

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:  
INSIGHTS FROM AN ALL-GIRLS URBAN NEIGHBORHOOD  
PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

---

A Dissertation  
Submitted to  
The Temple University Graduate Board

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

---

by  
Juliet DiLeo Curci  
August 2011

Examining Committee Members:

Erin McNamara Horvat, Advisory Chair, Urban Education  
Will Jordan, Urban Education  
C. Kent McGuire, Southern Education Foundation  
Catherine Schifter, Curriculum, Instruction & Technology in Education  
Christine Woyshner, Curriculum, Instruction & Technology in Education

©  
by Juliet DiLeo Curci  
2011  
All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

## Understanding Student Engagement:

## Insights From an All-Girls Urban Neighborhood Public High School

Juliet DiLeo Curci

Doctor of Philosophy

Temple University, 2011

Erin McNamara Horvat, Chair

Students in a large mid-Atlantic city graduate from the public district high schools at an average annual rate of fifty-six percent. This low rate of high school completion predicts future financial and social instability for not only those individuals who drop out of school, but also for their surrounding community. The research on dropouts highlights the significance that students' low levels of academic and social engagement in school have on their decisions to leave school. Advocates for single-sex education argue that students engage and achieve at high levels when learning in this educational model. According to the current literature, students' success in single-sex schools is primarily a result of the *proacademic choice* that they and their guardians make when electing to attend a single-sex school. Through focus groups, interviews, and observations, this study explores what student engagement looks like at an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school that is *non-selective* and where the *proacademic choice* of students is not a factor. With new federal policy measures advocating innovation in public education, single-sex schools - historically inaccessible to minority students from low-income communities - are finding a foothold in urban public school systems across the country. This study aims to illuminate the extent to which a single-sex school serves as a "site of

transformation” for young women of color from a low-income neighborhood. The realization of the school’s mission, to interrupt the social reproduction of the neighborhood through the education of its young women, depends on its students’ graduation from high school and their access to and success through college. Data related to various features of the school are analyzed to highlight how student engagement is promoted and inhibited at the school and ultimately results in transformative and/or reproductive educational experiences for students.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the students at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls who participated in this study, in appreciation of the generosity, candor, and humor with which they shared their experiences in school with me. I wrote in memory of my dad, Christopher DiLeo, who gave me a Webster's dictionary when I was a senior in high school with the following inscription: "Juliet- Choose your words carefully. They have power beyond your imagining. Love, Dad"

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are numerous people whom I would like to recognize for their support over the last five years of my graduate work. Their love, friendship, and generosity have helped to make this experience a formative and enjoyable one.

I am grateful for wonderful faculty mentors and friends at Temple University: Dr. Erin Horvat, Dr. Peshe Kuriloff, Dr. Ivan Quandt, Dr. Christine Woyshner, Dr. Catherine Shifter, Dr. Jean Boyer, Dr. James Earl Davis, Dr. Sarah-Kate LaVan, Dr. Wanda Brooks, Dr. Joseph Haviland, Dr. Will Jordan, Dr. Bill Cutler, Dr. Novella Keith, Dr. Jennifer Cromley, Dr. Marc Hill (Columbia), and Dr. Billie Gastic (U.Mass.- Boston).

I could not have had a more supportive advisory committee. Dr. Erin Horvat was incredibly giving with her time, feedback, and encouragement. Dr. Will Jordan and Dr. Kent McGuire were fantastic strategists at key “tipping points” throughout this process. I would also like to extend my appreciation to the committee examiners, Dr. Catherine Schifter and Dr. Christine Woyshner, for their time and feedback.

Dr. Cornelius Riordan (Providence College) read an early draft of my proposal and met with me to offer feedback, which I greatly appreciate.

I owe a “debt” of gratitude to those who employed me at some point within the last five years: Dr. Tom Walker, Dr. Catherine Schifter, Dr. Michael Smith, Dr. Erin Horvat, Dr. Wanda Brooks, Dr. Diane Ketelhut, Dr. David Kanter, Dr. Marc

Hill, and Dr. Dina Portnoy. I am also thankful to the Graduate School at Temple University for the Dissertation Completion Grant that allowed me to focus on writing during the Spring 2011 semester. The financial support from Marlene Smigel Korn and her husband Walter Korn was also greatly appreciated. Eric Leslie of KIPP Philadelphia Charter School provided me with numerous opportunities to work with his middle school students, which I loved!

Thank you to my family for their constant cheerleading: My husband, Chris; my mom, Janet; my step-father Phil; my “mother-in-love,” Loretta; my “father-in-love,” Joe; sister, Lauren; brothers, Matt and Jeff; step-sister, Katherine; Aunt Trudy; Aunt Alice and Uncle Joe; Brian, Heather, Greg, Chrissy, and Lauren.

I have been surrounded by friends, both in my personal life (Jessica, Theresa, Patrick, Nora, Wil, Ted, Misty, Emily, Mamie, Megan Z., Neil, Megan D., Anthony, Katie W., Juan, Anna, Jason, Jeff, Farish, Tre, Eric, Jenny, Eileen, Jimmy, Julia, David, Andrew, Sara, Susan, Katie B., and Sarah) and in my professional one (Joy, Mary, Laura, Lisa, Lorraine, Sarah, Rachel, Tony, Cara, Camika, Stuart, Emily, Kelli, Sally, Bernard, and Kelechi) who have served as amazing sounding boards.

Last but not least, I would not have been able to conduct this study at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls without the enormous generosity of Mrs. Wanda Leary and Mrs. Stacy Attle, the school’s former and current leaders. In addition to making Harper “an open book” for my study, they gave me office space, answered my numerous questions, and made themselves available for interviews. Their love and concern for the young women in their care at Harper made them enthusiastic

advocates for and participants of this study. They are passionate educators who want the best for their girls. I am so appreciative of and humbled by their trust in me as I learned about Harper and share my understanding of their story here.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	iii
DEDICATION .....	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	vi
LIST OF TABLES .....	xiv
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Research Questions .....	3
Rationale .....	3
Significance of Study .....	4
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL LENSES .....	9
Literature Review .....	9
Dropouts .....	9
Student Engagement .....	12
Various Understandings of “Engagement” .....	13
School Engagement of Students of Color .....	15
‘Critical’ Engagement .....	16
Single-Sex Education: Two Rationales, One Conclusion .....	17
Current Academic Achievement of Young Women of Color .....	18
History and Legal Context of Single-Sex Public Schools .....	20
Rationale 1: The “Brain-Based” Argument for Single- Sex (Public) Education .....	23
Rationale 2: The “Socialization” Argument for Single- Sex (Public) Education .....	24
Backlash to the Single-Sex (Public) Education Movement .....	25
Recent Policy Interest in Single-Sex Public Education .....	26
Research on Single-Sex (Public) Education .....	27
Theoretical Lenses .....	30
Engagement .....	30
Social Reproduction Theory .....	33
Black Feminist Theory .....	38

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....	43
The Research Site .....	44
Research Design .....	44
Selection of Research Site and Participants .....	45
Harper Leadership Academy for Girls.....	45
Student Participants .....	46
The Four “Key” Participants .....	48
“Witnesses”: Teachers, Parents, and Administrators .....	48
Data Collection .....	49
Part I: Focus Groups .....	49
Initial Survey.....	49
Focus Group Sessions.....	50
Part II: “Key” Participant Interviews and Observations & “Witness” Interviews .....	52
School Observations .....	54
Data Analysis .....	54
My Background and Perspective .....	57
EPILOGUE .....	58
Special Approvals .....	58
Temple University’s Institutional Review Board .....	58
The School District’s Research Review Committee .....	59
May 2009 .....	59
July-August 2009 .....	59
October 2009 .....	60
November 2009 .....	61
December 2009 .....	62
January 2010 .....	62
Data Collection .....	62
Diverting From the Study’s Original Design .....	62
An Opportunity to Conduct a Pilot Study .....	63
Initial Attempt at Data Collection at Harper .....	65
Second Attempt at Data Collection at Harper: A New Strategy .....	66
Challenges Soliciting Volunteers for Study Participation .....	68
Consent Forms .....	68
Voluntary Participation .....	69
Incentives .....	69
The Decision to Move On .....	69

CHAPTER 4: CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS .....	71
Harper Leadership Academy for Girls: A Unique Place With a Special Mission .....	71
The Riverbend Neighborhood: A Stable But Under-resourced Community .....	74
Harper’s History .....	77
Becoming “All-Girls” .....	77
Transforming a School .....	79
Learning From the Past.....	79
Assuming a New Identity .....	80
Preparing for a New Start .....	83
Growing Pains .....	84
Academic Achievement at Harper .....	87
Discipline at Harper .....	90
The Organizational Structure of Harper .....	92
‘Non-Negotiables’ for Student Behavior.....	92
‘Big Goals’ for Student Achievement.....	94
Special Programs .....	96
The ‘Institutes’ .....	96
Advanced Placement (AP) Courses .....	97
“College Pathways” .....	98
The School Day .....	100
The Start of the Day .....	100
Advisory .....	102
Instructional Periods .....	103
“Lunch n’ More” .....	104
“Common Planning Time” .....	105
The End of the Day .....	106
After School .....	107
The School Building .....	108
Harper Staff .....	111
Administrators .....	111
Mrs. Wanda Leary .....	111
Mrs. Stacy Attle .....	116
Teachers .....	122
‘Climate’ Staff .....	125
Operations Staff .....	126
Harper Students .....	126
“Key” Participants .....	130
Cierra – “Adjusted”.....	132
Nafeesah – “Disconnected” .....	135
Kelly – “Disaffected”.....	138
Raven – “Overwhelmed” .....	141

CHAPTER 5: ENGAGEMENT AT HARPER .....	145
Academic Achievement and Mobility at Harper .....	148
A Site of Great Possibilities and Missed Opportunities .....	150
The Case for ‘College’ .....	152
Academic Engagement at Harper: Strengths and Strains of a “College-Prep” District School.....	156
Stress for “the Test” .....	157
District-Mandated Curricula and Various Test-prep Initiatives.....	157
Increased Workload for Teachers .....	158
Different Expectations = Different “Tracks” .....	160
Harper’s Two Instructional “Tracks” .....	162
“College-prep”.....	162
Teaching Students to Be Better “Problem- Solvers”: Alternate Curricula That Emphasize Rigor and High Expectations .....	162
“I Think They Are Ready”: Students’ Readiness for College .....	166
“Test-prep” .....	169
Snapshot Glance of Instruction Based in Test- prep Curriculum.....	169
“I Was Just So Bored”: Students’ Lack of Interest and Participation .....	173
“Smart-notes” and Worksheets: A Lack of Rigor .....	176
“We’re Not in Kindergarten Anymore”: Teachers’ Low Expectations .....	180
“How Does It Benefit Me?”: A Lack of Purpose.....	182
“What Does That Have to Do With Any of Us?”: A Lack of Relatedness .....	185
“Shut Up” and “No”: Teachers’ Control and Students’ Lack of Autonomy .....	189
Explanations for Differences in the Instructional Quality of Harper’s “Tracks” .....	191
Expectations .....	192
Curricular Quality.....	193
Teacher Quality .....	194
Inexperienced Teachers .....	195
Ineffective Teachers .....	196
Teacher Absences and Substitute Teachers .....	196

What Happened to ‘College’? .....	197
Little College-prep Available at a College-prep School.....	198
Lack of Structure .....	199
Lack of Autonomy Support .....	201
Preparation for Other Post-Secondary Educational Opportunities: The ‘Institutes’ .....	206
Social Engagement at Harper .....	211
The ‘Non-Negotiables’: Obedience Versus Autonomy .....	211
Discipline at Harper .....	216
“Leadership” at Harper .....	220
Extra-Curricular Activities and Student Life Programming .....	223
‘All-Girls’ .....	232
Teachers’ Reactions .....	234
Students’ Reactions .....	237
 CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS .....	241
Understanding Student Engagement at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls .....	241
Overview of the Study’s Findings .....	244
“What Does Student Engagement at Harper Look Like?” .....	244
“Adjusted” .....	245
“Overwhelmed” .....	245
“Disconnected” .....	246
“Disaffected” .....	247
“‘What Features of Harper Either Promote or Inhibit Engagement?’” .....	248
Academic Engagement .....	248
Social Engagement.....	249
Consequences.....	250
Accounting for the Findings .....	250
Implications for Harper .....	253
Implications for the Literature .....	255
Implications for Reform .....	256
Suggestions for Future Research .....	257
 REFERENCES CITED .....	260
 APPENDICES	
A. Student Survey .....	269
B. Student Focus Group Protocol .....	283
C. Student Interview Protocol .....	285

D. Parent/Guardian Interview Protocol .....	287
E. Teacher Interview Protocol .....	289
F. Student Assent Form.....	290
G. Parent/Guardian Consent Form .....	291
H. Parent/ Guardian as Participant Consent Form .....	292
F. Teacher Consent Form.....	293
G. Permission to Audiotape Form .....	294
H. Harper Codes and Definitions .....	295

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
3.1. Summary of Research Study .....	45
4.1. Percentage of Harper Students Who Scored “Proficient” or “Advanced” on the State Assessment Over the School’s Five-year History .....	87
4.2. Percentage of Harper Students Who Scored “Proficient” or “Advanced” on the State Assessment Compared to Students at Comparable District Schools and the District Average .....	89
4.3. The Numbers and Types of Serious Incidents at Harper Over the Last Three Years .....	92
4.4. The ‘Big Goals’ for Harper Students’ Academic Performance (2010- 2011) .....	95
4.5. Cierra’s “Witnesses” .....	134
4.6. Nafeesah’s “Witnesses” .....	138
4.7. Kelly’s “Witnesses” .....	141
4.8. Raven’s “Witnesses” .....	143
5.1. Harper’s ‘Big Goals’ for Students in the Tested Grades (2010-2011) .....	160

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
2.1. “Engagement” as situated in Connell and Wellborn’s (1991) theory of motivation .....	32
3.1. Achievement and engagement matrix for study focus groups .....	47
4.1. Drawing of Harper’s 1 <sup>st</sup> floor .....	109
4.2. Drawing of Harper’s 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor .....	110
4.3. Achievement and engagement matrix with names of each of the four focus groups .....	131

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This study examines student engagement at an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. This research illuminates how this single-sex school that I call Harper Leadership Academy for Girls<sup>1</sup> promotes its students' academic and social engagement in school. It also highlights how the school inhibits students' academic and social engagement in school. Through focus groups, interviews, and observations, I describe what student engagement looks like in this unique all-girls *nonselective* public school setting. This study highlights students' explanations for which features of their school, their academic work, and their relationships with staff, teachers, and peers impact their engagement in school. These levels of engagement are linked to students' decisions to remain in school and to the types of educational experiences that they have at Harper. The study's findings will assist students, parents, educators, school administrators, and policymakers as they seek to understand school-related protective factors that keep female students engaged.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Metropolitan regions across the United States and around the world rely on the manpower and brainpower of their citizens in order to meet the demands of global production and to spark innovation. These human resources are critical to stimulating growth and ensuring fiscal stability (Adams, Bartelt, Elesh, & Goldstein, 2008).

However, in this metropolitan region on the East Coast, where manufacturing jobs have declined significantly over the past several decades and where only eighteen percent

---

<sup>1</sup> In order to protect the identity of the research site and the identities of the study participants, all names related to the dissertation research are pseudonyms.

(18%) of the city's residents have earned a college degree, it has become increasingly difficult for the city and surrounding region to remain competitive in the global marketplace (Adams, et al., 2008). Nearly fifty percent (50%) of students in this region drop out of high school before graduation. The large number of city residents without a high school degree inhibits the community's social progress and economic growth because companies that have highly skilled jobs to fill decide not to locate in the area (Adams, et al., 2008).

The implications of dropping out of high school, for the students themselves and the communities they call home, are clear and dramatic. According to Neild and Balfanz (2006), youth who leave high school without a diploma have difficulty sustaining employment, earning enough money to provide for a family, and achieving advancement in their occupational field. The authors also contend that cities within which large numbers of youth leave school before graduation have fewer opportunities for economic development, receive less tax revenue, and "experience higher social service costs, more crime, less civic participation, and high levels of concentrated and inter-generational poverty" (p. 3). Ultimately, Neild and Balfanz (2006) argue, "a city of the 21st century cannot prosper when large numbers of its young people lack this basic academic credential." Though government leaders and educators must work together to transform schools and plan initiatives that encourage students to stay in school, the 'dropout crisis' affects all citizens. It is imperative that high school students find success in school through graduation; the financial and social stability of these young people and their communities are at stake.

## Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions: *What does student engagement look like in an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school? Which features of an education in this all-girls school **promote** student engagement? Which features of an education in this all-girls school **inhibit** student engagement?* I explore various aspects of engagement in this all-girls setting, specifically how engagement is operationalized and described by the young women of color enrolled in the school. I studied student engagement in various school settings such as classrooms, hallways, lunchrooms, assemblies, and after-school activities. Through this investigation I have been able to illuminate the relationships between student engagement, achievement, and persistence among the girls who attend Harper Leadership Academy for Girls. Ultimately, this study will add to the literature on the benefits and challenges of education in a non-selective public single-sex school for young women of color from low-income communities.

## Rationale

While many factors contribute to the dropout crisis, exploring a school-based issue such as student engagement is significant for several reasons. Understanding student engagement on the academic and social levels is critical for addressing the key factors that contribute to students' decisions to drop out of high school before graduation. Knowing when, why, and how students in an urban neighborhood public high school are academically and socially engaged is critical to dropout prevention (Rumberger, 2004a; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Schools' focused efforts to consistently engage students academically and socially through graduation can reduce the number of dropouts.

Reducing the number of dropouts has the long-term potential to transform students' lives, both socially and financially, as well as transform the communities in which they live (Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Rumberger, 2004a).

Understanding how Harper Leadership Academy for Girls engages students and encourages them to remain in school potentially benefits the school's current students. With the information gleaned from this study school administrators may implement the supports and services identified by students as the ones that successfully and consistently engage them and support their academic work. With a high school degree, these students can then pursue employment or continue their education, outcomes much more profitable for them than if they do not graduate at all. Furthermore, the tax base of the city will increase as a result of higher earnings in a populous with more high school graduates.

