces that shape education in a place where poverty, underfunding, historical inequities in infrastructure, lacking access to teachers and resources outside of academics, create separate experiences of schooling that are nowhere near equal. By the same token, strong accountability policy was in effect in Alabama long before NCLB (Carnoy/Loeb, 2002) and continue to affect education in the state today: Representatives now focus their efforts on literacy, teacher quality and n-counts for subgroup reporting – another continuation of the NCLB structure of the past decades. Those involved in education instead continue to work for underserved student groups and underserved areas, managing policy and public expectation to the best of schools' and district leaders' abilities to retain community trust and sources of funding. As such, accountability in the profession is ubiquitous, yet decidedly not along the age of accountability rationale but as a community-driven effort directed at the advancement of students led by educators much aware of and actively engaged in their translation task between policy and practice.

5. A status quo of the age of accountability

In the following chapter, the study retreats from its example cases and returns to the age of accountability, now richly explored and discussed through one manifestation in a state, as the specific, narrow rationale of test-based accountability of the past decades. Between continued doubling-down on the seemingly endless race for more and more precise indicators, on the one hand, and the dichotomous debate between centralization and decentralization of schooling on the other, the present discussions pose fundamental questions about the purpose and quality of public schooling. They are by no means new but indeed old, constitutive tensions written into the field of Curriculum Studies that offers old answers. Neither more accountability and nor abandoning federal oversight for exclusive local control appears viable, but the socially, politically and culturally conflicted climate unraveling in the United States today leaves hope for a jolt toward the political center and a window of opportunity for a change of paradigm in education policy.

As I finalize this manuscript in the fall of 2020, U.S. presidential elections are looming and the matter of education policy has been, if at all, marginally relevant to the presidential race; it remained largely invisible as it was during the past four years of the Trump administration's tenure. The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 continues to be the law of the land in terms of federal education policy, as long-term effects of the reigning accountability rationale remain unknown

(Mittleman/Jennings, 2018; Jacob, 2017b). Effects on higher education and labor markets, health and civic engagement, voter participation or crime are unexplored by research (Figlio/Loeb, 2011, p. 417), no less because of the significant methodological challenges and limitations of such endeavors. One might argue "it should become more feasible to study the effects of test-based accountability on these long-term outcomes (...) which motivate much of the reforms" (Figlio/Loeb, 2011, p. 417). I would instead argue that the lack of research is, at least in part, due to the complex and non-linear correlations between schooling and the above-mentioned outcomes. While reforms claim and seek such outcomes, they aim too far, reaching into realms that education certainly affects but not as linearly and discernably as is often purported.

The call for more flexibility after NCLB was partially heard: ESSA did away with AYP and the linearity of short-term progress embedded in both the 100% proficiency and the highly qualified teacher requirement. States were mandated to choose one non-traditional school quality indicator, e.g. student engagement or school climate and safety (Mittleman/Jennings, 2018, p. 478), and to set their own challenging standards toward career and college readiness. All except four states initially fulfilled that requirement by adopting the Common Core (2008), a list of teaching contents for English language arts and math. The degree of its current influence is a matter of debate, with assessments ranging from it being irrelevant to it being steered through learning assessment software and materials as well as the ACT and SAT structures that guide teaching and learning (Greene, 2017). Alabama's case exemplifies both, having formally repealed the Common Core for math in December 2019 only to revamp Alabama's Course of Study standards for math in only a few months. Chances are they inevitably backtrack to contents that are not uniquely new and likely aligned with the assessments in place to ease roll-out, at least resembling characteristics of the Common Core. Thus, a fundamentally different and new curriculum is unlikely.

The *EdNext* debate on "A Decade On, Has Common Core Failed?" (2020) exemplifies three rationales concerning the status quo of accountability policy. Whereas some advocate for abandoning the Common Core for not delivering the desired increase in test scores (Loveless, 2020), others argue that aligned curricula and materials combined with improved teacher preparation might still accomplish the promised improvement; moving back on the policy now will have accomplished nothing (Petrilli, 2020). Agreement reigns on the fact that impacts are "definitely not enough to solve the problems of America's K-12 public schools (that) standards-based reforms have been chipping away at (...) for 30 years now" (Polikoff, 2020), no less because of measurement issues: It is nearly impossible to pinpoint the beginning and the level of consistency of the Common Core standards nationally and additionally, NAEP is neither aligned to any state's standards nor to the Common Core, resulting in various issues of assessing impact (Polikoff, 2020). Polikoff's argument stands on the need for reliable measurement in order to achieve reliable policy effectiveness

information, urging the "Wild West days of every teacher and every school with their own curricula must come to an end" (Polikoff, 2020). This argument favors centralized rather than decentralized education reform.

Even though ESSA addressed post-NCLB hopes for decentralization and state flexibility, it exacerbated capacity issues by mandating states to design and implement their own turnaround interventions for the identified bottom 5% of schools at least every three years (Mittleman/Jennings, 2018, p. 479). State leaders are tasked with assessing and choosing research to serve as a basis for their proposed intervention based on four intervention tiers that classify experimental studies as strong evidence (tier 1), quasi-experimental as moderate evidence (tier 2) and correlational studies as promising evidence (tier 3). It is effectively impossible to obtain funding for research that presents rationales that are not based on primary data but on existing high quality research (tier 4). A recent inquiry into state leaders' experiences presented findings that accumulated to a warning against flexibility without capacity, i.e. federal support coupled with states' ability to provide needed structures and resources (Center on Education Policy, 2019, p. 7). Leaders express frustration for having been hired for managerial skills yet being tasked with interpreting research. They report U.S. Department of Education's slow responses to their inquiries and lacking support with understanding and classifying research in a way that allows them to do more for their state than just meet the bare policy requirements (Center on Education Policy, 2019, p. 7). Leaders worry about the large number of schools identified for intervention and the funding being stretched too thin to attend to identifying the cause for schools' problems before setting the intervention results in "local control in theory but difficult to exercise in practice" (Center on Education Policy, 2019, p. 8).

Warnings were warranted that pointed to limited federal guidance resulting in few states doing well and others being left behind (Jacob, 2017a, p. 475; Jacob, 2017b, p. 482), no less for Alabama where local school-community partnerships differ in kind and structure but work fruitfully and to the benefit of both communities and schools. That being said, less affluent and less resource-rich areas merely cope under severely constrained conditions that are incomparable to environments of wealth and financial generosity. Context matters, and the decades-long charge against NCLB's centralized approach to education reform has been that it ignored the contexts in which schooling functions and disregarded the mischaracterization of problems, thereby pushing solutions that could not work, setting restrictive requirements that undermined educators' efforts to create conditions of success in their contexts. To those particularly it remains important that needs are communicated and met, something that state leaders fear will not happen through ESSA that "will render education leaders data rich but information poor" (Center on Education Policy, 2019, p. 12). Leaders call for federal government support in order to fulfill their responsibility to provide capacity (Center on Education Policy, 2019, p. 13). Alabama's example showed continuously strong efforts toward sound education

practice in locally meaningful ways by all interviewees' accounts. This gap management is by no means new, yet growing expectations paired with stringent frames and lacking support exacerbates capacities and becomes counterproductive: It creates environments in which people no longer creatively explore and develop pragmatic solutions and instead retreat to the safe space of more of the same. For example, NCLB waiver applications were paradigmatic for states retreating to what they knew, not creating new indicators, thereby perpetuating known problems (Polikoff et al. 2014). An analysis of ESSA applications shows, too, that *equity* is left undefined and unoperationalized by states other than through the problematic indicator of test scores (Chu, 2019). What effectively happened was a re-forming of the 2002 policy in 2015 (Cuban, 2020).