### **Significance of the Study**

According to the National Coalition of Girls' Schools (2008a), there are currently thirty-two all-girls public schools in the United States. Seven of these are high schools that currently enroll students in grades 9-12. Of these seven all-girls public high schools, only two do not have selective admissions criteria, including Harper Leadership Academy for Girls (the other enrolls students by random selection through a lottery). A qualitative case study of this school represents an interesting opportunity to investigate single-sex education in a non-selective school. Previous research on single-sex education in public schools has focused on the 'magnet' or 'special admission' public schools, which have selective criteria for admission. The criteria may include prospective students' prior grades, attendance, teacher recommendations, writing samples, and standardized test scores (Mael, 1998). Little research has examined the engagement,

educational outcomes, and aspirations of students who attend all-girls public schools where there are no admissions criteria and that enroll primarily students from low-SES and minority backgrounds who reside in the school's neighborhood. This study, focusing on a unique school site within public education and utilizing the voices of the students themselves, will help identify what features of an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school do or do not engage students on their path to educational success.

This study complicates the current literature on single-sex education (Lee, 1997; Lee & Marks, 1990; Riordan, 2002, 1994, 1990; Stabiner, 2002; Streitmatter, 1999; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2008) that highlights the positive academic achievement experienced by students who attend single-sex schools. The single-sex schools included in previous studies have been selective private, parochial, or public schools in which students voluntarily enroll. Moreover, students are admitted into these schools based on criteria related to their prior educational attainment, attendance, and behavior records. Harper Leadership Academy for Girls, the site of this study's exploration of student engagement, is a non-selective single-sex public school. Young women who live in the Riverbend neighborhood of this large city on the East Coast automatically attend the school as their public neighborhood district school. Thus an exploration of engagement and its possible relationship with achievement at a non-selective single-sex school will complicate previous findings. Previous studies contend that students' academic success is related to the single-sex nature of the school, and specifically to students' proacademic choice to attend them. This study explores how students who attend a non-selective single-sex school engage in the academic and social features of the school, considering that the vast majority of them did not actively choose to attend this all-girls school.

The study is also significant in its implications for public policy, particularly as it relates to the 2001 Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, otherwise known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). It is clear that a primary goal of NCLB is to close the ‘achievement gap’ in standardized test scores between students of color and White students and students from low-income families and their middle-class counterparts (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). Consequently, education policymakers have sought new and innovative strategies, school models, and programs to increase engagement, motivation, achievement, and degree attainment among traditionally underrepresented groups (Datnow & Hubbard, 2002a; Orfield, 2004a). As will be explained in the next chapter, it was in this vein that NCLB silenced arguments related to the legality of and funding for single-sex programs. The law pointedly cleared the way for such classes and schools within public education (Salomone, 2002). In much of the last century of schooling in the U.S., single-sex education only existed within private and parochial schools (DeBare, 2004). Single-sex public schools offer a new educational opportunity for young women of color from low-income communities.

President Obama’s establishment of the *White House Council on Women and Girls* on March 11, 2009 further underscores the focus that political leaders and policymakers have placed on educational and employment opportunities for young women. The White House Executive Order (2009, March 11) explains that this Council:

... coordinates the federal response to issues that particularly impact the lives of women and girls and to ensure that Federal programs and policies address and take into account the distinctive concerns of women and girls, including women of color and those with disabilities.

This study will help to clarify how single-sex public schooling offers a legitimate opportunity to address the academic challenges that young women of color from minority

and low-income backgrounds often face. Previous studies of single-sex schools have recognized their positive effects for students' engagement and achievement. However, these studies have investigated educational outcomes for students who attend *selective* private, parochial, and public single-sex schools. This study, situated at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls, illuminates the extent to which a *non-selective* public single-sex school supports students' engagement, achievement, and persistence in school.

As will be emphasized in the review of the literature in the next chapter, it is critical to explore the issues behind and find solutions to the dropout crisis within urban education. Educators and policymakers alike are interested in determining potential safeguards that will help ensure that all young people remain in school through graduation. It is widely known that students' academic success is largely related to their engagement in school (Furlong & Christenson, 2008; Newmann, 1992; Rumberger, 2004a; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Advocates of single-sex education contend that such a model for schooling is inherently engaging (Lee, 1997; Lee & Marks, 1990; Riordan, 2002, 1994, 1990). However, the current research has focused on the achievement of students who attend *selective* single-sex schools. There remain unanswered questions as to whether students who attend a *non-selective* single-sex school experience similarly high levels of engagement and achievement, even in a school that the majority of students did not choose to attend. As such, this study investigates what student engagement looks like at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls, an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. This study also explores the features of Harper that promote or inhibit student engagement. It is important to understand how Harper students, young women of color

from a low-income community, engage in their schooling through their graduation from high school for the sake of their futures and that of their community.

Finally, this study is significant in its attention to students' voices about their experiences with engagement in school. Only through conversations with students will schools fully know and understand how students respond to the managerial and instructional strategies employed by the adults in their schools. In order to be reflective practitioners who effectively facilitate students' engagement and achievement in school, educators must seek feedback from and listen to students when making pedagogical decisions (Schon, 1983; Lincoln, 1995; Deiro, 1996; Thomas & Montgomery, 1998; Cook-Sather, 2009). Furthermore, the student population of Harper Leadership Academy for Girls is comprised of young women of color from a low-income community. This population is often "silenced" in public discussions about social issues, even those that concern their own welfare (Collins, 2000; Shaffer & Gordon, 2004; McAdoo, 2007; Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001). This study has encouraged the young women who attend Harper to share their experiences with engagement and achievement while attending an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. I believe that it is the students' stories, told through their own voices, that provide value and give meaning to this study.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL LENSES

The literature related to this study encompasses three areas: dropouts, student engagement, and single-sex education. First, I provide an overview of the dropout population and the reasons youth give for leaving high school before graduation. Then I investigate engagement and its importance in the context of schooling. Finally, I explore single-sex education, including its history and the current rationales for and arguments against such an educational model. A review of the literature is followed by an exploration of the theoretical lenses with which I explore student engagement at an all-girls urban neighborhood high school.

#### **Literature Review**

##### **Dropouts**

“Nationally, only about two-thirds of all students- and only half of all Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans- who enter ninth grade graduate with regular diplomas four years later” (Orfield, 2004a, p.1). In the large city on the East Coast in which this study is situated, more than 8,200 young people (grades 6-12) leave school every year before earning a diploma, which equates to about 46 dropouts every day (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Thousands more are listed as “enrolled” on school rosters but attend classes less than fifty percent (50%) of the time. Of those who drop out, sixty percent (60%) are male and nearly two-thirds are in either the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade. The 6-year graduation rate for students in this city’s public high schools ranges from fifty-four percent (54%) to fifty-eight percent (58%). Approximately forty percent (40%) of Latino males, fifty percent (50%) of African American and White males, and sixty-five percent

(65%) of Asian males earn their high school diplomas within 6 years. Among females, about fifty percent (50%) of Latinas graduate, as do sixty-five percent (65%) of African Americans and Whites, and seventy-five percent (75%) of Asians (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

The reasons that students drop out of high school prior to graduation vary from school-related issues to personal ones (Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Rumberger, 2004a). The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 inquires as to why those who dropped-out of school left; seventy-seven percent (77%) of those surveyed responded with school-related reasons, thirty-four percent (34%) responded with family-related reasons, and thirty-two percent (32%) responded with work-related reasons (Rumberger, 2004a). The report written by Neild and Balfanz (2006), which captures a picture of this city's drop-outs, conveys that those students who cite school-related issues for dropping-out describe failing academically, feeling unnoticed by school staff, being bored by irrelevant coursework, and experiencing a chaotic school climate or high levels of school violence as their reason(s) for leaving. For those students who cite personal issues, involvement with one or more social service systems (juvenile justice or foster care) or a pregnancy and birth of a child during school are their primary reason(s) for dropping out.<sup>2</sup>

The research conducted by Neild and Balfanz (2006) has also revealed some powerful predictors for dropping out. Their longitudinal study indicates that the students who are most likely to leave high school before earning a degree are those who attend school eighty percent (80%) or less of the time, receive poor behavior marks, and/or fail

---

<sup>2</sup> Research by Neild and Balfanz (2006) indicates that ninety percent (90%) of young people in delinquent placements and 70% of young people in foster care drop out prior to graduation from high schools in this large city on the East Coast.

math or English. Many argue that dropping out of high school before graduation is the “final stage in a dynamic cumulative process of disengagement (Newmann et al., 1992; Wehlage et al., 1989) or withdrawal (Finn, 1989) from school” (Rumberger, 2004a, p. 133). Still others contend that students do not drop out of school so much as they are “pushed out” by their teachers and school administrators (McPartland & Jordan, 2004). This “push” could result from a student’s perception that school staff members do not care about the student or that he or she is invisible to them. The student’s perception could be accurate; in many instances, school staff members do not believe that certain consistently low-performing students will help raise the overall test scores of the school in its efforts to make ‘Adequate Yearly Progress.’ It then becomes likely that these school staff members refrain from encouraging him or her, thinking that eventually the student will lose all interest in school and leave altogether (Wald & Losen, 2003). This triggers an unfortunate self-fulfilling prophecy.

The limitation of future employment opportunities for high school dropouts threatens their long-term financial and social sustainability. Rouse (2005) estimates that an 18-year old who graduates with a high school diploma earns \$260,000 more in income and contributes \$60,000 more in taxes over his or her lifetime than someone who does not graduate. Furthermore, dropouts may feel marginalized socially from their age-level peers who have achieved jobs and status related to their degree attainment. Other potential consequences include an increased likelihood of unemployment, time spent in prison, being unmarried or divorced, and/or living in poverty (Rouse, 2005). For children of dropouts, the cycle continues; there is an increased likelihood that they will attend weak schools, perform badly in school, and finally, drop out themselves (Orfield, 2004b).

Not only are the implications of dropping-out a concern for the young men and women who leave school before graduating, but also they are also detrimental to the economic viability of the communities in which they live. The loss in potential income for this large city on the East Coast of these 8,200+ dropouts per year is estimated at over two billion dollars and represents money that may have been spent on goods and services purchased within the city. Another 500 million dollars is estimated as the city's lost tax revenue from those who drop out of high school. More crime and higher levels of concentrated and inter-generational poverty can also be expected if the high school dropout rate does not decline (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

The large number of students who drop out of high school and the consequences of their leaving school before graduation are significant for the youth themselves and for their communities. Most of the school-based reasons for dropping-out given by youth relate to a lack of social and/or academic engagement in school. Because students' decisions to drop out have such extreme negative consequences for themselves and for their communities, it is important to understand how addressing engagement may prove effective for dropout prevention. Thus, I will next look at the literature regarding student engagement.

### **Student Engagement**

A large number of young people who drop out of high school before graduation cite academic and/or social disengagement from school as their reason(s) for doing so (Rumberger, 2004a). While there are certainly reasons beyond those related to school that contribute to students' decisions to drop out, policymakers often choose to focus on the school-based reasons because this is the arena in which they have the most control;

schools can be manipulated but it is extremely problematic to alter families and their values or challenges (Rumberger, 2004b). Thus, policymakers focus on school-based reasons for dropout, which constitute seventy-seven percent (77%) of the reasons cited in dropouts' decisions to leave schools (Rumberger, 2004a). Previous research on the topic indicates that *student engagement* is one of the most crucial issues to address (Rumberger, 2004a; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). According to the National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, "the most immediate and persisting issue for students and teachers is not low achievement, but student disengagement... student engagement is critical to educational success; to enhance achievement, one must first learn how to engage students," (Newmann, 1992, p. 2-3). Furlong and Christenson (2008) confirm, "student engagement is considered the primary theoretical model for understanding and intervening with potential dropouts to promote school completion" (p. 366).

#### **Various understandings of 'engagement.'**

Student engagement has been discussed in numerous ways. Wentzel (1997) defines engagement not as an "attribute of the student, but rather as a state of being that is highly influenced by contextual factors- home, school, peers- in relation to the capacity of each to provide consistent support for student learning" (Furlong and Christenson, 2008, p. 366). Furlong and Christenson (2008) describe *indicators* of engagement and *facilitators* of engagement; the former convey the level of connection that a student has with his or her school and the latter describe the contextual factors that influence the strength of that connection.

The most widely used characterizations of engagement distinguish three types: *behavioral*, *emotional*, and *cognitive* (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

*Behavioral engagement* has been described as participation and effort in school and school-related activities (Finn, 1993; Kelly, 2004). *Emotional engagement* refers to students' affective reactions, both positive and negative, to their teachers, peers, schoolwork, and school itself (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). *Cognitive engagement* is explained as the depth with which students process their academic work and invest themselves in the learning process (Newmann, 1992). These three types of engagement were explored throughout the study's methodology.

Student engagement is impacted by several factors: pedagogy, relationships with teachers (Lewis, 2006; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), parents' attitudes and expectations for their children, influence of peers, classroom climate (Lewis, 2006), school culture and structure, the socio-demographics of the student body, the gender of the students, and the age of the students (Bryk, & Driscoll, 1988). Numerous researchers have explored student engagement and much of their work has incorporated the perspectives of students themselves and the factors that they believe support their engagement in school. Through interviews with students it is clear that their engagement requires more than just effective instructional design and delivery. Related to their schoolwork, students claim to be most motivated by effective use of classroom time, challenging assignments, group work, and recognition/use of the resources that they bring to the classroom (Certo, Cauley, & Chafin, 2003; Schmakel, 2008). Students feel most supported when they have the teachers' empathy and parental support, and when there is respectful control of the classroom (Schmakel, 2008). McNulty and Quaglia (2007) summarize in three buzz words what students cite as most important for engaged learning in school: *rigor*, *relevance*, and *relationships*.

Students, especially those at the middle and high school levels, feel connected to their schools when they have opportunities to exhibit *autonomy* and demonstrate personal and academic *competence*, they receive care and support from the adults in the school, and they feel accepted by their peers. The schools in which student belonging is strongest typically have small student populations, small class sizes, high levels of extra-curricular participation, and good classroom climates (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Newmann, 1989, 1992). Additionally, it is important for students that they learn in an environment in which they feel trusted and are supported as they navigate their way into adulthood (DiMartino, Clarke, & Lachat, 2002). A student's strong sense of school belonging leads to a positive attitude towards his/her school, teachers, and peers. Feeling connected to school entices students to participate in school activities and extra-curricular activities, which facilitates positive interactions with adults and peers. Academic engagement and achievement increase as a result of the increased participation and positive interactions (Certo, Cauley, & Chafin, 2003; Renzulli, 2008). The alternative situation, when students feel alienated from school and rejected by their teachers and peers, results in behavior problems, lower interest in academics, and consequently, lower achievement, which may ultimately lead to dropping-out (Osterman, 2000).

### **School engagement of students of color.**

Some research related to student engagement highlights findings related to African American students in particular. Positive interactions with teachers and peers are crucial to their academic success (Kuykendall, 1991; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Taylor, Casten, Flickinger, Roberts, & Fulmore, 1994). Feelings of school connectedness are

strengthened when students feel support and encouragement from their teachers, and this sense of belonging translates into higher levels of achievement (Powell & Jacob-Arriolla, 2003) and lower dropout rates (Fine, 1991). Miller-Cribbs, Cronen, Davis, & Ericson (2002) laud studies (Bowen & Bowen, 1998a, 1999; Epstein, 1987, 1995; Nash & Bowen, 1999; Rouk, 1999; Sanders, 1996, 1998) that focus on factors such as caring communities and parental support that influence student success in school, rather than further deficit-oriented perspectives related to the achievement of African American students. Peer support can also foster increased motivation, participation in school and extra-curricular activities, and attention to school as a focal point in one's life, ultimately contributing to higher achievement levels among African Americans (Crosnoe, Cavanaugh, & Elder, 2003). Additional research acknowledges the impact that cultural belonging within the school setting can have on the engagement and achievement of students from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds (Azmitia, & Cooper, 2001).

#### **'Critical' engagement.**

Critical perspectives in education challenge traditional school structure, pedagogy, and relationships between students and educators (Fine & Weis, 2003; Ginsberg, Shapiro, & Brown, 2004; Joselowsky, 2007). These critical approaches, when applied to student engagement, suggest that teachers should encourage their students to discuss social injustices, even those present in their own educational settings. Openly sharing about how they have faced inequalities in their lives allows students to give voice to their experiences (Fine & Weis, 2003) and name their oppressors (Ginsberg, et al., 2004). Such an acknowledgement facilitates students' engagement in school because they become part of the lesson, and their education becomes poignantly relevant to their lives.

Furthermore, when students are consulted in matters of school reform they feel valued, and their attachment to the school increases (Joselowsky, 2007).

The research indicates that students' engagement in school is critical to their academic success. Proponents of single-sex education argue that students who attend all-girls or all-boys schools are more likely to engage in their schoolwork and school-based relationships because the single-sex educational environments foster community and keep students focused on academic achievement (Lee & Marks, 1990; Meehan, 2007; Pollard, 1998; Salomone, 2003; Stabiner, 2002). The third and final area of the literature for this study focuses on single-sex education and its potential to engage female students socially and academically through graduation from high school.

### **Single-Sex Education: Two Rationales, One Conclusion**

"I always feel comfortable asking questions in class and getting help outside of the classroom. I think the reason I feel so comfortable is because we're at an all-girls school.

You don't have to worry about what you look like in the morning, or if you say something 'off the wall' or incorrect because you're not trying to impress some boy."

- Maria '06, Texas

"At first I thought it would be terrible without guys, but I like it. We still see guys at mixers and talk to them on the phone and such, but they aren't distracting us in class and preventing us from studying." - Sarah '09, Virginia

The quotations above, taken from the website of the National Coalition of Girls' Schools (2008b), illustrate particular ways in which two students who attend an all-girls boarding school in the mid-Atlantic United States believe their single-sex environment impacts their learning experiences. In addition to this anecdotal evidence, much qualitative and quantitative research in recent years has emphasized the unique benefits that a single-sex education affords girls in their academic achievement, educational aspirations, self-esteem, and friendships (Lee & Marks, 1990). In this section, I explore

two different schools of thought that drive the rationales behind the establishment of single-sex schools for girls and I review the legal standing of single-sex public schools in the United States today. Though girls overall lagged behind boys in educational achievement throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they have quickly caught up and have even begun to surpass them. Young women of color perform equal to or better academically than young men of color, yet their academic progress still lags behind that of young White women. The opportunity for young women of color to learn and socialize in an environment tailored for them is the reasoning behind the current momentum for single-sex schooling for girls within public education, which will be described in this section.

#### **Current academic achievement of young women of color.**

In just the past few years, it has been determined that girls overall perform well in school compared to their male counterparts. Young women across every racial and ethnic group are more likely to earn bachelor's degrees than young men are, and it is estimated that this trend will increase during the next decade (Bae, Choy, Sable, & Snyder, 2000). From elementary through high school, girls receive higher report card grades than boys do and they perform better on writing and reading assessments (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). However, major gaps exist in the achievement levels and graduation rates among young women from various racial/ethnic groups (Greene & Winters, 2006).

African American, Latino, and Native American girls continue to have the lowest achievement of all students in mathematics and science from fourth grade through high school (Bae, et al., 2000). Girls, in general, are more likely to take less sophisticated

computer classes (for example, data entry or word processing) and less likely to identify computer science as a possible major in college (American Association of University Women, 2000). Historically, young women of color from low-income communities have attended high schools that, in the 35 largest U.S. cities, only graduate 50% of their students (Barton, 2005; Swanson, 2008). Girls of color continue to drop out of high school at higher rates than White girls. Latinas have the highest drop-out rate in the country (Swanson, 2008; Swanson, 2004).

Asian/Pacific Islander and White women are more likely to go to college than African American or Latino women are, but African American women have made the greatest gains in this area proportionally; the percentage of African American female college graduates doubled between 1980 and 2000. Latinas have made some progress, but are still the least likely to have a four-year degree (U.S Census Bureau, 2000). On the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT), Asian American females and males scored higher than other students on average on the SAT mathematics section. African American females scored better than African American males on the SAT in critical reading and writing, and about the same in mathematics. Latin American females and males scored about the same overall on the SAT, although their scores were lower than both White and Asian American students (The College Board, 1999).

The young women in grades 7-12 who attend Harper Leadership Academy for Girls are nearly all (99%) African American. Despite the fact that women of color, particularly African Americans, have earned significantly more college degrees over the last few decades than they had previously, those who live in the Riverbend neighborhood still struggle to earn high school diplomas, let alone college ones. This study of student

engagement at Harper illuminates how the young women of color who attend Harper can remain academically and socially engaged in high school through the receipt of their high school diplomas and continuation onto post-secondary education.

### **History and legal context of single-sex public schools.**

Independent girls' schools (private and parochial) have had a long history in the United States, dating back to the late-18th century. Some historians believe that girls were schooled separately from boys because it was considered socially inappropriate for girls to receive an education in 'academic' subjects (Nash, 2005). Under this model, historians contend that all-girls schools belonged to one of two types: 'finishing' schools for girls from elite wealthy families that included courses in literature, art, embroidery, and table setting; or training schools for women destined for domestic servitude (DeBare, 2004). However, within the last two decades, historians have revisited such these ideas about the origination and purpose of single-sex schools. The ideology that women and men operated in "separate spheres" and therefore experienced different types of education has been widely refuted. Women from middle-class backgrounds in particular were institutionally supported in their intellectual pursuits, as men were, in order that they may maintain their class status. "Seminaries" or "academies" for women, such as Troy, Hartford, and Mount Holyoke, were founded as a result of women's desire to flex their intellectual capacities for the academic subjects (Nash, 2005).

Coeducational schools were established out of fiscal necessity; by the late 1800s, more women began to enter academic institutions and it was no longer practical to run them separately (Riordan, 1990). It has only been in the past decade or so that public policymakers and school officials have re-considered educating girls in single-sex

environments, partly in response to several studies from the late 1980s and early 1990s that highlighted the educational inequity that girls sometimes face in coeducational settings, which upset parents across the country (AAUW, 1991, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Salomone, 2006). It became apparent that the coeducational model for public K-12 schooling in the U.S., while traditionally effective for boys, might not be adequate for girls. As Gilligan (1982) asserts, “girls think, interact, display leadership and make decisions in ways unique both psychologically and developmentally” (NCGS, 2008c). While it was believed that Title IX of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1972 made strides towards ensuring educational equity for girls in school, many parents of privilege elected to place their daughters in all-girls schools that catered to their academic and social needs specifically (Salomone, 2006).

Contemporary single-sex schools, particularly single-sex public schools, gained legal status as educational models as a result of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)’s Reauthorization in 2001, commonly known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In its March 3, 2004 *Notice of Proposed Rulemaking*, the federal Office for Civil Rights concedes that in 1972, when Title IX was enacted as part of the ESEA, discrimination against women in the United States was a significant problem (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2006). It was believed then that an allowance for single-sex programs would promote further discrimination against women. The report continues with its acknowledgment that in the thirty years since the ESEA became law, women and girls had been afforded significantly more educational opportunities. Furthermore, the federal government recognizes that “educational research has suggested that in certain circumstances single-sex education provides educational benefits for some students.”

Therefore, the Title IX regulations in NCLB were amended to “expand flexibility in providing single-sex classes, extra-curricular activities, and schools in elementary and secondary education” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2006).

In its *Notice* the OCR clarifies that coeducational public schools may offer single-sex classes if they meet the following three criteria: 1) provide a rationale for offering a single-sex class in that subject, 2) provide a coeducational class in that same subject in a geographically accessible location, and 3) conduct a review every two years to determine whether single-sex classes are still necessary to remedy whatever inequity prompted the school to offer the single-sex class in the first place (National Association for Single-Sex Public Education, 2010). Single-sex public schools are only required to adhere to the second criterion, and, according to this second stipulation, there must only be a coeducational equivalent to a single-sex school. In other words, if a district institutes an all-girls school, it does not have to institute an all-boys school equivalent. As long as the educational programming available at the all-girls school is also available at a “geographically accessible”<sup>3</sup> coeducational school within the district, the single-sex status of the all-girls school is legal. Charter schools are exempt from meeting all three criteria.

The data from this study may illuminate positive effects of an all-girls education for the students at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls. Evidence that this non-selective single-sex public school positively affects girls’ engagement and achievement through high school graduation may prompt others to explore this educational model as a potential reform effort within urban education. The creation of new all-girls charter

---

<sup>3</sup> “Geographically accessible” is not defined in the OCR’s Amendments to Title IX.

schools, the transformation of public schools from co-ed to all-girls schools, and the continuation of existing all-girls schools are all allowed under current federal law; none of these options is contingent upon the existence of or the success of an “equivalent” single-sex option for boys. This means that under federal law, the legal standing for the single-sex model employed by Harper Leadership Academy for Girls is completely independent from that of Abbott Leadership Academy for Boys, the non-selective 7-12 school that the boys from the neighborhood attend. This is important as one evaluates that the benefits of a single-sex education for girls may look different from, and perhaps even be more robust than, those experienced by boys who attend a single-sex school.

**Rationale 1: The ‘brain-based’ argument for single-sex (public) education.**

Currently, advocates for single-sex education for girls take two positions regarding the advantages of such an educational model for girls. Leonard Sax, the current Executive Director of the National Association for Single-Sex Public Education (NASSPE), has conducted animal research on the brain-based differences between males and females. According to Sax, many learning differences in school can be attributed to these brain-based differences. Consequently, he contends that teachers should direct their instruction in ways that address these differences and that single-sex schools are the best sites in which to deliver this differentiated instruction. In *Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know About the Emerging Science of Sex Differences*, Sax (2005) explains that girls’ and boys’ brains develop differently. Girls’ brains develop in language areas before spatial relations and geometry areas, but the opposite is true for boys. The author contends that if teachers ignore these differences in their curricula, then boys will think they cannot write and girls will think they are not any good at math. Sax

also claims that girls' and boys' brains are wired differently. According to Sax, girls are able to talk about their emotions relatively easily because emotion is processed in the brain in the same area that processes language. However, the regions that process these functions in boys are different; therefore, boys typically have a more difficult time expressing their feelings. Furthermore, according to Sax, girls hear better than boys; they have more sensitive hearing than boys, so they often believe that people (especially men) are shouting at them when the men do not hear it that way at all. Sax contends that these are all factors that influence students' learning experiences and academic outcomes in the classroom. He strongly advocates for a single-sex educational environment for boys and girls so that teachers may more easily facilitate instructional accommodations that are based on these gender-specific brain-based differences.

**Rationale 2: The 'socialization' argument for single-sex (public) education.**

Others are focused on meeting the social needs of girls when they advocate for single-sex public education (Salomone, 2008). Ann Rubenstein Tisch has been one of the country's strongest proponents of single-sex public education for girls. She founded The Young Women's Leadership Academy in East Harlem, New York in 1996, in collaboration with the Center for Educational Innovation and the New York City Board of Education. Trained in broadcast journalism, Tisch had covered educational issues in Topeka, Kansas, and Minneapolis, Minnesota and as a national correspondent with NBC News in New York. According the website of The Young Women's Leadership Network (2009a), Tisch and the organization's push for single-sex schools stems from the belief that "single-gender public schools offer an appealing alternative to public schools where gender distinctions in learning and social development are mostly ignored." Tisch

purposely located her school in a neighborhood that would draw young women of color from a low-income community, as she believed that single-sex schooling, previously an opportunity reserved for the elite, should be made available to all girls (TYWLN, 2009b). The primary foci of the schools associated with The Young Women's Leadership Network are high standards and college preparation. Every student is expected to go to college. Each school has a *College-Bound Initiative* counselor whose "sole responsibility is to guide students and parents through the entire college admissions and financial aid process and to instill in the younger students the importance of a college education" (TYWLN, 2009b).

Others have followed Tisch's lead in establishing single-sex public school options in urban communities around the country. Many of these are situated as charter schools, founded by organizations such as KIPP, Brighter Choice, and the Public Prep Network. In addition, the public school districts of Dallas, Miami, and Baltimore have also established single-sex schooling options for girls. Enrollment paths for students who wish to attend these public schools, whether charter or district, vary from open lotteries to selective applications that reflect students' academic and behavior records.

#### **Backlash to the single-sex (public) education movement.**

The establishment of public schools that cater solely to girls, while championed by many, has also met resistance. Some believe that a separation of the sexes inherently leads to unequal educational opportunities for boys and for girls (Datnow & Hubbard, 2002b). Others claim that state and federal public funding for schools cannot legally be dedicated to institutions (in this case, schools) that intentionally discriminate against a particular group (in this case, boys) (DeBare, 2004; Salomone, 2002; Stabiner, 2002).

Organizations that promote women's causes are concerned that single-sex schools perpetuate stereotypes regarding gender roles and attitudes toward the opposite sex (AAUW, 1998a; Lee, Marks, and Byrd, 1994).

In a 2008 paper presented at the National Conference on Single-Sex Public Schools, Rosemary Salomone, a professor of law at St. John's University, stresses the dangers of using Sax's 'brain-based differences' theory as the rationale for single-sex education. First, the focus on potential deficits of males or females as a reason for their segregation can create an image of "the other" that can be damaging to mixed-sex relationships. Second, the assertion that there are significant brain-based differences between men and women may lead students to believe that there are deficits inherent to their biological make-up that must be overcome. Finally, there is very little scientific research that supports the assertion of brain-based differences in humans. She urges single-sex public school advocates to focus on the *socialization* of students as the rationale for such learning environments, and to also acknowledge that single-sex schools may not be the appropriate educational setting for everyone. "Single-sex schools should be empowering but they should not be isolating," she says (Salomone, 2008, p. 10).

#### **Recent policy interest in single-sex public education.**

Single-sex education in the public school system has become an interest of policymakers as researchers have noticed that boys lag behind their female classmates in their test scores, are prone to more discipline problems, and are more likely to be referred for special education services (Gurian, 1998; Pollack, 1998; Kleinfeld, 1999). Despite this recent focus on boys, research continues to highlight the flaws in the education of girls, in describing how girls receive less attention from the teacher, they must deal with

sexual harassment, and speak up in class less often (AAUW, 1992; Sadker and Sadker, 1994). As articulated by Datnow and Hubbard (2002b):

Gender bias can no longer be seen as an isolated problem, but is now understood as representative of larger systems of oppression, which include race, class, and sexuality. Gender bias is now seen as affecting both girls and boys, because neither group is immune to societal pressures and expectations. (p. 3)

Proponents of single-sex education for girls desire specifically to support the schooling and socialization of young women so that they grow up with confidence in who they are and in their potential as students, future professionals, and leaders. There is nothing in the efforts of these groups that aims to reduce or diminish the importance of educational opportunities or experiences of boys, but the advancement of young women in school is their cause.

#### **Research on single-sex (public) education.**

Cornelius Riordan has conducted extensive research over three decades on single-sex education and its academic and social effects on the boys and girls who attend such schools. He argues:

The research is ‘exceedingly persuasive’ in demonstrating that single-sex schools are effective in terms of providing both greater equality and greater achievement, especially for low-income and working-class students, most particularly for African-American and Hispanic-American boys *and* girls. (in Datnow & Hubbard, 2002a, p. 13)

He acknowledges, however, that his conclusions are drawn from research focused on single-sex private schools. In reviewing the literature in the field, Riordan highlights the successes experienced by socio-economically disadvantaged students who attend single-sex schools, namely higher achievement outcomes on standardized tests in reading, mathematics, science, and civics. Additionally, students in single-sex schools take

advantage of more leadership opportunities, enroll in more difficult courses, complete more homework, and have higher expectations for their educational paths. Furthermore, they have fewer disciplinary issues and better attitudes towards school. However, the more controlled school environment and increased work load indicate less satisfactory social lives for students who attend single-sex schools than what is reported by students who attend coeducational schools (Riordan, 2002).

These results are taken from studies that focus on single-sex schools that select their students and/or single-sex schools that students and their guardians elect to attend. Researchers (Riordan, 1990, 1994; Lee, 1997) interested in single-sex education have proposed twelve theoretical rationales for the positive effects seen in selective single-sex schools. These rationales are described as:

- 1) the diminished strength of youth culture values
- 2) a greater degree of order and control
- 3) the provision of more successful role models
- 4) a reduction of sex differences in curriculum and opportunities
- 5) a reduction of sex bias in teacher-student interaction
- 6) a reduction of sex stereotypes in peer interaction
- 7) the provision of a greater number of leadership opportunities
- 8) *single-gender schools require a proacademic parent/ student choice*  
(emphasis of original author)
- 9) smaller school size
- 10) a core curriculum emphasizing academic subjects taken by all students  
(organization of the curriculum)
- 11) positive relationships among teachers, parents, and students that lead  
to a shared value community with an emphasis on academics and  
equity (school social organization)
- 12) active and constructivist teaching and learning (organization of  
instruction.  
(from Datnow & Hubbard, 2002a, p. 19)

Riordan believes that the eighth rationale, the *proacademic choice* made by parents and their children to attend a single-sex school, is the “key explanatory variable” (in Datnow & Hubbard, 2002a, p. 19). He sees this choice as an intentional rejection of societal

values, particularly those within youth culture that downplay the importance of education. Students who desire to focus on their academic growth in school are more motivated to do well academically, and are therefore more likely to do well academically.

It is intriguing to consider whether or not the rationales put forth by Riordan (1990, 1994, 2002) and Lee (1997) have promise for single-sex schools within public education. There are single-sex public schools for girls, particularly those established under the umbrella of the Young Women's Leadership Network, that have also found success for their students; however, girls' attendance at all of these schools is voluntary. The eighth rationale, *proacademic choice*, has been pinpointed by Riordan as the "key" to the success of single-sex education for students from traditionally underserved backgrounds; however, this variable is missing in the context of the school site for this research study.

By and large, the girls who attend Harper Leadership Academy for Girls do not choose to attend this single-sex school; the district assigns them to Harper because it is their neighborhood high school. Previous studies of single-sex education have explored the educational experiences of students who attend single-sex schools that are *selective* private, parochial, or public schools. Students apply and are selected for admission to these schools. According to Riordan (2002) these students have made a *proacademic* choice to attend a single-sex school that has an inherent focus on academics and rejects the values of youth culture. However, this *proacademic* choice does not seem to be an adequate explanation for the engagement and achievement of Harper students as they do not select to attend Harper Leadership Academy for Girls. As such it is important to identify what student engagement at Harper looks like, what features of the school

promote engagement, and what features of the school inhibit engagement in order to provide an alternative explanation for students' achievement at a non-selective school. Analysis of data from this study will offer responses to these questions.

### **Theoretical Lenses**

I utilize three theoretical perspectives in the investigation of student engagement at an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. Connell & Wellborn's (1991) work on engagement that draws on their theory of motivation supports my characterization of what student engagement looks like at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls and what features of the school promote or inhibit student engagement. Social reproduction theory supports my contention about how an all-girls education has the potential to transform the lives of the young women of color who attend Harper, as well as the financial stability of Riverbend, the neighborhood in which they live. Black Feminist Theory suggests what an education in an all-girls environment could, and perhaps should, look like for the young women who attend Harper, in order to support their academic success to and through college. I describe these three theoretical perspectives in this section.

### **Engagement**

Most high school dropouts cite a lack of academic and/or social engagement as their reason for dropping out before graduation (Rumberger, 2004a). Schools that focus on heightening students' engagement with their school, classes, extra-curricular activities, teachers, and peers are more likely to have students complete high school successfully (Rumberger, 2004a). 'Quality' schools with an agenda that focuses on engagement serve as *protective factors* for students against the risk factors inherent to the social

environment of many low-income communities: poverty, racial inequality, and illegitimate opportunities (Jessor, 1993).

Skinner and Belmont (1993) utilize and expand upon a theoretical framework first proposed by Connell and Wellborn (1991) that emphasizes how students' engagement or disaffection (and consequently, their educational outcomes) is impacted by their various academic and social experiences in school. The authors utilized the following descriptions to explain *engagement* versus *disaffection*:

Children who are engaged show sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by positive emotional tone. They select tasks at the border of the competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest. The opposite of engagement is *disaffection*. Disaffected children are passive, do not try hard, and give up easily in the face of challenges. Disaffected children can be bored, depressed, anxious, or even angry about their presence in the classroom; they can be withdrawn from learning opportunities or even rebellious towards teachers and classmates. (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p. 572)

This distinction between engagement and disaffection is what I aim to delineate in the data gathered from students about their experiences in school. Analyzing the data in this way allows me to investigate the impact of students' engagement on their educational success in an institution designed to meet the needs of young women of color from a low-income community.

Connell and Wellborn's (1991) framework posits that students' engagement or disaffection in school is dependant on how students [the SELF] respond through feelings of *Relatedness*, *Competence*, and *Autonomy* to their learning environment [the CONTEXT] in the domains of *Involvement*, *Structure*, and *Autonomy Support*, respectively (see Figure 2.1). As one can see in the flow of Figure 2.1, the *Involvement* on

the part of the school and/or its teachers affects students' feelings of *Relatedness*. The *Structure* provided by the school and/or its teachers for students' mastery of the learning material affects students' feelings of *Competence*. Finally, the school's and/or teachers' *Autonomy Support* for students, or the opportunities that are provided for students to think and act independently, creatively, and critically in school and in the classroom, affect their sense of *Autonomy*. Together, students' overall feelings in the areas of *Relatedness*, *Competence*, and *Autonomy*, are determined by the school's and teachers' efforts as related to *Involvement*, *Structure*, and *Autonomy Support*, and translate into their overall *engagement* or *disaffection* in school [the ACTION], which ultimately impacts students' academic skills and abilities and social adjustments [the OUTCOME].