Now, 18 years after NCLB, it has become clear that the centralization-decentralization dichotomy remains unresolved: Too narrowly constructed, centralized guidance has proven damaging and passing down large-scale, high-stakes policy-making from federal to state levels (Cuban, 2020) does not equal decentralized, local school reform. Yet by the same token, historical roots are prone to resurface if left untended by federal regulatory oversight (Frankenberg et al., 2019) and in fact, they reappeared as resegregation after federal guidance disappeared. The *Parents Involved* (2007) Supreme Court ruling eliminated federal oversight for school district desegregation. As a response, the Obama Administration issued various documents containing practical, voluntary guidance to district leaders because the ruling was widely misinterpreted, no less because of a Bush Administration white paper on the case that offered a narrow reading of the ruling. Legal guidance for diversity-promoting school district policy included site selection for programs and magnet schools, new rezoning and admission policies that specifically aid diversity and transfer options (George/Darling-Hammond 2019, p. vii) as well as school discipline measures, action for transgender and disability students that current Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos reviewed upon taking office "whether and how the federal government has overstepped its legal authority in K-12 schools" (Exec. Order No. 13791, 82 Fed. Reg. 20427, 2017 as quoted in George/Darling-Hammond, 2019, p. 2), eventually rescinding close to 600 policy documents offering guidance to state leaders (Strauss, 2017). The Trump Administration wrote no large-scale policy act into law; however, it led action toward what is purported to be local control and choice. Warnings against uneven capacity and retreating civil rights have proven warranted:

Given this nation's history of racial discrimination and the infusion of that discrimination into our institutions and systems, including the public school system, it is imperative – particularly in the face of confusion about court rulings – that the federal government continue to play an active and vigilant role in encouraging proactive local efforts to promote racial diversity and reduce racial isolation. This helps ensure that all students can access the benefits of racially diverse learning environments. History and evidence indicate that without an active federal role, our localities are likely to revert to racially isolated learning environments that undermine efforts to provide quality educational opportunities for all students. (George/Darling-Hammond, 2019, p. 19)

Existing double-segregation trends along race and poverty threaten not only the promise of equitable access to education for students of color but also the immeasurable benefits of diverse education environments for all students, no less white learners who also attend large majority white schools at increasing levels (Frankenberg et al., 2019, p. 23).

In fact, the 2018 report by the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights on the status quo of civil rights finds education to be among the top five listed⁴⁴ priorities today, specifying pressing matters within education that are equitable funding and facilities and cost, school discipline, the school-to-prison pipeline and opportunities for Native American students. When asked about the issue of highest importance in their state, the majority of 21 members reported race/color. Representatives of Alabama listed race/color and voting rights as the two issues of highest importance. When asked about emerging civil rights issues, education was named and specifically matters of finance and resources, discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline as well as reverse discrimination in higher education, and lack of teacher and licensing requirements. For Alabama, representatives named voting rights and abuse of redistricting as emerging issues. (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2018) The issue also appeared in the debate that followed Judge Coney Barrett's hearing by the Senate Judiciary Committee, culminating in Senator Ted Cruz's pointed statement that matters of school choice would become the core civil rights issue of the century.

Federal oversight and guidance seem necessary to offset widening historical disparities and exacerbating civil rights issues that endanger the enterprise of public education. The South specifically educates 27% Latino and 25% African American students, a total of 60% low-income students, and sees rising numbers of charter schools that enroll 4.4% of public school students, a majority of whom are Latino and African American. Enrollment in private schools is decreasing, in the South and in the nation, but enrollment remains majority white. While the South may be uniquely equipped to recognize and act on its "historical understanding of how racial segregation has harmed its communities" (Frankenberg, et al. 2017, p. 6), it may not be – for the very same reason. Alabama's example showed how place matters to retention and mobility, of teachers, principals and students; how recent choice policy efforts are not crafted transparently enough for proper evaluation or financed meaningfully long-term, and how moving policy targets upset the stability needed in schools and schooling.

Concentrated poverty and generational disadvantage are accumulated results of the "century-long pattern of racially motivated and racially explicit federal, state, and local policies" (Rothstein, 2013, p. 19) that continue to disproportionately affect communities of color. Research on successful programs for disadvantaged students showed that otherwise relevant aspects to advancing students

⁴⁴ The report presents the results of the 160 survey submissions of members of the State Advisory Committee (SAC) of the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights.

such as collaborations between educators in schools and with parents outside of schools and well-designed and aligned curricula do not help students in neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty, residential mobility, low incomes, little formal education and high levels of unemployment because these factors effectively undermine the continuity of teaching and schooling; discipline and attendance issues, remedial and slower pace teaching and lacking exposure to intellectually rich environments (Rothstein, 2013, p. 18). Any reform promise to fix these ailments must fall short, as much as any silent or outspoken acquiescence might rise to the level of culpability. Contexts create conditions that limit opportunities for action yet as Alabama's example showed, principals and superintendents succeed in stretching their limits to find funding for extra teachers, use federal monies to bus children to afternoon programs, or to lead against public shaming as a result of wrongly accounted data. What is more, the interviewees spoke out about their pedagogical standards and their professional accountability and pulled into the light the specific decisions that are responsible for the contexts and conditions that limit schooling on their watch.

Federal oversight in the form of NCLB has been counterproductive in view of equitable schooling, no less because the call to value excellence above equity is written into law itself. That finding is a direct reflection of the false belief that regardless of any background and against all odds, good schools can make students achieve. Twenty years down the line, that belief has continued and exacerbated historical, intentional inequities that helped generate today's disparities (Ladson-Billings, 2013, p. 14) which early criticism of NCLB foresaw because context is inseparable from education:

It is inconceivable to think that education as a civil rights issue can be addressed without addressing residential segregation; housing policy is school policy. (Rothstein 2013, p. 19)

Housing is but one example of the accumulated Education Debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that is owed to all students involved in schooling. All four components of the Education Debt – historical, economic, sociopolitical, moral – deprive all students, not just students of color, of benefitting from education that is no longer characterized by "the legacy of education inequities (...) formed around race, class, and gender" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5), no longer limited by the pattern of lacking funds for those who would need more resources and more support, finally co-created by active civic representation of families of color and other generationally disenfranchised groups similar to the ways in which affirmative action effectively created the black middle class and especially benefitted white women (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 7). And finally, the moral component of Education Debt calls to do what is right in the face of what may be easier, more compliant, or less-disruptive than taking on social responsibility that can in turn impact ongoing discussions by truthfulness that leads to good-faith argumentation and builds trust, offsetting "distrust and suspicion about what schools can and will do (against) teachers and administrators (who) pay each year against what they might rightfully invest in helping students advance academically" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 9). In Alabama,

all interviewees expressed wanting and needing more focus on proactive education work instead of recording data, responding to misinformed public inquiries or campaigning for needed funding. That tenor was consistent throughout the soundboard, echoing the Education Debt as their duty to provide the best formal education and pedagogical professional care for students.

Repaying even parts of the Education Debt would yield the power to provide the experience of acceptably funded, diverse education to all students, also those in resource-rich environments. They, too, are in schools characterized by non-diverse student populations. Their experiences of schooling, too, are limited and limiting in ways they would no longer be. Strengthening all of us strengthens all of us, the old mantra holds. As such, youth would more likely experience common ground in school with people no matter their looks, their religion, their sexual orientation, their wealth or their poverty. Those youths might experience better education for its breadth because whatever the subject or the project, they would have had the opportunity to learn about and negotiate the multiple valid ways of thinking and being, the multiple realities that exist next to their own. My argument here is pedagogical in the sense that it expresses hope in the power of the self-reflective yet restrained educated human mind and as such, it stands decidedly separate from the educationalization of social problems (Labaree, 2008), the long-standing ask of American society for education "to ameliorate race and class inequity (...) to take responsibility for remediating all of these social problems" (Labaree, 2008, p. 447) against all evidence that "the result is a record of one failure after another." (Labaree, 2008, p. 448) By the standard of the idea that schooling ought to fix what ails society, schooling expectedly failed, yet that standard is an unfounded, counter-factual belief that persisted in education reforms of the past four decades.

Accountability as the "national crusade for excellence" (Cuban, 1998, p. 469) is the paradigmatic example of a pattern of school reform: The overreaching political rhetoric of promises and goals is followed by far more limited policy that in turn is executed inconsistently (Cuban 2020). It is consequently judged as a failure against policymakers' common standards of effectiveness, popularity and fidelity that are implausible (Cuban, 1998, pp. 456ff). This misjudgment is based on a failure to recognize the historically persistent Grammar of Schooling (Tyack/Tobin, 1994) as the stable core of schooling that results in schools tending to respond apprehensively to reform, if at all. In blatant terms, schools do not behave in ways that policymakers expect them to behave, but they continue to educate students and serve communities precisely because they do not sway with the wind of reform. The failure is not with schooling but with what is asked of schooling.

In the end, test-based, high-stakes accountability did not match with what most educators and administrators and communities understand to be good schooling. For a sweeping reform, however, it would need that fit in order to "cultivate the kind of broader social movement that might nourish educational and social change" (Tyack/Tobin, 1994, p. 477) as did the civil rights movement initially

before the idea of advancing equity was encoded in economic terms and nationalized in the wake of *A Nation at Risk* (Cuban, 1998, p. 463), becoming what we know today as accountability in education. For the case of Alabama, it appears as though the tangible consequences of NCLB and its inevitable demise eroded any initial support because it "violated the public's notions of a 'real school'" (Cuban, 1998, p. 477) that first and foremost serves its community within their specific construction of schooling in mind (Cuban, 1998, p. 478). This match is what interviewees tell me is better today, and more fruitful, resulting for example in generous donations from businesses in the community and artists in residence. The conversations I had with principals and superintendents and academic advisors were designed for them to educate me on what is relevant to them, and not one person spoke about NCLB or ESSA or any other policy. In fact, multiple interviews started out with unprompted statements against standardized high-stakes testing on grounds of it being unfair to the students. Similarly, all interviewees affirmed their readiness to stand accountable for advancing students academically and non-academically, by their profession's standards of doing no harm and doing what is best for the children (B, p. 27) as well as in view of the community they are in. Everyone named difficulties involving parents and finding extra funding, yet everyone also shared stories of success of fitting into the place and being able to respond to it in a way that is appreciated both inside of schools and outside of them. I read these successes as "adapting reform to local circumstances and public expectations" (Tyack/Tobin, 1994, p. 478) because they manage to "hybridize (reforms) according to local needs and knowledge" (Tyack/Tobin, 1994, p. 478) based on continuous conversations with representatives of parents, businesses, churches and social workers in the respective places. Shared understandings of schooling seems to have sustained it in the face of policy demands that interviewees treat as busy work, an obligation outside their core responsibility:

We throw a lot of reports (*at them*), which is where a bureaucracy- so we do it, but we try saying, yeah, you have to get them done. There's a deadline, but on these we don't really care. Just get them done. Even if you're late, you know, focus on being in the classrooms with kids, changing outcomes for students. And that's just the leadership issue of how do we- how do we keep the focus. (Da, p. 24)

Keeping the pedagogical focus in the midst of mounting administrative tasks is the clear goal all leaders, without exception, affirmed in our conversations. Their clarity extends to the lingering historical burdens and civil rights issues that manifest themselves in schooling and appear in their daily professional lives. Still, leaders are unflinching and uncompromising in their clarity of mission and as such they exemplify other criteria of success than those commonly used:

They are just as interested in student outcomes as are policymakers, but the outcomes differ. What skills, content, and attitudes have my students learned beyond what is tested? Are our students decent people? Are the parents working with us rather than against us? To what extent is the life lived in our classrooms and schools healthy, democratic, and caring? (Cuban, 1998, p. 466)

Alabama seems to be a case in point for local control of schooling that manages to navigate through the age of accountability by actively involving communities and serving their needs to the best of

their ability under the conditions that plague the state. School boards through their hired superintendents and principals seem to indeed stabilize the turmoil caused by moving policy targets and hasty changes to reform programs. In the case of Alabama, however, school boards both appoint and elect members, depending on the place, for various term lengths and with varying degrees of influence. They contract superintendents and principals based on terms they see fit (H, p. 16). So in one sense, the junctures of democratic control over education do rest in the hands of communities where members of school boards are elected (Tröhler, 2008, p. 8). Democratic control is then lost at the level of the State Board of Education – the body responsible to enact federal requirements – where elected members' tenures are extended unlimitedly if no challenger to the seat surfaces. Places where the city council appoints members would offer insightful case studies to explore the nature of democratic control and its manifestation in local political process (Tröhler, 2008, p. 12).

The case of Alabama documents the winning pragmatism of "local and regional expectations of the school" (Tröhler, 2008, p. 12) in balancing and negotiating policy vision and practical feasibility under conditions that are as draining as they are unlikely to change anytime soon. Alabama schooling as it persists against the magnitude of its historical baggage and state policy of ill-funded choice programs, increasing charter schools and abandoned Common Core math standards is nothing short of a success story in its own right, no less for educators and education leaders who connected to their constituencies and found extra resources from community members and the industry. Yet the case of Alabama is also a case in point for untended social problems that weigh heavily on the quality of public schooling. And while the ongoing gap management is a success story, equitable education in Alabama is not. So it appears that leaving schooling to local contexts and as a result, local histories, is equally damaging as is doubling down on federal accountability with high-stakes teacher assessments, early childhood literacy testing and choice options funded by public schooling that drain resources from schools and districts that would need extra resources.

Either extreme is problematic for the same reason: It tilts the delicate balance between the political, economic and individual purposes of education, thereby losing the tension between them that are constitutive of public schooling (Labaree, 2017). Competing perspectives and interests push for these purposes and necessitate debate and societal negotiation of them. The accountability rationale, however, values economic and individual purposes over political ones and prioritizes excellence over equity, for example, favoring academic advancement over all other aspects of a students' active participation in school life and not providing accountability credit for non-academic achievements to either students or schools. This "shift from one set of values to another, from character and citizenship to economic utility" (Labaree, 2017, p. 287) results in treating education as a tool for private gain: "For some this means going to school to gain access to the social opportunities that

evaded their parents; and for others it means using school to preserve social advantages that their parents already have." (Labaree, 2017, p. 288) More importantly, it devalues acquiring knowledge because it becomes a mere means to an end rather than – at least in part – an end in its own right. If the end of education is conceptualized as personal gain, the social setting for learning and interaction schools provide becomes an obstacle, especially to those students who could advance faster and save costs for schooling. In Alabama, a fast track option to college is already available for students who are able to reduce seat-time, i.e. mandatory presence in school, through dense content progressions individualized as self-study and subsequent credentialing through individualized testing (B, p. 34). If such models were to go to scale, public schooling understood as social interaction and social growth through common experiences would be lost, intentionally furthering stratification and as a consequence, undermining diversity.