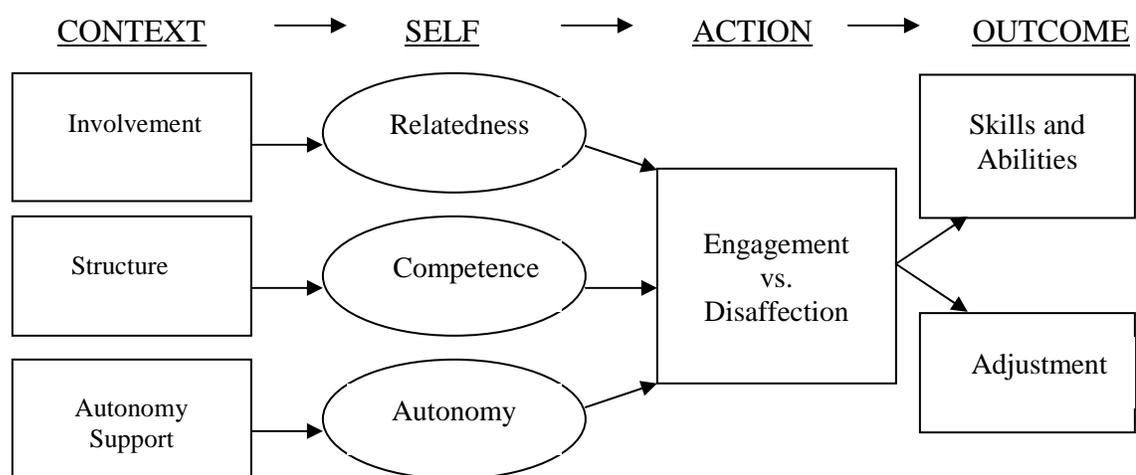


Figure 2.1. "Engagement" as situated in Connell & Wellborn's (1991) theory of motivation.<sup>4</sup>

I hypothesize that the single-sex environment at Harper shapes the *Involvement*,

<sup>4</sup> A motivational model of the effects of children's psychological needs on their engagement. (From "Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness: A Motivational Analysis of Self-System Processes" [p. 51] by J.P. Connell and J.G. Wellborn, 1991, in M.R. Gunnar and L.A. Sroufe [Eds.], *Self Processes in Development: Minnesota Symposium on Child Psychology* [Vol. 23]. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. Copyright 1991 by Erlbaum.

*Structure*, and *Autonomy Support* features of the school's context in ways that impact students' feelings of *Relatedness*, *Competence*, and *Autonomy*, respectively. Depending on the degree and frequency of the context's positive impacts and students' positive feelings of self, students at Harper will either be engaged or disaffected in school; Harper students' engagement or disaffection in school will ultimately influence their educational outcomes.

Proponents of single-sex education argue that such a model for schooling inherently increases students' academic and social engagement (Meehan, 2007; Salomone, 2003; Stabiner, 2002). For girls, a single-sex education offers fewer distractions from boys, less bullying, more opportunities to get involved in leadership and gender-atypical activities, and teaching focused on girls' learning needs (Pollard, 1998). Given these benefits of a single-sex education for girls, one would expect to observe high levels of *behavioral*, *emotional*, and *cognitive* engagement in an all-girls high school. One would also expect to observe high levels of student-reported feelings of *Relatedness*, *Competence*, and *Autonomy*. These would be directly related to institutional features of the school, or work of the teachers, that stress *Involvement*, *Structure*, and *Autonomy Support*, respectively. As such, this study aims to illuminate what student engagement looks like and how it is facilitated within the learning environment given the framework offered by Connell and Wellborn (1991) and furthered by Skinner and Belmont (1993).

### **Social Reproduction Theory**

Many critical theorists who write in the Marxist tradition have criticized schools for being sites of reproduction for the class inequalities present in society (MacLeod, 1987, 1995, 2004; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Oakes, 1995; Oakes &

Saunders, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Willis, 1977, 1983; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). They contend that schools educate students for particular positions within the workforce that reflect the class statuses of their families. This social reproduction benefits those of the dominant class by ensuring their retention of economic power. Schools do this through the employment of a 'hidden curriculum' that indoctrinates students with ideas of work, ownership, rules, and decision-making according to their class backgrounds (Feinberg & Soltis, 2004).

Jean Anyon (1980) describes the varied educational experiences of elementary school students across five schools in which students from different class backgrounds are enrolled. Students from working-class families overwhelmingly received classroom instruction that was rote and mechanical, and they were not allowed to make decisions within the classroom. Rules and assignments were not explained or discussed; rather, they were to be followed or completed without question. Behaviors that students exhibited that reinforced their submission to authority were encouraged and rewarded. Their higher-income peers, meanwhile, received instruction that allowed for students' freedom of expression, freedom of mobility, and independent decision-making. They were supported for their eventual roles as managers. Anyon's observations highlight how schools prepare students for their roles in the workforce, and that the types of jobs they will have reflect the educational experiences that they receive. It is the students' economic class that determines their educational experience, as the resources of their schools, the quality of their teachers, and the rigor of their lessons vary according to whether or not they attend school in high-income or low-income areas. In this way, schools reproduce existing class inequalities present in society.

Two of the most well known theorists who write of the social reproduction that occurs within education are Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron. Their 1977 work highlights the “symbolic violence” that occurs as “the meaning system of one’s class background is imposed from one group onto that of another” (Feinberg & Soltis, 2004, p. 62). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), the dominant class utilizes the structures and curricula of schools to reinforce the social hierarchy without having to resort to violence. The behaviors, skills, and dispositions appropriate for one’s class status are reinforced in schools in intentional ways that provide little room for mobility. In fact, students develop the “habitus” of their class status, defined as “the deep-seated ways of perceiving and understanding that develop in the process [of symbolic violence]” (Feinberg & Soltis, 2004, p. 62). Schools are ideal locations for this socialization because in their youth students learn to maintain a “distant respect for the unapproachable objects and symbols of the dominant culture” (Feinberg & Soltis, 2004, p. 62). Schools are able to maintain a perception of being neutral and apolitical. Subordinate groups come to accept their place in the social structure because they acknowledge the cultural superiority of the symbols of the dominant culture that exist in schools because they believe that these symbols are inherently superior, as opposed to positioned to be so by those in the dominant group.

Paul Willis (1977, 1983) argues that not all of those in subordinate groups passively acquiesce to their place in society’s economic structure. For over two years, he followed a group of twelve working-class boys in England who called themselves the “lads.” These boys resisted the school’s efforts to (re)socialize them into the structures of school and the pursuit of a degree that they knew would not actually disrupt the social

reproduction of their class status. They rejected the moral authority of the school and instead actively opposed school because they recognized the illegitimacy of the “opportunity” for which they were being trained. MacLeod (1987, 2004) expands on Willis’ work in his analysis of students’ disaffection at school as it relates to social reproduction. He identified that some students’ opposition to schooling is related to the damage of the “Achievement Ideology” often touted in schools. The typical message that students receive at school is that through hard work and an education, students can achieve “success” however the students are well aware that a high school degree will not translate into social mobility for them so they disengage from school in resistance to the “hypocritical rhetoric.” MacLeod concludes that students’ investment in school depends on a recognition of the social conditions that create barriers to their academic success, on the support of students’ self-esteem, and on curricula that are responsive to students’ needs.

Freire (1970) and Mehan, et al. (1996) offer an alternative viewpoint of schooling that argues that schools can be sites of liberation rather than oppression. Horvat & Davis (2010) recognize schools’ potential to be both reproducers of social inequality as well as “sites for transformation” as they are complex systems (p. 2). The authors describe the YouthBuild charter school model that provides educational and vocational training to youth ages 18-21 who have dropped out of high school. Through various structures and supports available to them at the school, students “develop a different way of seeing the world, different behavioral tendencies, and different patterns of actions” (p. 5). In this example, the school itself has provided the opportunity for its students to experience social mobility, as the “habitus” of their previous class status has shifted. The authors

argue that, “this reformulated outlook, or habitus, alters [students’] educational and social class trajectory” (p. 5).

Others have written about how social reproduction is a function of schooling in society, though not in direct affiliation with society’s economic structures. Ray McDermott (1983) identifies the tendency of a teacher to allow her high-level readers to interrupt her when she works with the low-level readers in a guided reading group; however, low-level readers are not allowed to interrupt her for help when she works with the high-level readers. Ray Rist (1970) describes the power of teachers’ subjective judgments of students’ academic potential based on nonacademic characteristics, such as neatness of dress. Teachers treat students differently as a result of these evaluations, give them more or less attention with instruction and offer them different freedoms of expression and mobility in the classroom. Students respond to their teachers’ dispositions towards them. Consequently, the teachers’ beliefs (and their actions in light of those beliefs) create self-fulfilling prophecies for students’ beliefs about their own academic potential, and ultimately, translate into either their high or low academic performance, accordingly.

As will be shared in Chapters 4 and 5, it is inherent in the mission and vision of Harper Leadership Academy for Girls and in the sentiments of its leaders that the school interrupts the social reproduction of its neighborhood. The school aims to do this by being a “site of transformation” where its students’ social and financial trajectories can be altered or changed. Harper contends that the young women who live in the Riverbend neighborhood can receive a liberatory education when they are supported within an all-girls setting that is focused on academic achievement and results in students’ eventual

acceptance into college. Seeing as how the Riverbend neighborhood, as will be described in Chapter 4, is low-income and few residents have any post-secondary education, it is important to identify the structures and supports available to the students at Harper that may alter their habitus. If students are able to access post-secondary education as a result of their educational experiences at Harper, then the school would meet its goal of being a “site of transformation.” However, there may be aspects of the school that reproduce the social inequalities present in society. Alternately, like Horvat and Davis (2010) suggest, Harper may have characteristics that reflect both a “site of transformation” and a “site of reproduction” and the consequences of this tension may have different effects on different students.

An analysis of the data related to what students’ engagement at Harper looks like, as well as features of Harper that promote or inhibit engagement, will be identified and discussed in Chapter 5. The extent to which these features reproduce or interrupt the social inequality of the Riverbend neighborhood in the education of the girls who attend Harper will also be explored. I investigate through the data analyzed in Chapter 5 whether Harper is indeed a “site of transformation” for its students, a “site of reproduction” or a place where the characteristics of both are present. The implications of this determination are then explored in Chapter 6.

### **Black Feminist Theory**

The students who attend Harper Leadership Academy for Girls are young women of color from a low-income community. McAdoo (2007) argues that young women of color share unique experiences, such as “extended relationships with family and friends that involve a larger network of caring adults” (in Shaffer & Gordon, 2004, p. 80). Yet

many of the experiences she mentions that are unique to women of color are framed in a negative light, and she identifies these experiences as: “seeing the world differently from White girls, regardless of their social class; experiencing devaluation of their talents because they are from groups that have been traditionally less appreciated by mainstream society; and feeling peer pressure to reject success when measured by White standards” (in Shaffer & Gordon, 2004, p. 80). The lives of young women of color, experienced at the intersection of race and gender, may present “insurmountable obstacles to education opportunities” according to the National Women’s Law Center (1997). Discrimination based on both race and sex deters women from pursuing certain jobs in the workplace for fear that such positions that may open them up to difficult interactions based in stereotypes and assumptions. This helps to explain why young women of color are not represented in high-wage careers that are untraditional for women (NWLC, 1997). Women of color often face a “double whammy” as a result of their two-pronged minority status in society (NWLC, 1997). Research has shown that this positionality greatly affects their access to education and job opportunities as they face biased standardized testing and discriminatory tracking in schooling and sexual and racial harassment as well as occupational segregation in employment (NWLC, 1997).

Women are the life-blood of urban communities in the U.S. Providing young women of color from a low-income community with a college-preparatory education can shift the social and financial trajectories of the women from that community and thus, interrupt the social reproduction of the low-income neighborhood in which they live. A school that is dedicated to the education of young women of color has a unique and powerful opportunity to alter how its students view themselves and their futures. Because

young women at Harper are the only demographic of students reflected in the student body, there is no mistaking that the messages of high expectations and of ‘college’ are meant for them and not those with more power in society, namely White men, White women, and men of color. Internalizing these messages can lead students to imagine different possibilities for themselves and their futures than what is typical of the women in their community. Students’ schooling at Harper has the potential to be transformative for them and for their community.

In urban public schools’ consideration of how to prevent students from dropping out, the focus on enhancing students’ academic and social engagement should extend to incorporate the concept of *empowerment*, particularly when serving young women of color. This empowerment commences as young women of color are recognized and valued for their identities, talents, and experiences. Through the acknowledgment of their worth in others’ eyes, young women of color are ultimately able to “define” themselves and their own life paths, rather than accept the ones determined by society. According to Collins (2000), a leading scholar of Black Feminist Standpoint Theory, women of color must take a critical stance towards the simultaneity of the oppressions that they face. It is imperative that young women of color “reject the negative images of Black womanhood” and fight social injustice, which has been “sustained by intersecting oppressions” (Collins, 2000, p. 1).

Similarly, the schools that these young women attend should act as change-enabling agents. This demands that they include curricula, learning materials, and activities, and foster teacher-student and student-student relationships that not only *engage* students in meaningful ways, but also *empower* them in ‘righting’ the wrongs

they see in society. An all-girls school that serves young women of color from a low-income community may be particularly positioned to engage and empower its students, seeing as how meeting the academic and social needs of this demographic is its sole purpose and mission.

An analysis of student engagement is facilitated through exploration of the aspects of *Relatedness*, *Competence*, and *Autonomy* that students experience at the school. The girls are able to experience engagement or disaffection in these three domains as a result of the features or elements of the school that encapsulate *Involvement*, *Structure*, and *Autonomy Support* for students. This study utilizes a lens of *critical social theory*, grounded in Social Reproduction Theory and Black Feminist Theory, to interrogate what student engagement looks like at an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. Data will be explored for evidence that supports or refutes Harper Leadership Academy for Girls' mission to be a "site of transformation."

Chapter 2 has offered a review of the literature in the areas of high school 'drop-outs,' student engagement, and single-sex education. Social reproduction and Black Feminist theories have been shared for how they may inform this study on student engagement at an all-girls urban neighborhood high school. When the literature and theories are considered together, a conceptual framework emerges that suggests that a single-sex education for young women of color from a low-income community has the potential to engage them academically and socially through high school graduation. Furthermore, a school that desires to have a transformative impact on the community in which it situated would capitalize on its students' potential by preparing them academically and socially for numerous post-secondary educational opportunities. The

next chapter outlines the methodology utilized for an original qualitative research study that investigates what student engagement looks like at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls. The study will also illuminate what features or elements of the school promote or inhibit engagement as the school in its efforts to see them succeed academically.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DATA & METHODOLOGY

Research on engagement often takes a quantitative approach (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) or specifically aims to link engagement with risk factors for dropout (Rumberger, 2004a). Instead, the aim of this research is to understand and describe student engagement in an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school and the aspects of an education in this school that promote or inhibit student engagement. In collecting and analyzing data about student engagement at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls I hope to illuminate the distinctions between students' experiences at this *non-selective* single-sex school from those of students who attend *selective* single-sex schools, which have already been recognized in the research. The *proacademic* choice that students have made to attend selective single-sex schools is not present for Harper students. Therefore, it cannot be the key explanatory variable for students' engagement and achievement at the school. I am interested in learning what does and what does not factor into students' engagement at Harper. This study employs qualitative methods in order to provide in-depth descriptions of students' perceptions of and experiences within their school.

The following research questions frame this study:

- *What does student engagement look like in an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school?*
- *Which features of an education in this all-girls school **promote** student engagement?*
- *Which features of an education in this all-girls school **inhibit** student engagement?*

### **The Research Site**

This study was conducted at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls, an all-girls urban public neighborhood high school located in a large city on the East Coast. Approximately 500 students attend Harper and they are overwhelmingly young women of color from a low-income community. Ninety-eight percent (98%) of the students at Harper identify as Black/African American, one percent (1%) as White, and one percent (1%) as Latina, and eighty-nine percent (89%) of students are eligible for Free & Reduced Price Lunches.<sup>5</sup> They range in age from 12 to 19 years old and they are enrolled in grades 7-12 at the school. Extensive descriptions of both the school and the study's student participants are included in Chapter 4.

### **Research Design**

This qualitative study was conducted in two parts (see Table 3.1).<sup>6</sup> Part I involved four focus group sessions with student volunteers, following an initial survey of their academic and social engagement in school. Part II consisted of individual semi-structured interviews with four “key” students, as well as “witnesses” to their engagement and achievement in school, in order to explore each student's academic and social engagement in school in-depth. One teacher and one guardian of each of these four students were invited to participate in the study as the student's “witnesses.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover,

---

<sup>5</sup> “Source” Derived from data provided by The School District of Philadelphia. Copyright © 2009 by The School District of Philadelphia. All rights reserved.

<sup>6</sup> Please see Chapter 3's “Epilogue” for a detailed explanation of previous iterations of and challenges related to this study's research design.

<sup>7</sup> The use of “witnesses” to describe those people who have been present in students' lives and who can, therefore, speak to students' engagement in school is adapted from Combs, G. & Freedman, J. (2004). “A poststructuralist approach to narrative work” in Angus, L.E. & McLeod, J. (Eds.) *The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

each student was observed through a day of school for evidence of academic and social engagement. Data collection, including ongoing observations of the school community, took place over sixteen months. Data analysis, while mostly concurrent, lasted an additional three months.

Table 3.1.

*Summary of Research Study*

Part of Study	Method	Type(s) & Number of Participants	Length of Time for Data Collection
I	Focus Groups	4 groups of 4-5 students in each for focus group sessions	10 months
II	“Key” Participant Interviews and Observations; “Witness” Interviews	“Key” Participants: 4 – Students “Witnesses”: 4 - Parents/ Guardians 4 – Teachers 2- Administrators	3 months
	School Observations	School Community	Ongoing over 16 months

### **Selection of Research Site and Participants**

In the following section I will briefly describe the selection process for the research site and the participants of the study.

#### **Harper Leadership Academy for Girls.**

The selection of the setting for this research was based upon purposive sampling. Harper is a non-selective public school that touts a graduation rate of ninety-seven percent (97%) and a college acceptance rate of ninety-four percent (94%). These statistics intrigued me given that the annual dropout rate of students within the district that Harper

is situated in is fifty-two percent (52%). I wanted to learn about Harper and understand how the students who attend school there experience its unique environment, particularly when considering that the overwhelming majority did not choose to attend this single-sex school.