Losing the tensions between differing purposes of schooling means losing the democratic ground on which competing visions of public schooling can legitimately stand because one set of ideas becomes manifest as the discursive frame that lends legitimacy of those ideas and excludes alternatives from being recognized and debated. Accountability has grown into such a policy paradigm, i.e. a dominant narrative based on specific problem definitions that guards one possible understanding of schooling as the "defining the frame of what will seem acceptable as a solution" (Mehta, 2013a, pp. 291f) to the interpretation of the perceived nature of the problem. Arguments that fall outside of the boundary are not refuted on fact but reframed and negated, as the example of warranted criticism of teachers showed: Tests as inadequate measures of quality, funding as the key for elevating quality and professional improvement and societal responsibility were discredited as a problem of teachers unwilling or unable to change (Mehta, 2013a, p. 309). One dominant narration of schooling, and in this case also teachers, decides the way in which conversations about schooling are had:

In sum, once crystallized, a new paradigm not only delimits policy options to conform to that paradigm (Hall, 1993; Weir, 1992), but it can restructure the political landscape around an issue and change the agenda status of the issue, the players involved, their standing to speak, and the venue in which the issue is debated. (Mehta, 2013a, p. 293)

This way, the paradigm creates politics of its specific direction, supported by multiple actors and their different positions because "paradigms help to explain how the context was created in which those positions came to seem rational" (Mehta, 2013a, p. 293). In the case of accountability, the historical analysis of policy talk spanning from *A Nation at Risk* all the way to *No Child Left Behind* identifies how four differing strands – economic purpose of schooling (strand 1), linked to educational production (strand 2), increasing performance for all (strand 3) that schools are responsible for (strand 4) – converged into a rationale that was supported from the political left, the center and the political right for equity or for pressuring schools to achieve, respectively (Mehta,

2013a, pp. 314f). This historical analysis refrains from any insinuation of ill-will of actors but reconstructs the process by which multiple factors form the context in which this paradigm could prosper. Actors' efforts rest on their problem definition, as well as what schooling is and what it is for. Those positions and their standards are rarely explicated in school reform discussions (Cuban, 1998, p. 471) even though it would need transparent positions in order to interrogate them for their validity. Being nontransparent guards ideas against argumentative inquiry, and claiming authority of standing in the ways that interests groups and institutions do further obscures the embedded rationales. However, if paradigms create politics, "interests of groups and institutions *are* ideas about what we should be for and who should decide what" (Mehta, 2013a, p. 316) that can – and need to be – challenged and renegotiated and recast. The argument for competing visions of schooling rests on championing the variety of ideas discussed. Underscoring the "multiplicity of ideas, logics, or orders (that) are always at play" (Mehta, 2013a, p. 316) is necessary to create recurring caveats to define problems in alternative ways, thereby opening opportunities for change.

Four decades of evidence against the expectations of evidence-based policy have not succeeded in dismantling the accountability paradigm as arguments on facts have failed: They did not sufficiently address and change the problem definitions, which is no small task given that problem definitions "generally evoke both normative and empirical descriptions in ways that are mutually reinforcing" (Mehta, 2013a, p. 291). As a result, the accountability paradigm is a stable and persistent phenomenon, a fact that makes it particularly challenging to establish alternative understandings of schooling. The technocratic logic has entered education and schooling through cries of crisis that invited outside approaches to enter the field of education, eventually dominating discussions, politically backed and ineffectively resisted by the field of education (Mehta, 2013b, p. 7). Among weak welfare and social geography disparities, it is the "political timidity that avoids questions of distributive justice and sees technocratic solutions as the politically easier path to improving student outcomes" (Mehta 2013b, 22). In addition, the genealogy of education as an academic field in the U.S. renders both education practice and the field hierarchical and hence susceptible to outside control (Mehta, 2013b, p. 23).

So how to step out of this 40-year-pattern of narrow accountability? The rationale has arrived at questions of educational purpose that are not empirically answerable (Koretz, 2017). They lead back to old questions about what schooling can do and what it does, the curricula it follows and the people who develop them. Curriculum Studies as a field offers longstanding approaches to these present questions that yield alternative ways of discussing schooling and its inner workings led by the profession that is teaching. Deconstructing and widening the reigning narrowings is countering the accountability paradigm in all spaces of educational engagement – practice, research, policy – by broadening the ways in which schooling is discussed, thereby expanding modes of thinking and

doing and researching education, inviting a multiplicity of alternative visions for schooling "of what schooling has been and still can be" (Labaree, 2017, p. 289). Implications for research on school and schooling direct efforts away from research designs that, for example, uncritically assume linearity in teaching and learning or view teachers as mere instructors. Instead, opposing such "outside control" (Mehta 2013b, p. 22) means reaching for Curriculum Studies' knowledges and approaches that long preceded the past four decades of narrow accountability and offers decades of scholarship that addressed similar questions to the ones debated today.

6. The final pointe

The study reconstructed and discussed conceptualizations of accountability in the context of their various horizons and according to their respective intentionality, from NCLB's accountability rationale to the interviewee soundboard that resonated nine individual yet unified constructions of accountability for school and schooling. My aim was to elicit example ways in which accountability may be understood and responded to, not to evaluate or claim empirical truths but to contribute to widening the conversations about accountability to step out from its narrow paradigm. I close by reviving arguments for a renaissance of knowledges from the field of Curriculum Studies. Its broad corpus of scholarship can enlighten discussions about the future of public schooling in the field and in the policy arena through renewed emphasis on, for example, the value and relevance of history, the situational nature of curriculum discussions and the inherent relatedness education theory to its practice. It therefore offers alternative visions for public schooling (Labaree, 2017) that embrace the multiplicity of ideas as the basis for democratic ways of teaching and learning in schools.

In this study, I purposefully rejected populist cries of crisis about schooling's alleged failures by not utilizing school rankings or report cards based on test scores or other similarly narrow indicators. I also did not lead my enquiry in the spirit of evaluation or investigation but instead set out to learn about and understand sets of experiences and constructions of phenomena. As such, I linked accountability discussions to practice via two cases – NCLB and the state of Alabama – that are representations of how the age of accountability manifests itself in a place. In doing so, I hope to counter the narrowings set by the paradigm of accountability and contribute to reviving alternative visions of schooling based on alternative problem definitions (Mehta, 2013a). The findings of this study indicate that schools and schooling continue to advance students and serve the community in the age of accountability, despite the devaluation of equity for excellence and the social problems that persist: Disparities of generational wealth and poverty and the failure to legislate proper funding plague Alabama schooling and everyone involved in it. Against these odds, educators provide the stability and flexibility for schooling to function by adapting reforms rather than the other way around (Cuban, 1998), as interviewees explained:

My personal view is with all the accountability that we have in place and all of the standards that we have to meet, I have- personally, and I, maybe it's just me, I have really not seen where it has ever come to fruition that someone has negatively been impacted for not achieving those things. Does that make sense? Like it's on paper. It's a lot of talk and when we say all this stuff, but I mean other than public execution by, you know, by what people think- people aren't losing their jobs, we're not losing funding. School still has to happen. (B, p. 31)

Accountability may remain a matter of compliance and paperwork for some; for others it is a limiting reality that exacerbates their conditions by restricting resources, adding public scrutiny and making it harder to campaign for additional funds from the community. This result is echoed by a recent study of three states' education leaders – similarly including superintendents, and assistant superintendents, principals and assistant principals – found that half of them leave after only three years, especially for leaders of color, those in small districts, when salaries are low and accountability consequences loom (Meyer et al., 2020). In similar ways, this study's interviewee soundboard also reflected and exemplified the range of skills and resources required to navigate unrealistic and inconsistent policy expectations. Job transience and vacant positions are reflected as well and unsurprisingly specifically in places where resources are stretched thin.

More important than claims of crisis is recognizing the Education Debt that is owed to those involved in schooling and the calls for mitigation of historical, economic, sociopolitical and moral disparities (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5) in schooling that deprive all students – privileged or not – of a common education experience, no less at the hand of school choice options that separate students from one another and drain public schooling's funding. The equity question embedded in school funding and zoning policies might just become the issue through which civil rights matters are negotiated. Importantly, recognizing Education Debt exposes the narrow focus of accountability policy as unconscionably neglectful of the education quality experienced by learners with disabilities and those who are homeless, incarcerated or living in environments affected by incarceration, education dropout and reentry, engaged in high-stakes athletic scholarships, affected by food insecurity, substance abuse, early parenthood, or any other one of the innumerable burdens that make learning difficult if not impossible. The accountability paradigm has effectively sidelined questions of quality education for these learners and denied them a place in schooling they can fruitfully inhabit, explore and experience as rightfully theirs.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Early school leaving often represents the end point of a long process of negative and alienating experiences in education that make it continuously harder for students to find and maintain their place in schooling. I call this process procedural alienation and propose that it is that experience that co-directs and often limits future education pathways of youth. Each school has its own culture of rules and rituals, social groups and their structures that can be difficult to join and navigate, especially if previous experience has been negative. Early leavers tend to have experienced school profoundly differently than those who progress through school smoothly and linearly. Considering the powerful, long-term memories of school and the broad consensus that dropout prevention benefits everyone involved, it is crucial to understand the pathways of youths before they eventually leave school early.

Students' achievements are broader than accountability's singular focus on outward academic achievement – e.g. test scores, Ivy League college placement or four-year graduation rates – suggests. Consider how very different the achievements may be for the learner groups above and how carefully attuned educators have to be to the individuals' histories and contexts and their prior experiences in education to prompt experiences of success and advancement. Consider also non-academic avenues that schooling offers to students to explore their talents in the arts or athletics, on the debate team or as a contributor to the school newspaper or radio. Accounting for these aspects of quality schooling seems just as important and far more challenging to operationalize. It is possible, if difficult, to derive indices of quality pedagogical work in schooling from within the field of Curriculum Studies and the profession that is teaching: Affective variables reflect the experience of school of educators and students alike based on, for example, interpersonal connectedness, the quality of exchanges outside of class, the availability of principals and teachers, coaches and student representatives. Similarly, the level of parents' and communities' engagement indicates the quality of those relationships; school's presence in that community and community presence in the school is indicative of their collaboration. Teacher autonomy and retention is a standard indicator of quality already but it can be more usefully operationalized; for example, schools offer liberties and engagement opportunities for teachers such as leading clubs, social projects inside and outside of school, involve students in social causes for extra-credit or creating extra-credit programs for students who contribute to the school community in meaningful ways, e.g. tutoring, student-led buddy programs, volunteering to kitchen or library or gym services, and helping the bus drivers with getting younger students on and off the school bus. There are no limits to creative minds where schools invite agency to thrive. The quality of schooling is also characterized by the work done to prevent dropout and aid reentry, to support pathways other than college and maintain relationships with graduates so to provide stability to all students, enrolled and graduated. They become role models, a valuable resource in affirming the multiple realities of success while at the same time remaining an appreciated member of the school community.

The promise of alternative proxy-indicators includes, at least to some degree, to be able to reflect non-academic aspects of school life, thereby providing broader and more substantive insights into what happens in schooling and its value of public schooling, for individual students and the community. The lingering risk of any such endeavor is any indicator being misconstrued as the only relevant one and used for public rankings, funding, hiring decisions, etc. which would represent a regression into the pattern of narrow accountability. Reviving these alternative indicators, however, revives the Place Called School and opens a new discussion of the quality of schools and the profession's standards of educators.

The experience of schooling matters: Whatever is the dominant tangible, visible, every-day experience in school will become what school *is*. This view challenges the assumption that schooling evolves around subject matter knowledge, or grades, or test scores. Schools educate their particular students and serve their communities through their efforts to create a rich environment that fosters learning and develops interests through offering educational experiences for their particular clientele in view of the conditions under which the school functions. Hence, schools are rightfully different in serving different people as they elevate their students' gaze beyond their immediate lifeworlds. For some, that may include trips overseas and foreign languages, internships with local industry and social services volunteer work. For others, it may include trips to the movie theater and to local sports events, class visits by local law enforcement and nutrition experts. These experiences are not the same, and the point is that they do not have to be in order to create the educative difference between matter and meaning, i.e. taught content and individual knowledge (Hopmann, 2007). The profession's standard is to offer educational experiences for the specific individuals at hand, in cooperation with them, to foster inward ends of education through shared experiences. That way, the community becomes accountable for providing the social conditions in which educators can educate (Berliner, 2005). The Education Debt standard, therefore, conceptualizes schooling as a collaborative effort between educators, parents and policymakers who owe it to students, particularly those in need, to build policy with them in mind (Pogrow, 2017), because in contrast to students from resource-rich environments, students in need depend on schooling to open pathways for them. The pedagogical principle of doing no harm can manifest itself in practice, policy and research as finding ways of not making it worse (Labaree, 2010). So if for just a moment we were to imagine school as not being responsible for solving social problems, what would we be left with? My interviewees' standards and their pedagogical accountability as the vision that guides their work would still stand. They would still advance students to the best of their ability. Their professional practice would be the same, just unhindered and uninterrupted by outside expectations that are impossible for schooling to meet as long as the conditions are as dismal as they are today. It appears that federal funds directed toward social reforms could impact the lives of students and families for the better (Labaree, 2008, p. 448).

Teaching as a profession extends far beyond conveying a pre-selected, pre-sequenced progression of content, and it is hence decidedly different to instruction. Recall that teaching content is exemplary of the world outside of school, representing a one of many possibly means by which teachers and students relate to and engage with one another in the effort to transform that content matter into meaning. Thus, content is interchangeable, a tool by which many possible modes of understanding world (Sivesind/Luimes, 2017, p. 221), *Modi des Weltverstehens*, can be taught. What matters is *how* they enter the classroom, and *what* is done *with* them. Consider the example of the flower in biology:

Once plucked, it is no longer the flower out in the world as it is removed from the world, a mere token of all flowers out there. Learning about this flower is useful in school because it teaches students how to learn about flowers, and it is useful for the next content that builds upon learning about this and other flowers. The end-in-view then leads to the next end-in-view, as these ends are

(...) 'foreseen consequences which arise in the course of activity and which are employed to give activity added meaning and to direct its further course.' (...) Those Deweyan ends-in-view may lead to ultimate ends, but because our focus is on each one at a time, the course and its destination are revisable (...). The achieved ends-in-view then tie together in continuity as growth, and with each fulfilled end-in-view, we sustain our hope by highlighting meaningful headway and redirecting our further action. (Stitzlein, 2018, p. 17)

Teaching also means broadly engaging students with the flower so that their experience-based concept of it is altered to the flower's various meanings: Flowers have breeding histories, specific places in the world where they grow, flower-related occupations, but also the flower's biological characteristics, its practical uses and the symbolic ways in which flowers are relevant in the world of painting, literature, the culinary arts or psychology, to name just a few. The teacher's expertise is to choose and adapt relatable content that can become tangible to this particular group of students so to allow them to form educational experiences with their lifeworlds and horizons in view. As such, educators are the co-creators of the experience of schooling through teaching contents, based on their knowledge of and rapport with students and in communication with families. These delicate connections are guided and guarded by teachers, a factor that has been misconceptualized and overlooked in the narrow rationale of accountability (Mehta, 2013b; Tröhler, 2008, p. 13). Having control over instruction is the precondition for any teacher accountability (Ingersoll et al., 2016; Hopmann, 2009) and for the protective stability it can provide, guided by its standards of advancing students to their own benefit, and by doing no harm. As an emancipated profession, teachers would develop the circumstances that allow for their professional judgments in teaching and schooling (Hopmann, 2009) through "courageous imagination, a quality which is personal, human, moral" (Dewey, 2009 [1922], p. 3).