### **Student participants.**

Student participants for this study were recruited using the snowball method with several different steps. First, I visited the school's teachers during a faculty meeting in fall 2008 to introduce myself, explain the study, and solicit their cooperation in the recruitment of their students. I requested their help in distributing consent and assent forms to the students for participation in the study. (All students attending the school were encouraged to participate in the study, which I titled "The VOICES Project.") Second, I posted flyers around the school that advertised the opportunity for students to participate in "The VOICES Project" in which they would share their experiences at Harper. Third, I enlisted the help of each homeroom's "Connections Leader" for the recruitment of participants for "The VOICES Project." As a result of these efforts, fifty-five students across grades 7-12 initially volunteered to participate in the study.

Students who volunteered to participate in the study and returned the appropriate consent and assent forms were asked to attend one of several lunchtime or after-school meetings. At these meetings, which occurred between February – June 2010, students were asked to complete an initial survey of engagement. Participants' survey responses determined which of the four groups that each student would participate in, though the students did not know there was any distinction between the groups.

In order to establish the four focus groups I first separated the participants into

either a “high engagement” or “low engagement” group based on their survey responses. I did this by scoring the survey items and splitting the participants into “high” and “low” groups through an evaluation of the mean engagement score among the participants. I then separated each engagement group into two groups, “high achievement” or “low achievement,” based on participants’ achievement levels in school the year before, as determined by their GPAs. (Students’ parents/guardians had signed “Access to Student Record” forms prior to the students’ participation in the study. The school provided me with the GPAs of the student participants in grades 9-12. The school provided me with the grades earned during the 2009-2010 school year by the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade student participants because the school district does not calculate GPAs for middle-grades students. Therefore, I calculated GPAs for the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders myself.)

Four focus groups were created based on the four domains of a 2x2 table of student engagement and achievement: (1) those who are highly engaged and high achievers, (2) those who are highly engaged and low achievers, (3) those who are not highly engaged but high achievers, and (4) those who are not highly engaged and who are low achievers (see Figure 3.1).

		ENGAGEMENT	
		High	Low
ACHIEVEMENT	High	High Eng. / High Ach.	Low Eng. / High Ach.
	Low	High Eng. / Low Ach.	Low Eng./ Low Ach.

*Figure 3.1.* Achievement and engagement matrix for study focus groups.

I randomly selected eight girls who were grouped within one domain for participation in that domain's focus group. Four or five girls from each domain who were invited to participate elected to do so and attended their designated focus group session. As will be described in Chapter 4, I have given each focus group a name that corresponds with the overall personality of the group as related to its members' characterizations of their engagement and achievement in school.

**The four “key” participants.**

Student participants for the interview and observation stage of the study (Part II) were randomly selected from the high school students who participated in one of the four focus groups. All four girls who were randomly selected agreed to participate, as did their parents/guardians and one of their teachers.

**“Witnesses”: Teachers, parents, and administrators.**

There are people present in the lives of the “key” student participants who are “witnesses” to the students' educational experiences at Harper. They regularly observe and/or hear accounts of students' engagement and achievement at school. They have witnessed the students' successes and struggles over periods of time that have lasted anywhere from several months to several years, and they interact together daily. As such, they are able to speak with authority on the perceptions of the “key” participants' experiences at Harper. Teachers are able to comment on students' educational achievement, as well as their daily attendance, demeanor, and participation in class. Parents/guardians are able to describe how their daughters or granddaughter talk about school at home and to share their own perceptions of Harper as a result of their interactions with the school's staff and structures. The administrators included in this

study have witnessed to the engagement and achievement of Harper students at large and throughout the school's five-year history.

The teachers who were solicited for participation were selected based on their identification as a classroom teacher for one or more of the students involved in Part II of the research study. The parents/guardians who were solicited for participation were selected based on their identification as a parent/guardian for one of the students involved in Part II of the research study. The teacher and parent/guardian participants were solicited for participation via emails, letters, and phone calls. The selection of the administrators for interviews was based on purposive sampling. They are the current Principal and former Principal of the school. These two participants were included in the research in order to help provide background about the school's history, mission, vision, and structure.

## **Data Collection**

### **Part I: Focus Groups**

#### **Initial survey.**

Following the collection of parent/guardian consent forms and student assent forms, the student participants were given a 40-minute initial survey of engagement (see Appendix A). The purpose of this initial survey was to gauge individual student's engagement level in school in order to designate which of the four focus groups in which each student would participate. The survey was administered in classrooms and in the library on several occasions during students' lunch periods and after school.

Students were asked to provide a small amount of background information at the start of the survey. This information was used to obtain descriptive data and confirm that

the students are indeed women of color from low-income families. The bulk of the survey questions are taken from the U.S. Department of Education NCES' Educational Longitudinal Survey of 2002 (both the base-year 10<sup>th</sup> grade student questionnaire and the first follow-up student questionnaire). (The ELS questionnaires are in the public domain and I was given permission from the NCES to use any items from them.) These questions were posed in order to learn more about students' experiences in a variety of areas that impact their education and engagement in school. Questions refer to students' school experiences and activities, money and work, plans and expectations for the future, community, family, friends, family's education/ work, students' beliefs and opinions about self, how students spend their time, and students' plans for education after high school and/or work after high school.

I distributed the survey to participants, answered general questions, and assisted with any reading or writing difficulties that arose. When the surveys were completed, I assigned each participant an identification number, which is the only identifying information on the survey. The surveys have been kept in a locked office off-site, separate from the list of participants' identification numbers, to protect the anonymity of the participants and their responses. Students were compensated for their time with snacks and a coupon for a free soft pretzel during the school's next sale. At the completion of the survey, six participants' names were drawn randomly in a raffle for one of six \$20 gift cards to Old Navy.

#### **Focus group sessions.**

Thirty-two students continued their participation in the research study during one of the four focus groups. A letter that described this stage of the study was attached to

'parent consent,' 'student assent,' and 'permission to audiotape' forms. Students were asked to take the letter and these forms home for their parents/guardians' review and signatures and return them at the time of their scheduled focus group session. (The forms notified potential participants that confidentiality could not be guaranteed within the focus group, as I would be unable to control what other participants said to their peers about the session.) The four focus groups were conducted on four separate occasions after school and included 4 or 5 students from one of the four domains of engagement and achievement in each. Questions examined trends in students' responses on the survey and explored students' sentiments related to their all-girls educational setting (see Appendix B for protocol). Each focus group session lasted approximately 45 minutes and occurred during students' lunch periods. Each session was recorded and then transcribed. The participants were compensated for their time with a pizza lunch.

These focus groups sessions were informal, as the students ate pizza while they answered my questions about their engagement at school. Participants were overwhelmingly eager to share about their experiences in their classes, their relationships with their teachers and peers, and their suggestions for ways in which Harper could improve. Students were candid, funny, and thoughtful. On a few occasions I had to remind them that only one person could speak at a time in order for the audio recorder to pick up their voices. I also had to create space for a few of the shier students to have a chance to speak, as at least one girl in each group dominated the conversation and others had a hard time chiming in. All of the students seemed to enjoy themselves, and several asked me if they could participate in another focus group session soon.

## **Part II: “Key” Participant Interviews & Observations and “Witness” Interviews**

One student from each of the four focus groups was randomly selected for participation in Part II of the study, which involved in-depth interviews of the students, one of their teachers, one of their parents, and the shadowing of each student through her school day. The four students were given letters, one addressed to the student and the other addressed to the student’s parent or guardian, which described Part II of the study. Parent/guardian consent forms, student assent forms, permission to audiotape forms, and parent/guardian as participant consent forms were sent home with the students for the review and signatures of their parents or guardians. The students returned these forms, and all four students and their parents/guardians agreed to participate, which eliminated the need to randomly select any other students for participation. Teachers of the students who participated in Part II of the research study were randomly selected and emailed with a request for their participation in Part II of the research study. Consent forms and permission to audiotape forms were collected from teachers prior to their participation in the study.

Students who volunteered to participate in Part II of the study were questioned about their personal views related to their schooling experiences and engagement while attending an all-girls neighborhood public high school. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis in a private setting with the student during either a lunch or study period (see Appendix C for protocol). The interviews lasted no more than 45 minutes, though a second interview was scheduled with one student, as her responses to interview questions were lengthy. Responses during the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Additionally, I shadowed each of the four students through a day of

their classes, and during their lunch periods and extra-curricular activities for evidence of their *behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement* in school. I extended my gratitude to the teachers who hosted me as a regular visitor in their classrooms with a \$5 gift card to either Dunkin' Doughnuts or Starbucks. Each of the four girls was compensated for her participation with a \$25 gift card to either Wal-Mart or H&M, retail stores of their choice.

Teacher and parents/ guardian "witnesses" who volunteered to participate in Part II of the study were questioned about their student's engagement and achievement in this all-girls public neighborhood high school setting. Questions probed the teachers' and parents/guardians' understandings and observations of the students' connections to their school, classes, teachers, classmates, and academic work. Interviews were conducted by me on a one-on-one basis in a private setting and scheduled in a location and at a time convenient for the participant. Three of the teacher interviews took place after school in the teacher's classroom; the fourth teacher was interviewed at his home on a Saturday morning. Two of the parent interviews took place at school during school hours. One guardian was interviewed at her place of work on a Sunday. One parent was interviewed in her home on a Saturday. Participant responses during all but one of the parent interviews were recorded and then transcribed. (The interview that was not recorded was transcribed by hand because the guardian preferred not to be recorded.) The interviews lasted between 40-120 minutes (see Appendices D and E for protocols). These participants were compensated for their time with a \$10 gift card to Walgreens, Wal-Mart, Target or Staples.

Two administrators agreed to be interviewed for this study. Mrs. Wanda Leary, the former Principal of Harper, was interviewed in her district office in the evening hours of a weekday. Harper's current Principal, Mrs. Stacy Attle, was interviewed at her home on a snow day. Both interviews lasted 90 minutes. The interviews were open-ended and consisted of general questions regarding Harper's history, their history with Harper, and the goals, progress, and current challenges of the school. Neither felt comfortable being audio recorded so their interviews were recorded by hand. Both women were shown appreciation for their time with a \$20 gift card to Barnes & Noble.

### **School Observations**

In addition to observing the four key participants through a day in their lives at school, I spent over 100 hours during a sixteen-month period at the school observing regular and special school events. I observed classes, assemblies, and hallway interactions with students and their peers and with students and school staff members. I also observed special school events such as Junior Prom, Graduation, Career Day, Field Day, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade Retreat, New Student Orientation, and 'Brag Day.' Through these observations, and through my inclusion on the Harper staff email listserve, I was able to get a sense of the pulse of the school to confirm or refute data gleaned through the other phases of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis began with a review of the initial survey data for trends in the students' responses related to their *behavioral*, *emotional*, and *cognitive engagement*. Those trends were investigated through the questioning of students at various engagement and achievement levels during the focus groups sessions (Part I). Discussion

in the focus groups related to students' reactions to the all-girls model of the school, the school rules, students' classes, their relationships with their teachers, and their relationships with their peers. Audio recordings from the focus group sessions were transcribed shortly after each session and themes that emerged in the students' responses were noted and explored in the interviews with the four "key" student participants and their parent/guardian and teacher "witnesses" (Part II). Discussion in the interviews related to the "key" participants' academic histories at Harper, their participation in classes, involvement in extra-curricular activities, future aspirations, and relationships with teachers and peers. Audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed shortly after each of those sessions, and themes that emerged were noted and compared to participants' responses in the focus groups and interviews with other participants.

Coding of the survey and transcription data to identify themes involved highlighting the words and phrases used by participants in the focus group sessions and interviews that seem to capture the overall meaning and emphasis of participants' statements. These codes were then either collapsed into a number of larger, simpler themes or expanded into more detailed categories, depending on the thematic outcomes. These themes were identified and tagged across focus groups sessions and interviews, and the specific number of instances of each theme was recorded. Coding themes were also considered in relation to the grade-levels of the students and the number of years they have attended Harper. Demographic codes included: student, parent, teacher, administrator, "neighborhood" resident, and "transfer" student. Conceptual codes included: *Involvement*, *Lack of Involvement*, *Structure*, *Lack of Structure*, *Autonomy Support*, *Lack of Autonomy Support*, *Relatedness*, *Lack of Relatedness*, *Competence*,

*Lack of Competence, Autonomy, Lack of Autonomy, Engagement (Behavioral), Engagement (Emotional), Disaffection, and Leadership.* “Simple” codes included students’ mention of other schools, of sexuality, and of money. Student academic experience codes were their interests, progress, and aspirations. “Harper” codes were elements related to the school’s identity that were mentioned by participants, such as its motto, its history, and its programs. There were 28 codes altogether that were defined and utilized for data analysis within this qualitative study (see Appendix H).

Chapter 3 describes the methodology of this research study on student engagement at an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. The study was conducted in two stages and utilized a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis: focus groups (Part I), interviews with and observations of the four “key” participants, as well as two of their “witnesses,” (Part II), and observations (ongoing). Fifty-five students participated in the initial survey for Part I, 18 students participated in the focus groups in Part I, and 4 students, 4 parents/guardians, 4 teachers, and 2 administrators participated in Part II of the study. Data collection occurred over a sixteen-month period between September 2009 and December 2010.

Students’ experiences at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls were explored through both stages of the study for information about their cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement in school. Students were characterized as belonging to one of four domains in a 2x2 table of student engagement and achievement (the eventual focus groups) based on their survey responses and their student records. Students’ engagement and achievement levels in school were used to delve further and deeper into students’ experiences at school through interviews and observations.

### **My Background and Perspective**

I have been sensitive to my role as the researcher throughout the duration of the study and in my interactions with study participants as well as others at the research site. As a young White female who was new to the staff and students at Harper, I was an outsider. I worked diligently towards becoming a regular presence at the school. As a result of my frequent visits, the students and staff eventually became comfortable with me. My familiarity with working with youth in urban schools as a former middle school teacher in the district made me confident that I would be able to gain acceptance within the school community. I frequently reflected on my personal bias regarding the positive influence of an all-girls educational environment as I myself attended an all-girls school, though it was a parochial one in a city on the Gulf Coast. I was sure to solicit and analyze data that acknowledged all of the positive and negative schooling experiences that students, their parents/ guardians, and their teachers shared.

## EPILOGUE

It is important to provide the reader with a comprehensive description of how the methodology for this study came to fruition. There was a different iteration of the study initially than the one that was described in this chapter, as a result of numerous challenges that arose throughout data collection at the research site. It is hoped that the inclusion of this epilogue, a “behind-the-scenes” view of research with students in an urban public school, will be informative for others who may be interested in embarking on a similar study of student engagement.

### **Special Approvals**

Prior to the commencement of data collection for this study, I needed to acquire the appropriate legal and ethical access to the research subjects by seeking approval for the project from Temple University’s Institutional Review Board and from the school district’s Research Review Committee. Descriptions of the processes for acquiring these approvals are described in this section.

#### **Temple University’s Institutional Review Board**

My dissertation committee approved my research proposal for a study of student engagement at an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school in April 2009. Because the study involves the research of human subjects, I needed to gain approval from Temple University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). I submitted a human-subjects research protocol to Temple’s IRB in late April 2009. Because the study’s design included minors younger than age 18 as participants, the research protocol that I submitted required “full committee” IRB review rather than the typical “expedited” review for protocols that do not involve protected populations. This was considered

necessary to insure that no harm would come to the minors as a result of their participation in the study. The research protocol, including the study instruments and consent forms, received full approval from Temple's IRB in August 2009.

### **The School District's Research Review Committee**

Because the study involves the research of students who attend a school in a large urban district on the East Coast, I needed to gain approval from the school district's Research Review Committee in order to conduct my research there. I submitted a research protocol to the school district's Office of Research and Evaluation in May 2009. Included with this protocol was documentation of my dissertation committee's approval of the study and documentation of the school principal's approval of the study. While Temple IRB's protocol review process was fairly straightforward and smooth, the school district's process was anything but. I hope that in sharing the difficulties that I encountered in this process, the reader is able to better anticipate potential roadblocks to conducting research with students in an urban district and develop contingency plans to avoid or circumvent such obstacles.

#### ***May 2009 – Month 1 of the school district's approval process.***

The school district changed the template required for research protocols submitted to the district the day after I submitted my protocol. I was asked to re-submit the protocol again, but in the new format.

#### ***July - August 2009 – Months 3 and 4 of the school district's approval process.***

No where in the district's materials regarding research protocol submission was there mention of needing documentation of a university IRB's full approval. I did not submit such documentation, nor was I made aware that I needed to do so. Therefore, my

initial protocol submission of May 2009 was rejected by the school district in late July because I did not provide documentation indicating Temple IRB's approval of my study. I resubmitted my research protocol with this documentation a second time in early August 2009.

*October 2009 – Month 6 of the school district's approval process.*

In early October 2009 I received a phone call from my contact in the school district's Office of Research and Evaluation. She told me that despite the fact that my paperwork had been submitted and was undergoing review by the Research Committee, the new leadership of the district was putting a 'hold' on all research at "Intervention" schools in the district. She explained that current research projects would be suspended and new projects would be denied because it was believed that the staff at these schools "needed to focus on their students and testing, not the work of outside researchers." My contact also said that unless I received approval for my project from the Regional Superintendent in order to circumvent this hold, I should probably consider changing my research site to one not located in the school district. Given that my study is completely centered on the unique positionality of Harper as an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school, I knew that this development was a potentially devastating blow to the work of the previous year and a half.

I reached out to my dissertation committee with this news. Just as surprised as I was by the recent developments at the district, Dr. Horvat talked with the contact in the district office to confirm this information, and Dr. Jordan and I set-up a meeting to discuss alternative designs for my study should I not be able to conduct research at my original school site. Such alternatives included: conducting research on engagement at an

all-girls magnet school in the district that did not have the “Intervention” label, researching engagement of girls who attended a local charter school, and identifying an all-girls public school in another city on the East Coast in which to study student engagement. While we weighed the feasibility of these ideas, I attempted to get in contact with the Regional Superintendent to request a meeting with him so that I might explain my study and its significance, and request his approval of my project.

*November 2009 – Month 7 of the school district’s approval process.*

On Election Day (November 4, 2009), I met with the principal of my research site and told her about the difficulties that I was having getting in touch with the Regional Superintendent. She called his office phone from hers and was able to ask him to meet with me. She told me that I needed to arrive at his office in fifteen minutes in order to receive his signature before he left the building for the day, which I was able to do. I thanked the Regional Superintendent profusely upon seeing him and rushed the paper with his signature over to the district office. A week or so later, my district contact called to let me know that the next step in the approval process was getting a Data Agreement signed; this document would be my contract with the district about the appropriate use of the data that I would collect at the school. Upon reviewing the document with Dr. Jordan and speaking with faculty in the College who had also conducted research in the school district, it became clear that Temple University’s Legal Counsel would have to complete this paperwork on my behalf. I met with an attorney for Temple University to explain the situation to him and he assured me that his office would be able to negotiate with the school district and get everything taken care of within a few weeks.

*December 2009 – Month 8 of the school district’s approval process.*

Throughout the month of December, Temple University’s legal department and the school district’s legal department negotiated over terms contained in the Data Agreement contract. Representatives from Temple signed-off on a revised version of the contract in mid-December and sent it to the district for its representatives’ signatures. However, by early January, the Data Agreement was still not finalized.

*January 2010 – Month 9 of the school district’s approval process.*

I received a letter in the mail at my home on January 24, 2010 that announced the district’s approval of my research protocol as of January 23, 2010. I could now formally and officially begin data collection for my study of student engagement at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls, an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. I was extremely frustrated that the process of acquiring the district’s approval had taken nine months and had been so unpredictable; however, I was grateful to finally be given the permission I had sought for so long to conduct research at the site that I had selected to be at the center of my dissertation.

## **Data Collection**

### **Diverting From the Study’s Original Design**

The original design of this study, proposed to and approved by my dissertation committee in April 2009, was that of a mixed-methods study comprised of three parts: (1) a quantitative phase that included a survey, (2) a qualitative phase that included focus groups, and (3) a qualitative phase that included participant interviews. As a result of the difficulties that I encountered with the data collection when soliciting participation for the

survey, my dissertation committee agreed to an amendment of the study's original design to only include the qualitative parts as official components for analysis.

Thus, the study's design as described in Chapter 3 refers to a study composed of *two* distinct parts, the focus groups (facilitated by an initial survey) and the interviews. The survey, included as a separate phase in the study's original design, was only used as a tool for generating the composition of focus groups in the amended design. The participants' responses to the survey data were not analyzed as if they were data reflective of the experiences of the student body as a whole. The decision was made to change how the survey was utilized and discussed within the study's data collection and subsequent data analysis because of the small number of students who volunteered to participate in the study. This amended design has been described in Chapter 3. This epilogue of Chapter 3 continues with a description of the study's original design and of my attempts to implement it.

#### **Opportunity to conduct a pilot study.**

When I received approval from my dissertation committee to conduct my student on student engagement at Harper, I believed that I would be able to begin data collection in September 2009 when the new school year started. I was under the impression that approval from Temple's IRB and from the school district could be secured in just a few months' time. I had no way of anticipating the challenge and duration of the school district's approval process, as no other graduate student (or faculty member for that matter) in my program had submitted a research protocol for the school district's review and approval during the tenure of the district's new Superintendent.

I tried to utilize the time I spent waiting for approval wisely, and so I commenced with a “pilot” version of my study, which I had not had time to do prior to defending my research proposal for my dissertation committee. In particular, I wanted to see how students would respond to the survey instrument and whether they found the questions easy to understand and the format easy to follow. (At my proposal defense, members of my dissertation committee mentioned wanting me to add a phase to the study that would have been exploratory in nature and preceded the design of my survey instrument and focus group and interview protocols. It was believed that time spent at the research site to investigate the site and ponder questions about student engagement would be more desirable and authentic than anticipating, given the engagement literature, the types of questions that warranted inclusion on the survey and in the focus group and interview protocols. However, because of the school district’s requirement that the study’s research protocol be in its final form for submission to the Research Review Committee’s approval, that suggestion had to be dismissed.)

In the fall of 2009 I solicited a friend who teaches at a local charter school for help in recruiting students to pilot the survey instrument for my study. She identified eight female students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade who agreed to meet with me for an hour after-school to take the survey. I brought them snacks of in exchange for their time and feedback about the questions and directions on the survey. As a result of this “pilot” with the charter school students, I made some minor adjustments to the wording of some survey questions. Then in preparation for data collection at Harper, I created a template of the new version of the survey in Remark OMR software and I practiced scanning the surveys into the program to make sure students’ responses were read and recorded

correctly in the program. Also, because I had received the approval of the school's principal and believed that the district would grant its approval "any day," I conducted some general observations of the school culture at Harper during the fall months. Through this initial contact with the school staff and students I was able to build a rapport with many, which facilitated my later work at the school.

### **Initial attempt at data collection at Harper.**

Immediately following the district's approval in January 2010 to collect data at Harper, I set to work implementing Part I of the study's original design, the survey. After receiving a roster of all 500 Harper students' names, I re-typed these names, along with students' grade levels, into an Excel spreadsheet for easy sorting. I gave each student a unique identification number for the purpose of the study. Then I ran a function in Excel to randomly select 225 of Harper's 500 students to solicit for participation in the study. (I over-sampled by about 50 students, anticipating that some students and/or their guardians would not be interested in participating.) I sent a manila envelope to each of the 225 students through her homeroom teacher. This envelope contained a cover letter describing the study, highlighting the benefits of participation in the study, and explaining the other documents enclosed in the envelope. The other documents included a Parent Consent form and a Student Assent form related to students' participation in the survey portion of the study, and a Parent Consent form and Student Assent form for Access to Student Records (I desired access to information about the students' academic backgrounds including their attendance and achievement (as measured by their GPA, grades, PSSA scores, Terra Nova scores, and SAT/ACT scores, if applicable). Only 25

envelopes with the necessary forms were returned to me within a few weeks' time, despite several post-card reminders to each student randomly selected for participation.

I went ahead and scheduled days after-school for those girls who had agreed to participate to take the survey, and I treated them to snacks while they spent about 45 minutes completing it. It came to my attention from a few of the homeroom teachers at Harper that there were some students who were interested in participating in the study but they were not randomly selected to do so. It seemed as though the exclusivity of my design for random selection of student participants was hurting my ability to build relationships within the school, as some students were confused about what I was doing and why. As such I went ahead and invited any student who was interested to participate in the study to take the survey. At this point it was clear to me that I would have to consider this attempt at data collection another "pilot" of my study, given the extremely low level of participation that I had been able to generate and the murky mess that my participant selection strategy had become. I realized that I had to re-think and re-strategize around how I would solicit participation for this study of student engagement. So, I scrapped the initial attempt at data collection and chalked it up to a "learning experience" in the process of conducting research with students in an urban school setting.

### **Second attempt at data collection at Harper: a new strategy.**

I realized that in order to get the interest of Harper students, I needed to communicate more clearly what the study's significance was and what kind of impact students could have on their school through their participation. I hit the "re-set" button on the study's data collection, and in March 2010, I debuted a campaign that I hoped would

generate school-wide excitement about the study and result in the participation of at least 40% of the student body.

The campaign began with a name for the study: “The VOICES Project.” In choosing this name I wanted to emphasize to Harper students that they would have the opportunity to share their stories and experiences of schooling at Harper through their participation in the study- this was their chance to be heard! I posted flyers around the school with information about “The VOICES Project” and its survey. I posted quotes on flyers in the hallways around the school about supporting one’s community, being a force for positive change, making a difference in the lives of others, and being a leader among peers, all followed by “The VOICES Project” logo.

I collaborated with one of the school’s counselors to work with each Advisory’s (or homeroom’s) selected leader. I gave each of these leaders a clipboard that they could decorate as they wished, with a roster of their classmates in their Advisory and information about “The VOICES Project.” I provided extra incentives and prizes for these leaders as they served as recruiters for the study and my liaisons in the classroom, distributing and collecting consent forms from their peers. I met with these leaders every Thursday morning for fifteen minutes (during Advisory) to share updates and hear about their progress with recruitment. Students were provided with breakfast during these meetings. In addition to serving a logistical purpose, these meetings also helped me get to know a core group of students, the majority of whom did participate in the study by completing the survey and recruiting their closest friends to participate as well.

Over the months of March, April, May, and June I decorated and updated weekly a large bulletin board in the school’s main hallway with the names of students who took

the survey. I thought it was important to recognize the students who had supported positive change at their school by sharing their feedback on the survey. Moreover, I believed that students' desire to see their names included on the bulletin board that most Harper students passed daily would be an additional incentive for their participation.

In order to further the inclusiveness of the project, I visited a class at Harper comprised of fifteen students with severe mental disabilities. I brought them breakfast of mini-muffins, juice, and fruit, and walked them through a survey of student engagement that I adapted to better meet their cognitive levels. Their classroom teacher, classroom assistant teacher, and I helped the students write their responses to questions such as their favorite and least favorite things about school. It was clear from the students' reactions to the survey and the teacher's feedback later that their inclusion in a school-wide initiative was enjoyed and appreciated.

### **Challenges Soliciting Volunteers for Study Participation**

Despite all of these efforts, however, only fifty-five students across grades 7-12 took the survey either during lunch or after school over the months of March – June 2010. I attributed the difficulty in generating student participation for the study to three particular factors that I describe in this section.

#### ***Consent forms.***

All students, as minors, were required to submit both parent/guardian consent forms and student assent forms in order to participate in the study. The school district's Research Review Committee required the *active consent* of the students and their guardians. This prevented me from distributing the survey to large groups of student

volunteers during their lunch periods because I had to collect signed consent and assent forms from students prior to their participation in the study.

***Voluntary participation.***

Because it is important that students' participation in the study is completely voluntary, I was not able to coordinate with classroom teachers (or the principal) in order to solicit study participation from entire classes of students. First, such an act on my part would have been intrusive to the students' learning time. Second, the students may have felt coerced to participate as a result of some type of unstated but potential pressure from their classroom teachers and/or their peers if they were to be solicited in their regular class periods.

***Incentives.***

Furthermore, it is important that students do not feel coerced to participate by the incentives offered to them for their involvement with the study. Also, because I was funding the study myself, the incentives that I could offer students for their participation in the study were modest. Students who returned the signed consent forms (whether or not they and their guardians had consented to their participation) received a free soft pretzel. Students who completed the survey either during lunch or after school were compensated for their time with snacks including pizza, juice drinks, chips, and cookies, and their names were entered into grade-level raffles for \$20 gift cards to Old Navy.

**The Decision to Move On**

As the 2009-2010 school year came to a close I felt that I had done my due diligence in pushing for students' participation in the survey because of its value as an instrument for the quantitative analysis of student engagement at Harper. In consultation

with my committee, I decided to adjust and amend the design of my study to include only the qualitative portions of the study, for which I would begin to collect data at the start of the 2010-2011 school year. This amended research design is what is described in detail in the body of Chapter 3.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

In this chapter I describe the context for this qualitative case study that explores student engagement: Harper Leadership Academy for Girls, an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. An understanding of the school context requires descriptions of the neighborhood in which Harper is located, the school's history, and the people who work and learn there, all of which will be provided in this chapter. An understanding of these aspects, in addition to explanations of the school's organizational structures, educational programming, students' past and present levels of achievement, and the climate, provide context for this study of student engagement at Harper. Finally, I conclude this chapter with descriptions of the four students who served as the study's key participants and describe how they are situated within the study's structure.

#### **Harper Leadership Academy for Girls: A Unique Place With a Special Mission**

I selected Harper Leadership Academy for Girls, an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school located in a large city on the East Coast, as the research site for this study because it is a non-selective single-sex public school whose graduation rate exceeds that of the other neighborhood high schools in the district. In a district in which the high school dropout rate averages forty-five percent (45%), Harper students graduate at a rate of ninety-seven percent (97%) and are accepted to attend 2- and 4-year colleges and universities at a rate of ninety-four percent (94%). Moreover, Harper was the only neighborhood high school of the twenty-six in the district to make Adequate Yearly Progress on the state assessment in 2009. This single-sex school's success is also atypical of the majority of single-sex schools that require tuition and/ or have a selective

admissions process because of the magnitude and breadth of the challenges that Harper students face in their educational pursuits. At Harper, students' previous academic shortcomings in elementary school, poverty, teen pregnancy, and the lack of parental involvement are formidable challenges to schooling on a daily basis. Despite the potential for these challenges to become insurmountable obstacles, the students at Harper have made tremendous academic gains not matched by their counterparts in the district's co-ed neighborhood schools.

The school's leadership sees Harper students' academic success as critical to interrupting the social reproduction of the neighborhood in which the school is located. Harper's founding and former Principal, Mrs. Wanda Leary, is from the neighborhood. She believes that an education at the all-girls Harper is transformative for students because it is a place where, through the school's interventions, they can re-imagine themselves and their futures. Mrs. Leary says, "We've seen how giving kids structure, expectations, and routines have changed girls – girls who didn't know they had that potential." It is atypical for young people from the Riverbend neighborhood, a low-income urban community, to graduate from high school, let alone college. The messages about college that students hear at Harper help facilitate educational outcomes for the girls that are not typically known to the young people from their community. By attending college, students can bring new social capital (and new economic capital upon their graduation) back to their neighborhood, which will help to interrupt the cycle of poverty that plagues it.

It is important to Mrs. Leary and Mrs. Stacy Attle, the school's current Principal, that Harper remains a "neighborhood" school within the district, meaning that it does not

become a magnet school with a selective admissions process. Though Harper's test scores could certainly be higher if the school only admitted students who demonstrated high standardized test scores and grades from their elementary and middle schools (as a result of the proacademic choice that Riordan (2002) describes), the entire ethos of the school would change. "We can't quantify what we have to offer [to girls from the neighborhood]" explains Mrs. Leary. She is adamant that as long as she remains employed as an administrator within the district she will fight to keep Harper's status as an all-girls *neighborhood* public school, ensuring that it remains non-selective and open to girls from the Riverbend neighborhood.

The school's most critical role, in the eyes of Mrs. Leary and Mrs. Attle, is its work to change the expectations and skills of the girls from the Riverbend neighborhood, many of whom may not have an awareness or appreciation of their own potential. "There are too many kids I know who never had seen college as a possibility for themselves; but now, after attending Harper, they do believe that they could go to college," says Mrs. Attle. If made a selective school, Harper would educate girls who already have the agency to identify what a college-prep single-sex education can offer them and who have the academic backgrounds to already make them elite within the district. Harper "allows the kids changed lives because the [single-sex] model did come through," Mrs. Leary asserts. She describes the difference that she sees between the girls who attend Harper and the girls who attend the co-educational neighborhood schools in the district as "how the girls carry themselves, how they look in school, their expectations of their teachers, and their expectations of themselves." She continues:

Most of the schools have no limits. The boys take over the room. It's a shame to see how ostracized the large girls are;

I think, “if ya’ll was at Harper you’d be okay.” Harper- it looks different; it feels different.

In addition to the potential positive effect that Harper’s all-girls model offers to individual students, it also has the ability to significantly interrupt the cycle of poverty plaguing the Riverbend neighborhood. Through educating the neighborhood’s young women, the school can prevent the social reproduction that currently occurs there.

Women are the backbone of the neighborhood; if a significant number of Riverbend’s young women are supported by Harper to attain a college degree, and the professional job and salary that accompany the credential, then the lifeblood of the community could be altered in tremendous ways. Riverbend, the neighborhood that most of Harper’s students call home, will be described in the next section.

### **The Riverbend Neighborhood: A Stable But Under-resourced Community**

Harper Leadership Academy for Girls is located in a low-income neighborhood named Riverbend; it is 2 square miles in area, and major thoroughfares to the north, west, and south, and a state highway to the east define its perimeters. Harper is bordered by a parking lot for staff and a cemetery to its immediate west, a recreation center and park to its south, the headquarters of one of the city’s public works to its east, and a mix of residential and commercial properties for two blocks to its north before reaching a major thoroughfare. Several public transit bus lines have stops on the street on which the school’s main entrance is located (on its east side). Small stores dot several of the corners in the neighborhood to the north and east of the school, where students sometimes stop for snacks on the way to and from school. To the school’s north there is a McDonald’s and a pizza restaurant, establishments frequented by many staff members for quick lunch pick-ups. Two auto repair shops, several small Christian churches, and a barbershop are

located on a side street north of the school at the end of the blocks of traditional brick rowhomes that make up the residences closest to the school. The rowhomes reflect a mix of community pride and despair, as many front porches display planters, benches, and wind chimes, while other homes have boarded-up doors and windows.

The Riverbend neighborhood is described in a 2003 city redevelopment plan as a “stable and viable residential area.” The report describes the strengths of the Riverbend neighborhood as “high homeownership, good highway access, bus and train service, and several recreation facilities.” It is home to nearly 18,000 people, most of whom identify as African American. Residents live in single-family rowhomes that were constructed in the 1900s “when factories were built along major streets or railroad tracks and worker housing was constructed on the narrower immediate streets.” Riverbend has been the proud recipient of many affordable home-ownership programs and commercial revitalization programs. It has a strong community-based business association with a membership that includes over 150 local companies (citation withheld to protect the anonymity of the study’s research site).

Information from the city’s database reveals that the median household income of Riverbend residents is \$27,797; this is \$10,000 less than the city’s average (as of 2009). Fewer than ten percent (10%) of the neighborhood’s residents have attained an Associate’s degree or higher, compared to the city’s average of twenty percent (20%). The service industry employs most of the men living in the Riverbend neighborhood (26.6%). Most women (38.5%) are in sales or office occupations. Thirty-one and a half percent (31.5%) of the neighborhood’s residents live below the poverty line (citation withheld to protect the anonymity of the study’s research site).

The neighborhood has struggled with vacant houses, lots, and buildings and a high level of tax delinquency. Property values in the Riverbend area are low; the average estimated value of the area's rowhomes is \$33,517 compared to the city's average of \$65,271. Blight is evident in the conditions of over 4,000 properties, which "has a deteriorating effect on the neighborhood." A public records search indicates that there have been 73 crimes reported in the Riverbend neighborhood in the last four years; the most common crimes in this area are burglary (27%), theft (13%), vehicle theft (21%), aggravated assault (15%), robbery (11%), rape (1%), and homicide (1%) (citation withheld to protect the anonymity of the study's research site).

Because Harper is a district school that enrolls girls in grades 7-12 and Abbott Leadership Academy for Boys is its equivalent for boys, the two schools enroll students from the five elementary (K-6) schools who reside in the two schools' catchment areas. (Abbott is located about one mile away from Harper.) This area is unusually large within the district, and students from the catchment area, or neighborhood, may potentially live over 2 miles away from their school. The district provides free public bus transportation for students who live over 1.5 miles away from school; other students must walk, get rides from family members or friends, or pay their own bus fare. While some students live in other areas of the city and attend Harper following a transfer to the school, the vast majority of students live in the Riverbend neighborhood. This description of the Riverbend neighborhood and its residents has provided the context in which Harper is situated geographically and socially.