Teaching as a profession is attuned to the specific contexts in which it takes place. It not only means that teachers need to understand their students' histories and contexts, but it also means that a good part of teaching practice depends on the conditions of a place and the histories and contexts of the people that inhabit that place. Social problems cannot be remedied by schooling, yet they enter the classroom and teaching by shaping students' lives and as a result, their experience of schooling. Bridging the gap between the locality of practice and any policy, specifically narrow accountability, is a daunting task because abstract descriptions do no justice to the many aspects that matter in teaching. As such, discussing the multiple experiences of schooling seems impossible to do in the abstract. By the same token, policy discussions are necessarily led in the abstract and some strands of education research are too, exacerbating the issue of remoteness:

William James said that anyone grasps the significance of a generalization only in the degree in which he is familiar with the detail covered by it. (...) We are familiar only with things which specifically enter into our lives and with which we steadily reckon and deal. All concepts, theories, general ideas are thin, meager, and ineffectual in the degree in which they are not reflective expressions of acts and events already embodied, achieved, in experience. (Dewey, 2009 [1922], p. 2)

In that very way, the interviewee soundboard accomplished making their experiences an educational experience for me through engaging me by sharing their own and others' experiences. Stories are by their very nature grounded in the concrete and so experiential narratives are tangibly powerful in moving those who engage with them because "new meanings and values have become embodied in concrete life-experiences and are thus sustained by them." (Dewey, 2009 [1922], p. 2) Poverty, for example, can be described by numbers but in order to convey a tangible understanding of the experience and consequences of being poor, the narrative is the only form (Berliner, 2005) because it is relatable, and it creates immediate relationships between people through a shared experience that is the story. Given that education is about those involved in it, having their stories at the forefront seems another viable avenue to finding ways of not making it worse and refocusing on all education actors' responsibility to advance the cause of creating fruitful conditions for schooling.

Part of leaving the accountability paradigm is advocating for other education rationales than the paradigm's technocratic logic of efficiency (Mehta, 2013b). The interviewee soundboard was clear: Their standards and their accountability keeps what is best for the students at the forefront of all decisions, with a specific end-in-view in sight that will change over time and in different ways for different students. Every decision is assessed in its situational context, in view of the people involved. Situations may change and different people might be affected by the next decision that will need to be contextualized anew. Pedagogical decisions purposefully craft educational experiences geared toward eventually independent decision-making. Students' biographies as a result of their decisions rest with the students alone. The profession serves all students to the best of its ability – not just those who are easiest to advance or who choose linear or elite pathways. Education and educators are not tasked to solve students' life problems but to stand ready in support helping them help themselves. Doing so is inevitably dissonant and while challenging, practicing restrained teaching is at the core of the profession (Hopmann, 2007). The alternative would be to overreach or to disengage entirely, and in both scenarios therefore fracture the fundamental basis on which teaching rests.

The call to engage frames the argument at hand in acknowledging and accepting the political piece involved in discussing and researching and creating education reform. The ending of the 2006 AERA Presidential Address calls on researchers to remember that "we do not merely have an achievement gap – we have an education debt." (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 10) and working toward a better future for education includes sidelining discussions of approach or method, scale or paradigm:

"The only thing that would matter (...) would be that education researchers were bringing their expertise to bear on education problems that spoke to pressing concerns of the public." (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 10) Hope seems to be inscribed into education and schools, as they "prepare for the future and aim to make that future better than the present." (Stitzlein, 2018, p. 1) It is grounded in the works of John Dewey and William James, reappearing in contemporary works in philosophy and education as a human-made outlook based on possibility that prompts purposeful action in view of the unpredictability of the future and the interconnectedness of our efforts with others in solving problems. (Stitzlein, 2018)

Understanding the age of accountability as a paradigm (Mehta 2013a, 2013b) reveals the caveat of refocusing present debates onto alternative problem definitions by capitalizing on shared values. Arguably, actors' efforts can be assumed to be rest on the belief of doing what is best, hence acting on a set of values. More often than not, at least some of those values are shared values with the opponents on the other side of the argument. While the problem definition might differ and the suggested course of action differs as well, the underlying value of, for example, education for every child or advancing students to the best possible futures might be the same. Recognizing and capitalizing on those values opens opportunities to negotiate for a win-win that is impossible to achieve through capitalizing on difference. Instead, shared values carry the potential to form into shared goals if an at least partially shared problem definition can be developed and sustained. Understanding the rationales of others and the meanings they assign to those rationales seems a precondition for any fruitful debate in the spirit of mutual success. Such a strategy requires actors to actively engage with each other in negotiating for a win-win, converging their problem definitions to the degree needed to gain momentum and ground for change that is led together. Opponents would need to explore the other side's construction of the problem before outlining their own, staying flexible and strategic to actively build common ground to stand on.

The interviewee soundboard spoke to the common grounds and common goals they share with each other and with policymakers. They reflected "habits of hope (that) drive us to action in the face of adversity and directs that action toward our growth and democratic life alongside others." (Stitzlein, 2018, p. 21) Their belief of being able to change their environment for the better sustains their standards and their professional accountability. Similarly, it exemplifies the attitude and work needed to counter narrowing policy and contribute ideas from the field of education that are grounded in concrete experience of those in schooling who need it most, debated on content and merit in view of advancing students. The lifeworlds that meet in public schooling are many and it seems that if schooling is to remain public, it needs to validate and explore the multiplicity of lifeworlds because it is that experience that will determine students' future relationship with education. Schooling is there for them, to provide them with experiences that amount to education,

not in preparation for life but as life itself, in the present and in view of a future that remains unknown to all of us.

As my inquiry draws to a close, I wish to reflect on a few core findings in light of the common cries of crisis that lament schooling's alleged failures, and the dominant paradigm of narrow accountability that erroneously purports to promote equity and fairness through technocratic sameness. A first finding in chapter 3 showed how the construct of accountability that reduces equity to a means to excellence's end is embedded in NCLB's very language. Various context data at the beginning of chapter 4 showed no manifestation of NCLB goals in Alabama and in fact indicated the opposite dynamics to the ones intended. The interviews' findings indicated how those involved in Alabama schooling have long abandoned the narrow construct of accountability in order to continue schooling to uphold their responsibilities as a profession. Schooling has done and continues to do whatever it can to advance students and serve their communities in the conditions of each place – that is the educators' standard and their own accountability measure. Given the different histories and contexts of communities and its constituents, schooling happens differently in different places yet it answers to the same standards that the interviewees uphold. While present discussions about narrow accountability circle around salvaging it (chapter 5) through either more federal or more local control, more sophisticated indicators, larger scale reporting along sounder test measures, those involved in schooling are ahead of that conversation: They have long refocused their professional practice and pedagogic concern onto educating students and serving communities.