## **Harper's History**

Harper's establishment as an all-girls urban neighborhood public school is deeply embedded in the education reform efforts of this large East Coast city's school district. In this section I describe how Harper Middle School changed in name, identity, student composition, and programming to become Harper Leadership Academy for Girls.

### **Becoming "All-Girls"**

In 2002 the school district of a large city on the East Coast granted management purview to an Education Management Organization (EMO), EduNation, for seven schools; of those, two elementary schools and two middle schools were located in the Riverbend neighborhood of the city. The middle schools, Harper Middle School and Abbott Middle School, were two of the district's poorest-performing schools before their takeover by EduNation. Little to no learning took place in either building; students had the complete run of the schools. According to Harper staff members who were employed at Abbott during those years, the most difficult students ran in and out of classrooms, set fires in the hallways, and busted vending machines. Others braided hair and jumped rope in classrooms, listened to music, and talked with friends throughout the entire school day. There were no rules, just chaos.

The district's agreement with EduNation in 2002 required that the EMO reconstitute its elementary schools as K-6 schools (they had previously been K-5 schools) and that the middle schools (Harper and Abbott) be expanded into high schools to serve students in grades 7-12. This meant that as of the 2003-2004 school year neither Harper nor Abbott would enroll 6<sup>th</sup> graders and both schools would keep their middle school students for enrollment through the high school grades.

For the 2003-2004 school year, in accordance with its educational philosophy, EduNation separated the students in one of its middle school buildings, Abbott, by gender. Abbott had two sets of administrators and two sets of teachers- a set for the girls' side of the building and a set for the boys' side of the building. Abbott operated with this model for the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years, with the school serving both boys and girls but in gender-separate sides of its building. In order to facilitate its plans for transforming the culture and achievement of both Abbott and Harper, in 2005 EduNation began to implement its plans to educate students from both schools in single-sex buildings. (The school district was aware that EduNation would likely convert the schools to single-sex schools in its efforts to reform them when it granted EduNation the contract to manage Harper, Abbott, and five other district schools in 2002.)

EduNation held several meetings in Spring 2005 with the Riverbend community in order to share its plans to convert Abbott from a host for a gender-separate school to one that was completely single-sex, and Harper from co-ed to single-sex. The meetings served to inform the community about the plans to convert the neighborhood schools- not to seek feedback or ask for consent. However, there was little opposition voiced by the community because of the district's support for EduNation's management and the eagerness of the community for some kind of change in the unruly and poor-performing schools. It was confirmed in summer 2005 that the girls at Abbott would move to join the girls at Harper in Harper's building and the boys from Harper would move to Abbott to join its boys there for the 2005-2006 academic year.

The Principal of the girls at Abbott, Mrs. Wanda Leary, was asked to assume the role of Principal at Harper, and she agreed because she was eager to stay with her girls.

Mrs. Leary concedes that she would not have done anything differently in her organization and leadership of the school had she been with the boys at Abbott, as she's "always been good with teenagers." However, she felt a "major connection" with the girls because she can "relate more to girls because I'm one of them. I grew up in the neighborhood and went to school with their mothers."

## **Transforming a School**

### **Learning from the past.**

Much of what informed Mrs. Leary's plans for Harper's transformation was framed by her experience as the Principal of the girls' side of Abbott the year before. She recalls that on her first day as Principal of the girls at Abbott "everyone was fighting," and she told the teachers to bring all of the students to the auditorium. Students ran in, jumping over chairs; Mrs. Leary grabbed one girl to break up a fight, and she was told by the student to "get the f#\*@ off me." "*Lean On Me* had nothin' on this [school]," says Mrs. Leary. Once the students were mostly seated and somewhat quiet, Mrs. Leary told them about the changes that would occur at their school under her leadership. She recalls that a student named Bianca Williams raised her hand during the assembly and asked, "Why you keep calling this a school? This ain't no school!" The sentiment shared by Bianca was underscored by the lack of teaching and learning that Mrs. Leary observed across Abbott's school building. Instead of places for academic instruction, classrooms had become "braiding rooms," where girls would braid hair, and play yards where teachers would push back the desks and students would jump rope. The highly volatile situation eventually calmed, according to Mrs. Leary, because she had decided to "focus only on that- make it a school." She says:

[I knew] it was about loving the children, hugging them, talking with them... [The students] knew that I wasn't going to give in- there was a core of us committed to making it a school... I wasn't scared of them. I grew up in the neighborhood; my grandmother lived across the street.

In addition to instituting non-negotiables for student behavior, Mrs. Leary planned school-wide programs such as dances and parties to generate a sense of school pride and celebrate students' achievement in the classroom. She shut down the former classroom activities of braiding, jumping rope and playing jacks by holding teachers accountable for lesson planning and teaching. "I had different expectations for the teachers, which started to change students' expectations [for their school]," Mrs. Leary shares.

The central tenets of Mrs. Leary's leadership as Principal of Abbott were (1) the creation of a safe environment for learning through implementation and enforcement of non-negotiable rules and their consequences, (2) the establishment of a focus on academic instruction for teachers and academic growth for students, and (3) and the facilitation of caring relationships among students and teachers. Mrs. Leary transferred these same tenets into her approach to the school transformation at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls, when she assumed its leadership just prior to the 2005-2006 school year.

#### **Assuming a new identity.**

With the knowledge that both Abbott and Harper had been consistently failing and chaotic schools in which little learning had taken place, Mrs. Leary and her staff set out to focus on changing the expectations that the schools' girls (and their guardians) would have at the new all-girls school. They began by selecting a name that would garner students' pride and others' respect: "Harper Leadership Academy for Girls." During the summer of 2005, a group of staff members (mostly those who had transferred from

Abbott with Mrs. Leary) developed the school's mission and vision statements (below) and its motto: "Learn Today. Lead Tomorrow."

*The Vision of Harper Leadership Academy for Girls*

Harper Leadership Academy for Girls will prepare students for college, careers, and active participation in the community. Every student at Harper will graduate in four years at the proficient or advanced level. Every student will graduate from a post secondary institute, become a life-long learner and dedicate themselves to the improvement of their lives, family and communities.

*The Mission of Harper Leadership Academy for Girls*

The mission of the students, staff and community of Harper Leadership Academy for Girls is to pursue our vision by:

- Providing academically rigorous instruction in preparation for post- secondary education
- Encouraging students to set goals and high expectations for themselves
- Teaching students how to create and execute an action plan to effectively pursue their goals
- Stimulating intellectual curiosity to become a life-long learner
- Creating a safe and nurturing environment for students from a range of backgrounds
- Preparing students to be competitive in a continually developing technological world
- Providing students with the skills to participate actively and constructively in society
- Fostering positive character development
- Encouraging students to maintain their own physical, mental, and emotional health
- Teaching and encouraging students to set high goals and expectations leading to the achievement of goals.

At the time that these emblems of the school's identity were created, the staff members who participated in their development believed that it was important for Harper students (and their guardians) to have high expectations for students' academic success. They needed to re-imagine not only what their school could look like, but what their futures could hold.

When planning for Harper's re-opening in Fall 2005, Mrs. Leary wanted the students at Harper to "stand out" among other students in the district: "I thought in terms of a private girls' school- what made them stand out? It was the uniform." The girls who attended Harper and Abbott prior to Harper's transition to all-girls had never worn a uniform before. At their new school, students were required to wear a yellow polo shirt with the school's logo embroidered on it and a gray skirt or pants. "They looked beautiful," reflects Mrs. Leary. Students' adherence to the school's dress code was a "non-negotiable," a term that Mrs. Leary coined for the school rules that were not up for debate or interpretation. Mrs. Leary explains that she "never allowed rags or flip-flops... we had to get rid of the slave-like mentality... they had to look different in their own mind."

However, it was "crazy" and "hard" to implement this school uniform policy because it was met with opposition. Community members whose daughters were to attend the newly reconstituted school in the Fall called their Congresspeople to try to stop its implementation. Mrs. Leary recalls thinking, "if we lose on the uniform, we'll lose on everything else." Mrs. Leary stuck to her conviction despite the pressure to back down. She ultimately persevered in having a mandated dress code for the students who would attend the Harper Leadership Academy for Girls. "We are working on [Harper] being a different school- old people [from the neighborhood] can't fathom it being a different school," acknowledges Mrs. Leary. The community's resistance to the mandated uniform policy signaled to Mrs. Leary and her staff that their conceptualization of 'school' varied greatly from the community's, and Harper students, who live in this community, may also be resistant to a new idea of 'school.'

### **Preparing for a new start.**

In preparation for the move to Harper, Mrs. Leary sent Abbott staff members to visit the building and report back to her about its condition when the 2004-2005 school year ended in June. It was apparent that there had been people, whether staff or students, who did not approve of EduNation's merging of the girls from Abbott and Harper at Harper the following year, as the building was in a disastrous state. Books littered the floors everywhere across the building; desks were overturned; bulletin boards were ripped down. It was so bad, in fact, that Mrs. Leary's staff members returned to Abbott and told her that not only should she not go see Harper, but that it might not be possible to utilize the building at all, let alone transform it in time for the start of the new school year.

It was clear that with only months before Harper's reopening as an all-girls school, there was a tremendous amount of work that needed to be done in order to beautify the building and make it conducive for learning. It was "all hands on deck" for the school's leadership team that summer, who worked around the clock in preparation for Harper's re-opening. Mrs. Leary even hired children from the neighborhood to pick up the strewn books from off of the floors, a prerequisite for the unionized custodial staff's agreement to clean the building. According to Mrs. Leary, the transformation of the space that had been "Harper Middle School" into the space that would house "Harper Leadership Academy for Girls" would not have been possible without the financial and operational support of the Education Partnership for Young Women or EPYW, a national network that supports single-sex public schooling. This organization had been a partner in the education of the girls' side at Abbott and partnered with Harper in its transition to a

single-sex school. Funds donated by the EPYW paid for the building to be painted, the library to be stocked with books, computers to be available in the labs, textbooks to be purchased, and additional staff members to be hired.

In addition to addressing the needs of the building and remaking it into a pleasant learning environment, Mrs. Leary also had to recruit a teaching staff for the 2005-2006 school year at Harper. Many of the teachers who had worked for Mrs. Leary on the girls' side at Abbott had agreed to move to Harper with her; however, most of Harper's former staff had decided not to return to Harper to work for her the following year. Of the teachers opted to stay at Harper, several were forced out by Mrs. Leary once she evaluated their teaching records. (Only 5 teachers currently remain at Harper from before its transition to all-girls in Fall 2005.) Teachers affiliated with alternative certification programs such as Teach For America and The New Teacher Project filled many of the school's remaining vacancies for the 2005-2006 school year.

### **Growing pains.**

School staff members who were present during Harper Leadership Academy for Girls' inaugural year, the 2005-2006 school year, describe it as "rough." Mrs. Leary's expectations, both behavioral and academic, were very different than the ones the Harper girls had experienced the year before under Harper Middle School's administration. Mrs. Leary had extremely well defined systems, rules, and consequences with which to start the school year in Fall 2005; however, it took that entire year and some of the second for the girls to begin to acclimate to each other and to the expectations of their new school. Anticipating that challenges with the neighborhood rivalry between the Harper girls and Abbott girls would come into play, EduNation held counseling sessions at both schools

prior to Harper's transition, and the sessions continued for two years afterwards. "We knew it'd be an all-out brawl. It went on for two years! 'Harper girl.' 'Abbott girl.' The students fought constantly. Their parents fought constantly. I never thought they'd stop," recalls Mrs. Leary.

Moreover, the girls from Abbott, who were used to Mrs. Leary's expectations, made the situation more challenging rather than less so. They reverted back somewhat to their old behaviors and ideas about school that they had experienced at Abbott prior to Mrs. Leary's tenure. They had seen the fun the Harper girls were having doing whatever they wanted and they got "sucked into" the drama of their previous rivalry. They, too, had to be coached into the expectations of Mrs. Leary and her staff at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls. "The Abbott girls weren't reformed enough to be a positive influence on the Harper girls," remembers Mrs. Attle, who was an 8<sup>th</sup> grade Literacy and Social Studies teacher at Harper that year.

The structure of the school was drastically different than what the students and staff of Harper Middle School had grown accustomed to; students would previously be "coming and going as they pleased" to school and class. However, Mrs. Leary's 'non-negotiables,' and the swiftness with which she enforced them, provided a structure for the school that emphasized appropriate behavior for learning. The staff, too, was split, Mrs. Attle recalls, with a "camp of Leary supporters and [a camp of] nay-sayers on staff." According to Mrs. Leary, it took the entire duration of that school year, and some of the next, for the majority of the students and staff to adjust to the new expectations at Harper.

The seniors in the graduating Class of 2010 were the last students to have had experienced schooling at either Harper or Abbott before Harper's transition to all-girls;

they were 6<sup>th</sup> graders during the 2003-2004 school year. These girls have a unique perspective on the growing pains and successes related to the academic gains and social culture of the school throughout its transformation over their time at Harper. I had the opportunity to conduct a focus group with seven members of the Class of 2010 prior to their graduation from Harper in June. While only one of these seniors had been a student at Harper before its transition to all-girls and the inclusion of Abbott's girls, all were able to recognize and comment on the school's transformation over the previous four or five years. Holly began school at Harper when she was a 5<sup>th</sup> grader and it was still a middle school. She had this to say about how Harper changed over her years there:

Harper did change. I think if it would have stayed the same how it was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade... I think the school would have went down because it was just a bunch of play. We did whatever we wanted. It was really out of control. School was so fun. I used to wake up like 'I can't wait to go to school.' School was really banging. [But] I wasn't focused...

Holly shares that while school was fun when it was chaotic, she did not learn very much. She recognizes that she would not have been successful academically if changes had not occurred as a result of the school's transition to Harper Leadership Academy for Girls.

In this section I have described Harper Leadership Academy for Girls' history and its transformation from a coeducational middle school into an all-girls 7-12 school that is located in a large urban public school district on the East Coast of the U.S. This background knowledge starts to build the context of the school in advance of the exploration of student engagement that is presented in the next chapter. The section that follows offers an overview of the academic achievement of Harper students since the school's transformation in 2005.

### Academic Achievement at Harper

The academic achievement of the students at Harper has grown over the past five years since the school's turnaround began with its transformation to an all-girls school in 2005. In spring 2006, when Harper students first took the state's annual assessment, an average of 3% of students in grades 7, 8, and 11 scored proficient or advanced.<sup>8</sup> The percentage of students in grades 7, 8, and 11 who scored proficient or advanced on the test five years later, in Spring 2010, was fifty percent (50%). Table 4.1 captures the average percentile of scores earned by students in the tested grades at Harper on the state assessment for the last five years.

Table 4.1.

*Percentage of Harper Students Who Scored 'Proficient' or 'Advanced' on the State*

*Assessment Over the School's 5-year History*

	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
7 <sup>th</sup> grade Math	37%	19%	32%	51%	58%
7 <sup>th</sup> grade Reading	35%	16%	33%	29%	53%
8 <sup>th</sup> grade Math	10%	30%	28%	46%	61%
8 <sup>th</sup> grade Reading	23%	40%	39%	52%	57%
11 <sup>th</sup> grade Math	4%	6%	3%	15%	29%
11 <sup>th</sup> grade Reading	11%	21%	13%	37%	38%

There are two ways in which to read the data provided in the table. One can view the scores year to year across the same grade level and one can view the scores from year to year across the same groups of students tested. The cells in the table that are the same color represent the same groups of students tested across their years in the tested grades

<sup>8</sup> In the state in which Harper is located, students take the state assessment in grades 3 through 8 and in grade 11.

at the school. In other words, the 7<sup>th</sup> graders who took the state assessment in Spring 2006 (whose average percentile score is highlighted in yellow) were the 8<sup>th</sup> graders who took the state assessment in Spring 2007 (also highlighted in yellow) and again as 11<sup>th</sup> graders in Spring 2010 (also highlighted in yellow).

When looking at the overall growth in scores at each grade level, from the 2005-2006 school year to the 2009-2010 school year, one can see that Harper's students' scores have grown between 21-51% in math and 18-34% in reading in five years. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade math scores have grown the most significantly and the 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores have grown the most modestly. The scores from the 2009-2010 state assessment are the highest in the school's five-year history, which indicates that the school has become stronger in its instructional program since its transition to all-girls in 2005. In each year from 2006-2007 through 2009-2010, students' scores improved by 9-14% in math and 19-28% in reading between their 7<sup>th</sup> grade year and their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year. One can also observe that the 11<sup>th</sup> graders' scores are the lowest in the school annually, and the 11<sup>th</sup> graders scored lower when tested in 2009-2010 than they did when tested as 8<sup>th</sup> graders in 2006-2007.

Table 4.2 compares the academic success of Harper students with that of students from other neighborhood schools in the district. These other schools have student populations similar to Harper's in terms of their students' racial and ethnic backgrounds and free and reduced-price lunch status, and the percentage of students who receive special education services and are English Language Learners. The data included in the table are the mean percentages of students who scored 'proficient' or 'advanced' on the state assessment in particular grades and subject areas over the past five years.

Table 4. 2.