Current accountability debates have returned to fundamental questions about the purposes of public schooling that are old if not ancient questions. That turn presents a promising avenue to leaving the paradigm of narrow constructions of accountability for a Curriculum Studies renaissance, a field concerned with pedagogical practice as the "inner workings of schooling as a complex institution" (Westbury, 2008 as quoted in Deng, 2018, p. 692) that dedicates its efforts to "the mission of the improvement of schooling as an end-in-view." (Westbury, 2013) Curriculum Studies offers legacies of scholarship built on knowledges from history that interlink theory with practice by acknowledging its base in the latter: "As an academic field with a professional-practitioner constituency, curriculum theory and development cannot neglect practice" (Wraga/Hlebowitsh, 2003, 433). It works to improve schooling for all students through both scholarly and public means based on dialogue and deliberation toward "democratic ways of living and learning" (Wraga/Hlebowitsh, 2003, p. 433). I am hopeful that this longstanding yet newfound perspective will eventually lead discussions on public schooling and its future by strengthening the profession that is teaching to advance students in all the many ways that schooling can, in view of its public mission toward hope and democracy.

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Appendices

Abstract

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as the paradigmatic accountability reform presented the culmination of the age of accountability, that is four decades of increasingly narrowing accountability as the ultimate rationale of education reform. Its core construction of schooling, i.e. the linear attribution of responsibility for so-called academic achievement to schools and teachers, remains embedded in current discussions about the future of public education, within education policy and the field of education alike. NCLB failed by its own measures, yet the sustained impact of narrow accountability prompted this inquiry into accountability constructions and potential manifestations in schooling. The former is addressed through a Critical Discourse Analysis of the original language of NCLB's goals that elicit how the policy addressed actors and set expectations. The latter is engaged through the example place of Alabama by exploring its historical and demographic contexts before reconstructing its accountability genealogy through white papers, state reports, policy evaluations, newspaper articles and a soundboard of experiences from schooling gatekeepers. Nine phenomenological interviews with principals, superintendents and academic counselors yield a coherent narrative that reflects the construction of accountability of those who negotiate policy expectations vis-à-vis schooling practice. Results show how NCLB's goals offset the longstanding balance by devaluing equity as a means toward excellence, and how those involved in Alabama schooling construct narrow accountability as long-gone, detested busy work. Their practice focuses on their profession's standards of serving their communities, all affected by the state's history that forms the conditions of Alabama schooling, and holding themselves accountable for advancing all students as people. This thesis joins calls to broaden accountability and again rooting it within the profession that is teaching, in schooling for communities, and for Curriculum Studies as the body of scholarship that understands schooling as immediately intertwined with the histories and contexts of those it serves.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), das paradigmatische, U.S.-amerikanische Beispiel für *Accountability*-Schulreformen, markierte den Höhepunkt der *Accountability*-Ära – vier Jahrzehnte zunehmender Einführung von Rechenschaftspflicht als Ultima Ratio von Schulreformen. Diese Kernkonstruktion der linearen Zuschreibung von Verantwortlichkeit für sogenannte Schüler*innenleistung an Schulen und Lehrer*innen prägt weiterhin bildungspolitische und bildungswissenschaftliche Debatten. Auch wenn NCLB klar an den eigenen Ansprüchen scheiterte, macht die fortdauernde Einführung von *accountability* eine wissenschaftliche Analyse ihrer Konstruktionen einerseits sowie ihrer praktischen Manifestationen andererseits notwendig. Diese Dissertation erschließt zuerst diese Konstruktionen durch eine kritische Diskursanalyse des Gesetzestexts von NCLB, um nachzuvollziehen, welche Erwartungen an die Akteur*innen gestellt wurden. Dann wird am Beispiel Alabama die unmittelbare Relevanz historischer und demographischer Kontexte illustriert, die durch die Genealogie von *accountability* basierend auf Sekundärdaten und neun phänomenologischen Interviews herausgearbeitet werden. Daraus ergab sich ein kohärentes Narrativ von Schuldirektor*innen und Schulinspektor*innen, das zeigt, wie sich deren Verständnis von *accountability* im Spannungsfeld politischer Erwartungen und schulpraktischer Notwendigkeiten konstruiert. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass NCLB die historische Balance der Reformziele von Bildungsgerechtigkeit und Exzellenz verschob und ersteres nur mehr als Vehikel für letzteres versteht. Direktor*innen und Inspektor*innen konstruieren *accountability* als überholt und ihrem professionellen Handeln hinderlich und rekurren auf ihre professionellen Standards: den Dienst an ihren Gemeinden, die stark von Alabamas Geschichte und ihren Auswirkungen auf das Schulwesen geprägt sind, und die eigene Verantwortung, ihre Schüler*innen als Menschen zu fördern und zu formen. Aus diesen Gründen erwächst die Notwendigkeit, die Einführung von und durch *accountability* umzukehren und die Verantwortlichkeit zurück in die Hände der Profession zu legen, die diese unabhängig von politischen Erwartungshaltungen ^{wahr}- und ernstnimmt. Das Feld der Lehrplanforschung, *Curriculum Studies*, verhandelt breitere, historisch verankerte Konstruktionen von Schule und bietet neue Zugänge an, die Schule als unmittelbar mit der Geschichte und den Kontexten ihrer jeweiligen Gemeinde und Gemeinschaft verbunden verstehen.

Curriculum Vitae

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Scholarship

Education

Ph.D. in Education, Comparative and Historical Education, University of Vienna, Spring 2021

Title: The evidence of evidence-based policy: The case of No Child Left Behind – submitted January 2021

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Stefan T. Hopmann

M.A. in Teaching Philosophy, Psychology, English as a Second Language, University of Vienna, 2009

Title: 'With liberty and justice for all' – Systemic Issues in American Higher Education

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Astrid Fellner

Faculty positions

2019 – today	Deputy Head of English Faculty and Senior Lecturer and Researcher ESP Curriculum Development and Teaching English Department, University of Applied Sciences Technikum Wien, Vienna
2016 – today	Guest Lecturer for Education Theory and Education Reform Education Department, Technical University Darmstadt, Germany
2015 - 2019	University Assistant for Education Research and Theory Education Department, University of Vienna

Research interests

Curriculum Studies: the *Didaktik* and *Curriculum* transatlantic exchange of education theories and policies; education policy in view of histories and contexts of those addressed; nature and use of so-called evidence for practice; teaching as the profession of pedagogy endowed by pedagogical content knowledge

Foundations: comparative analyses of societal, political, philosophical, historical and cultural contexts that construe and construct the meanings of schooling and education for different people, over time, in different spaces; historiography of education reform

School and education research: equitable access for minoritized communities, specifically in the context of college athletics, disability, early parenthood; education trajectories of early education leavers

Phenomenology: applied phenomenology for education, structure of experiencing schooling and education

Publications

Salmen, C. (2021). J. F. Herbart on the Art of Teaching: *Bildsamkeit* and Pedagogical Tact for the teaching profession. Manuscript in preparation.

Salmen, C. (2021). Eliciting education experience. Methodological reflections on understanding meaning as assigned. Manuscript in preparation.

Salmen, C. (2021). Same script, different cast. The construction of scripted teaching as a way to standardize curricula and control for quality education. Manuscript in preparation.

- Salmen, C. (2020). With humility and courage: Educational scholarship as intellectual endeavor. *International Journal for the Historiography of Education*, 10(1), 97-99.
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- Schluß, H., Salmen, C. (2015). Religious matters as a mere possibility for educational research. *International Journal for the Historiography of Education*, 5(2), 223 - 226.

Presentations

- J. F. Herbart's teaching for morality: A history of ideas.
Society of the Study of Curriculum History Conference, 8-9 April 2021, online
- Holding Education Research Accountable: Proxy-indicators of *A Place Called School*
EARLI, SIG 17 Conference, 9 September 2020, Education Department, University of Vienna, online
- J. F. Herbart on the Art of Teaching: *Bildsamkeit* and Pedagogical Tact in Education.
Society of the Study of Curriculum History Conference, 24 June 2020, online
- “Tot inainte, mandru pionier!” - Romania’s 1989 Revolution
International Symposium The Fall of the Iron Curtain 1989, 2-3 November 2019, University of Vienna
- Tracing Education Pathways Demographically? Schooling Trajectories in European Cities
German Education Research Association, 16-18 September 2019, University Münster, Germany
- Exploring Social Relationships: Mixed Structural Analysis. (Schoonenboom/Froehlich 2018)
American Educational Research Association, Annual Conference, 6-9 April 2019, Toronto, CAN
- No-Size-Fits-All-Accountability: How Public Schooling is about a Place, its History, and Lifeworlds.
American Ass. for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies, Ann. Conference, 3-5 April 2019, Toronto, CAN
- The Problem with Evidence: How Public Schooling is about a Place, its History, and Lifeworlds.
Oxford Education Research Symposium, 20-22 March 2019, University of Oxford, UK
- Lessons in English Abstract Writing: Research is More than Methods.
Dies Didacticus Professional Development Day, 8 March 2019, IMC Univ. of Applied Sciences Krems
- Continuing Conversations in Education Policy: How *Curriculum* and *Didaktik* still Enrich Each Other.
Symposium Curriculum and Didaktik, 13 September 2018, University of Alabama, USA
- Teaching Managers how to do Mixed Methods Research? An Empirical Approach
Mixed Methods Intl. Research Association Annual Conference, 22-25 August 2018, University of Vienna
- Accountability Beyond Test Scores: Creating Indicators for the Quality of Schooling from Education Theory.
Kaleidoscope, Graduate Student Conference, 24-25 May 2018, Cambridge University, UK
- The U.S. as an Example of Comparative Analyses of Education Systems
Social Ministry of Austria Professional Development Day, 19 April 2018, Social Ministry of Austria
- Methods for Methods? A Student-Centered Approach to Teaching Research Methodologies
Dies Didacticus Professional Development Day, 7 March 2018, IMC Univ. of Applied Sciences Krems

Teaching

Certificate for Excellence in Teaching, March 2019, University of Applied Sciences IMC Krems

Teaching positions

2016 – today	Guest Lecturer for Education Theory and Research and Teacher Education TU Darmstadt, Germany
2016 - 2020	Lecturer for Academic English University of Applied Sciences IMC Krems, Austria
2014 - 2019	Lecturer for Financial English and Advanced Business English University of Applied Sciences of the Austrian Economic Chambers, Vienna
2012 - 2016	Lecturer for English Academic Writing Department of English and American Studies, University of Vienna
2013 - 2015	Lecturer for Business English University of Applied Sciences of Eisenstadt, Burgenland, Austria
2009 - 2015	Lead Teacher English as a Second Language, Psychology and Philosophy Private High School Phoenix, Vienna
2010 - 2012	Lecturer for Technical and Business English University of Applied Sciences of Upper Austria in Wels, Austria
2006 - 2007	Graduate Teaching Assistant, Webster University, St. Louis, USA

Teaching Education

Where is the theory? The critical reconstruction of inscribed education theories via education reform research
BA/MA Pedagogy, Technical University Darmstadt (Winter 2020/21 and Summer 2021)

Trends, limits, and futures of accountability in public schooling
BA Education capstone course, University of Vienna (Summer 2019)

Multiple realities of Accountability school reform
MA Education, University of Vienna (Winter 2018)

Using evidence in education policy research. A critical inquiry
BA Education capstone course, University of Vienna (2018/19)

Puzzling pieces of education reform: A detective approach to researching policy
MA Education, University of Vienna (Summer 2018)

Investigating the evidence in current approaches to reforming education
MA Education, University of Vienna (Winter 2017)

Qualitative & quantitative methods, and mixed
MA Management, University of Applied Sciences, IMC Krems (Winter 2017)

The use of education terminology in political discourses
MA Teacher/Education, Technical University Darmstadt (Winter 2017)

Reading, understanding, discussing: Vantage points of school reform
BA Education, University of Vienna (Winter 2016, Summer 2017)

Teaching, classroom, self: Experimenting between content and learners
BA Teacher/Education, Technical University Darmstadt (Winter 2016)

How school reforms do (not?) reach the core of schooling
BA/MA Teacher/Education, Technical University Darmstadt (Summer 2016)

Teaching English for Specific Purposes

Scientific Technical English and Writing, 1st semesters

various technical BA programs, University of Applied Sciences Technikum Vienna (Winter 2019 - present)

Professional, Creative, Social Communication, 2nd semesters

various technical BA programs, University of Applied Sciences Technikum Vienna (Winter 2019 - present)

Ethics and Transhumanism, 5th semesters

various technical BA programs, University of Applied Sciences Technikum Vienna (Winter 2019 - present)

Scientific English and Writing, 5th semesters

BA Health Management, University of Applied Sciences IMC Krems (Winter/Summer 2016 - 2020)

English for Tourism, 3rd semesters

BA Tourism Management, University of Applied Sciences IMC Krems (Summer 2016 - 2019)

International Management Issues, 1st semesters

MA Management, University of Applied Sciences IMC Krems (Winter 2016, 2017)

Intercultural Communication, 5th semesters

BA Executive Management, University of Applied Sciences, Austrian Economic Chamber (Winter 2014 - 2016)

Financial English, 3rd semesters

BA Executive Management, University of Applied Sciences Austrian Economic Chamber, (Winter 2014 - 2018)

Presenting and negotiating, 6th semesters

BA Executive Management, University of Applied Sciences Austrian Economic Chamber (Summer 2015 - 2018)

Integrated Language and Study Skills I and II, 1st and 2nd semesters

BA English and American Studies, University of Vienna (each term 2012 - 2016)

Service

Community Service

Reviewer for the Journal for Curriculum Studies (JCS), 2016 - present

Reviewer for the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Conferences

BA and MA theses supervision at University of Vienna, IMC Krems and Technikum Vienna, 2016 - present

Doctoral Student Co-Representative, PhD Education, University of Vienna, 2016-2019

Curriculum Commission for BA Education, University of Vienna, 2018-2019

Curriculum Commission for MA Management, University of Applied Sciences IMC Krems, 2017

Conference Organization

Futures at the Intersection of Technology, Language, and Society, 2 March 2020, UAS Technikum

30 Years after the Fall of the Iron Curtain, 2-3 November 2019, University of Vienna

Doctoral Workshops on Research Methods, January 2017, July 2017, November 2018, University of Vienna

Affiliations and memberships

Society for the Study of Curriculum History (SSCH) and History of Education Society (HES)

AERA Division F and L, SIGs: Politics of Education, Critical Issues in Curriculum and Cultural Studies

European Educational Research Association (EERA)

German Society for Education Science (DGfE)