*Percentage of Harper Students That Scored 'Proficient' or 'Advanced' on the State**Assessment Compared to Students at Comparable District Schools and the District**Average*

School Name	Current Student Enrollment	Grade & Subject	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
<b>District Avg.</b>	<i>n/a</i>	<b>11<sup>th</sup> Math</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>37%</b>
		<b>11<sup>th</sup> Rdg.</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>43%</b>
Harper (7-12)	574 (all-girls)	11 <sup>th</sup> Math	4%	6%	3%	15%	29%
		11 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	11%	21%	13%	37%	38%
Abbott (7-12)	375 (all-boys)	11 <sup>th</sup> Math	3%	5%	4%	12%	13%
		11 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	3%	5%	10%	12%	6%
Gifford	1100	11 <sup>th</sup> Math	26%	31%	7%	13%	9%
		11 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	26%	24%	8%	12%	11%
Green	850	11 <sup>th</sup> Math	13%	8%	11%	9%	9%
		11 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	20%	14%	13%	12%	15%
Drake	800	11 <sup>th</sup> Math	4%	13%	20%	18%	26%
		11 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	13%	21%	17%	30%	37%
Roper	350	11 <sup>th</sup> Math	5%	27%	15%	23%	21%
		11 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	12%	25%	37%	18%	28%
Oliver (8-12)	1500	11 <sup>th</sup> Math	9%	14%	15%	13%	16%
		11 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	15%	23%	21%	15%	25%
Randall	650	11 <sup>th</sup> Math	21%	24%	12%	9%	6%
		11 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	32%	28%	24%	12%	19%
Eastern	1100	11 <sup>th</sup> Math	6%	9%	6%	6%	19%
		11 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	18%	13%	21%	15%	21%
<b>District Avg.</b>	<i>n/a</i>	<b>8<sup>th</sup> Math</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>55%</b>
		<b>8<sup>th</sup> Rdg.</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>67%</b>
Harper (7-12)	574 (all-girls)	8 <sup>th</sup> Math	10%	30%	28%	46%	61%
		8 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	23%	40%	39%	52%	57%
Abbott (7-12)	375 (all-boys)	8 <sup>th</sup> Math	10%	15%	25%	20%	21%
		8 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	10%	20%	23%	18%	34%
Hayes (7-8)	385	8 <sup>th</sup> Math	13%	26%	25%	39%	76%*
		8 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	33%	35%	28%	60%	82%*
Stevens (7-8)	225	8 <sup>th</sup> Math	27%	32%	58%	41%	39%
		8 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	31%	32%	45%	33%	38%
<b>District Avg.</b>	<i>n/a</i>	<b>7<sup>th</sup> Math</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>57%</b>
		<b>7<sup>th</sup> Rdg.</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>53%</b>
Harper (7-12)	574 (all-girls)	7 <sup>th</sup> Math	37%	19%	32%	51%	58%
		7 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	35%	16%	33%	29%	53%
Abbott (7-12)	375 (all-boys)	7 <sup>th</sup> Math	10%	11%	33%	25%	31%
		7 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	9%	7%	12%	11%	9%
Hayes (7-8)	385	7 <sup>th</sup> Math	17%	22%	25%	49%	77%*
		7 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	27%	29%	28%	53%	73%*
Stevens (7-8)	225	7 <sup>th</sup> Math	20%	34%	35%	37%	46%
		7 <sup>th</sup> Rdg.	30%	37%	44%	46%	52%

As one can see in Table 4.2, Harper's 11<sup>th</sup> graders scored below the district average on the last state assessment taken in Spring 2010, but they scored above the 11<sup>th</sup> graders in the other comparable neighborhood high schools. Harper's 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored above the district average in Math but below the average in Reading. Students at Hayes Middle School, who represent a demographic similar to that at Harper, scored significantly higher than Harper's 8<sup>th</sup> graders, though students at Abbott and Stevens scored lower than those at Harper. Harper's 7<sup>th</sup> graders scored right at the district average in both reading and math; they had higher scores than all of the comparable middle schools, except for Hayes. (\*Hayes is currently being investigated by the district and the state for potential cheating on the state assessment, which may account for students' high scores.)

### **Discipline at Harper**

Over the last five years, Harper has struggled with discipline issues similar to those observed at other district neighborhood high schools: truancy, tardiness, class cutting, school ditching, and bullying. The girls at Harper get in trouble for fighting, disrespecting teachers and other school staff, and defying school directives. While student participants in this study believe that there are fewer fights than there have been in previous years and that there are fewer fights at Harper than occur at co-ed neighborhood schools, they admit that the fights occur regularly and are violent. It has proven difficult for school leaders to change some students' beliefs that it is acceptable or advantageous to handle conflict with violence.

Penalties for various infractions can result in detentions held by a teacher after school (for being late to class, missing an assignment, or not following the teacher's

directions during class), detentions held by the school counselors for an hour after school (for being late to school, missing a teacher's detention, or dress code violations), or suspensions (for failure to comply with the non-negotiables related to violence and profanity, and for repeated violations of the dress code). Students can receive an in-school suspension or an out-of-school suspension for 1-5 days at a time; a suspended student must bring a guardian to school to meet with an administrator before she is 'reinstated' (allowed to return to her classes). Mrs. Attle explains that there are 3 or fewer fights per month and that every year the number of fights at Harper drops. There are 30-50 students late to school everyday (consequences are enforced after 8:12am) and an average of 3-10 students are on suspension on any given day, though the range is difficult to determine given the various durations of the suspensions.

During the 2009-2010 school year, Harper students served over 250 out-of-school suspensions. This number was an increase over the 2008-2009 school year, in which approximately 160 out-of-school suspensions were served, and an increase over the 2007-2008 year in which 175 were served. (Possible explanations for this spike in suspensions will be explored in later chapters.) The district tracks the numbers and types of serious incidents reported by the school annually; data from the last three school years are available and have been included in Table 4.3 on the next page. The figures included in the table indicate that the number of serious incidents reported to the district increased last year from the year before. It is unclear whether the actual number of serious incidents increased, the number of incidents discovered at Harper increased, or the number of incidents reported to the district increased. Mrs. Attle clarifies that the number of serious incidents the year before Harper's transition to all-girls was 110 and that the figure for

the 2010-2011 year (as of March 2011) is 10. Regardless, it is clear that Harper has had students exhibit some serious behavior issues in recent years, especially related to the number of assaults and weapons in the school.

Table 4.3.

*The Numbers and Types of Serious Incidents at Harper Over the Last Three Years*

Serious Incident	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
Assault	9	2	5
Drugs	0	1	1
Morals	0	0	0
Weapons	5	2	7
Theft	0	0	1

Through the descriptions of students' achievement and discipline at Harper in this section, I have aimed to provide the reader with a general sense of the school's culture. In the next section, I will describe particular organizational structures at Harper that provide further context of this institution that is committed to the academic and social development of young women.

### **The Organizational Structure of Harper**

There are two key features of Harper's organizational structure that drive everyone and everything that happens on a daily basis: the school's non-negotiables for student behavior and its Big Goals for student achievement. Because both will be referenced on numerous occasions throughout this chapter and the next, I will introduce them briefly here.

#### **'Non-negotiables' for Student Behavior**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Mrs. Leary instituted non-negotiables for student behavior when Harper Leadership Academy for Girls opened with girls in grades

7-11 in Fall 2005. By coining the term ‘non-negotiables,’ Mrs. Leary intended to communicate to students, parents, and staff what behaviors would absolutely not be tolerated from the students at Harper. Students’ adherence to the ‘non-negotiable’ rules would facilitate the creation of a safe learning environment at Harper (they remain as the school’s rules today). They are included in the student handbook, of which a copy is given to every student at one of the six grade-level assemblies on the first day of school. At each of these assemblies, the Principal (Mrs. Leary through the 2009-2010 school year and Mrs. Attle this year) instructs students to sit in “every other seat.” She begins the assembly by welcoming the students to Harper and telling them that they will all be preparing for college while in school at Harper. Either Mrs. Leary or Mrs. Attle, in her role as Principal, introduces key members of the school’s administration, and then proceeds to review the non-negotiables:

- (1) Students must wear their uniforms and ID Badge everyday. Students are not permitted to wear jeans.
- (2) No profanity allowed! Students must not curse at peers, teachers, or any staff member at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls.
- (3) Physical and verbal violence will not be tolerated in school, on the way to school, or on the way home from school.
- (4) Inciting riots by screaming, running or pushing in classrooms or hallways is not allowed.
- (5) Students are not allowed to leave the building without permission.
- (6) No loitering in the halls or use of forbidden stairwells.

Students are forewarned that all staff members will strictly enforce the rules and that violations will result in immediate disciplinary action. Following the principal’s explanation of each non-negotiable, she offers clarifications about the rules and/or the consequences for their violations (usually suspensions) and answers students’ questions. “If it looks like jeans or feels like jeans, they’re jeans!” Mrs. Leary told the girls in relation to non-negotiable number one during the first-day assemblies in September 2009.

Students new to Harper stared at Mrs. Leary as she led the assembly, completely stunned by this powerhouse of a woman who captivated the attention of the students in the auditorium with her commanding presence and booming voice. It was clear that Mrs. Leary meant business when she introduced the non-negotiables. Mrs. Attle followed the same protocol as Mrs. Leary for the first-day assemblies at the start of the 2010-2011 school year. She shared a similar message with the students: “You are all going to college. We have a lot of work to do. I’m going to be honest with you and communicate the expectations by reviewing the rules here at Harper.” She instructed the students to turn to page 21 in their student handbooks, where the non-negotiables were listed. In introducing them, Mrs. Attle said, “These are our non-negotiable rules... there is no debating this. You must adhere to these or you may be suspended.” A glance around the room at the new 7<sup>th</sup> graders in their light-blue shirts led one to believe that many of the school’s youngest students were not phased or alarmed by Harper’s rules because of their inattentive demeanors; they stared blankly at Mrs. Attle or at their peers around the room, while teachers prodded students who had nodded off to wake up.

### **‘Big Goals’ for Student Achievement**

Harper Leadership Academy for Girls’ administration annually develops ‘Big Goals’ to guide the academic direction of the school throughout the year. The Big Goals are referenced regularly in conversations among teachers and administrators and between teachers and students. The Big Goals for the 2010-2011 school year at Harper are grade-level specific (see Table 4.4), and they establish targets for students’ academic growth beyond their achievement from the previous school year. The goals for students in grades 7, 8, and 11 are based on growth in reading and math on the state assessment for each of

those grades. The goals for students in grades 9 and 10 are based on school-based programs and interventions in preparation for the state assessment in a subsequent year of schooling. The 12<sup>th</sup> grade goal is focused on students' acceptance into college.

Table 4.4.

*The 'Big Goals' for Harper Students' Academic Performance (2010-2011)*

7 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>
65% Proficiency on State Reading Assessment	70% Proficiency on State Reading Assessment	80% Proficiency on Guided Group Tracking Post Tests	80% Proficiency on Guided Group Tracking Post Tests	55% Proficiency on State Reading Assessment	100% acceptance to a 4-year university
70% Proficiency on State Math Assessment	75% Proficiency on State Math Assessment	Reading and Math	Reading and Math	40% Proficiency on State Math Assessment	

The non-negotiables at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls articulate to students the expectations for their behavior at school; the Big Goals communicate to students the expectations for their academic achievement over the course of the school year. Both frameworks have a tremendous impact on everyday happenings at Harper. Posters outlining each framework hang in every classroom and in many hallways throughout Harper's building. School administrators and teachers refer to the non-negotiables in conversations with students about their behavior as often as they refer to the Big Goals in conversations with students about the academic goal they work towards in each of their classes. The effectiveness of these frameworks in facilitating students' engagement in their learning will be explored in Chapter 5.

## **Special Programs**

Throughout their participation in this study, students mentioned several special programs at Harper that contribute to their engagement in school. In order for the reader to understand students' comments about these programs when they are shared in Chapter 5, I present some background information on them here.

### **The 'Institutes.'**

In accordance with the district's Career and Technical Education (CTE) programming, every 9<sup>th</sup> grade student at Harper should be able to select an Institute that grounds her instruction in a technical field during her 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade years at the school. The idea is that the girls at Harper should be able to choose the Institute in the CTE area of highest interest to them, and after two years of coursework in this area they receive a certificate that indicates their eligibility for entry-level work in that field.

The school's difficulty in finding CTE-certified teachers, former professionals in the field who have undergone rigorous educational training, has limited the course offerings available to Harper students, and therefore, the extent to which students are able to participate in the program looks different now than it did at its inception. When the school was reconstituted in 2005 as an all-girls school that would include the high school grades, it developed three 'Institutes' based on the areas of expertise of three of its teachers: (1) Business/Accounting, (2) Architecture, and (3) Early Childhood Education (ECE). These were the three 'Institutes' offered at the school until the ECE teacher left at the end of the 2009-2010 school year. Because not all of Harper's students can be accommodated in the classes of the two remaining 'Institutes,' coordinated by the school's only two CTE-certified teachers, Institute coursework is now considered elective

coursework for 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> graders. Students are invited to participate in either the Business/Accounting Institute or the Architecture Institute based on the potential they demonstrate for math on the state standardized assessment and in their coursework.

**‘Advanced Placement’ (AP) courses.**

Harper Leadership Academy for Girls offers three AP courses as of the 2010-2011 school year: (1) U.S. History, (2) Calculus, and (3) Literature. These are the first three AP courses that have been offered at Harper in the school’s five-year history. Mrs. Sanders, a 3<sup>rd</sup>-year teacher who has taught at Harper since finishing her education degree (which she pursued after a short career in sales), teaches the AP U.S. History course, in addition to three “regular” U.S. History classes. Mrs. Sanders explains how Harper came to offer the AP courses:

I was approached at the end of last year by Mrs. Attle, and she asked me if I would be interested. She told me that I could choose from a number of history courses, and I chose U.S. History... I’m a big history nerd so I thought it would be fun, and I also thought [that] since it’s the first time that I would be teaching it and it’s a subject I’m familiar with, because I know that taking on an AP course load would be a lot.

As for what the AP courses mean for the school’s programming, she explains, “it’s just challenging our students more and taking it to that next level of high expectations and getting 100% of our girls to go to college.”

Mrs. Sanders goes on to explain that three pieces of criteria are used in the selection of the students who are invited to enroll in the AP courses: (1) previous teachers’ recommendations, (2) the recommendation of Harper’s Roster Chair (who is intimately familiar with students’ academic records), and (3) the students’ potential to succeed with the course material as indicated by their PSSA scores in particular content

areas. As for how she mimics college-level work in the AP U.S. History course that she teaches, Mrs. Sanders asserts:

[Students] are expected to do a lot more outside of school. They have a weekly reading assignment from the textbook. They read 2 chapters a week and they complete an outline and key terms and that kind of thing... also, they're reading a novel outside of class. Right now, they're reading Uncle Tom's Cabin. In class, it's a lot more lecture and note taking and really like college level. There's a lot of analysis...

Mr. Kyle Landen, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year teacher who taught at Harper last year, currently teaches the AP Calculus class. He is a former engineer who entered the education field through The New Teacher Project's alternative certification program. In addition to teaching Physics at Harper, he teaches an AP Calculus course to a class of 5 students (all 12<sup>th</sup> graders) during the 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> period instructional blocks. Mr. Landen explains that there are more students than the five enrolled who could take the AP Calculus course, as they are strong in math, but they are seniors who need an art credit in order to graduate. Mr. Eric Jones is a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year teacher who is in his 2<sup>nd</sup> year of teaching English to 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders at Harper. He graduated from a teacher education program at a local university before accepting an English teaching position at Harper. He teaches the AP Literature course in which there are twelve seniors enrolled; they all scored Advanced on the 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSA for Reading. It is expected that all three teachers' students will take the AP exams for the AP course(s) in which they are enrolled, and all of the students will most likely qualify to take the exams for free because of the school's Title I status.

### **'College Pathways.'**

One of Harper's hallmark features as a neighborhood high school in the district is its college counseling and programming office. This office is largely supported financially and operationally by the Education Partnership for Young Women (EPYW)

and it is charged with planning a college-bound curriculum for Harper students in grades 7-12. On their first day at Harper, as either 7<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> graders, students hear phrases such as “Smart girls go to Harper” and are given t-shirts with the year of their college graduating class. They are told that Harper students go to college after their graduation from high school, and students’ enthusiasm for this prospect is ignited by word of college trips, campus visits from college representatives, an annual college fair, and the resources of the College Pathways office at Harper. The school’s messages about attending college are strong and frequent. A large bulletin board in the school’s main hallway between the “A” and “D” wings of the building features the number of college acceptances and the amount of scholarship money awarded to students in each of the previous graduating classes. Harper’s college acceptance rate is a source of pride for the school, its staff, and its students.

Seniors are told at their orientation prior to the first day of school that they are required to submit a FAFSA application, take the SAT, apply for admittance into at least ten colleges or universities, and apply for at least five scholarships. Mrs. Melissa Gramercy, the College Pathways counselor supports students throughout the entire process. She meets with the seniors daily to guide them through the college admissions process so that by the time they graduate in June, all of them have been admitted into college. The College Pathways ‘suite’ in the ‘Upper A’ wing of Harper’s building is the command center of Mrs. Gramercy’s efforts. Each senior has a mailbox in the suite so that Mrs. Gramercy can leave paperwork for her to pick up and bring home for review with her parents/guardians. The college representatives who visit Harper to share about their schools with the seniors have small information sessions in the suite. College

guidebooks stuff the suite's bookshelves, and college brochures, pamphlets, and view books are catalogued in alphabetical order in filing cabinet drawers for students to peruse during lunch or after-school.

Most students who attend Harper will be first-generation college students (84% of the members of Harper's Class of 2010 were the first in their families to attend college). 96% of the students in Harper's Class of 2010 (43 of 45) were accepted into college. As of graduation, 58% planned to attend a 4-year college or university and 29% planned to attend a 2-year college. The Class of 2010 was awarded a total of \$548,814 in grant money and the average graduate's financial aid package totaled \$12,763.

### **The School Day**

In order for the reader to get a sense of the daily educational program at Harper, I have provided descriptions of different parts of the typical school day below.

#### **The start of the day.**

The school day at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls begins at 8:00am and it ends at 3:07pm. The girls are allowed to enter school through the student entrance on the rear (west) side of Harper's building as early as 7:30am. Harper's Assistant Principal greets them at the doors there. Once they enter the school building, students form a line to pass through the metal detectors and put their belongings on the belt of an x-ray machine for scanning. Once they have collected their belongings, they swipe their ID cards at stations monitored by members of the climate staff, and then enter the "D" cafeteria where they may eat breakfast and wait to be dismissed. A few minutes before 8:00am a member of the climate staff blows a whistle to indicate that students are allowed to leave the cafeteria, go to their lockers, and make their way to their 1<sup>st</sup> period classrooms. A

few minutes after 8:00am, the doors to the student entrance are closed (and locked from the outside) and late students must enter through the school's main entrance on the building's east side, where they are marked tardy.

This part of the day is best described as “organized chaos.” Students jostle each other for a place in line to pass through the metal detectors, particularly in cold weather when a wait outside of the school doors is uncomfortable. Once inside the doors, the students remove their coats, hoodies, and sweaters, which are not allowed to be worn in school according to Harper's non-negotiables (though many put them back on once they reach the cafeteria for breakfast). Prior to walking through the metal detector, students also remove their jewelry, often consisting of large silver hoop earrings and metal bracelets. Many conceal cell phones in their backpacks or somewhere under their clothes, because they are confiscated if found and only returned to a parent or guardian on Thursday afternoons. Throughout this process, many of the girls shout greetings to each other and the school staff members. Others are quiet because they are not yet fully awake. Some groan with frustration when their student IDs are not accepted the first time they scan them through one of the machines used to track attendance located just beyond the metal detectors.

The bags that the girls use to carry their schoolbooks and personal items vary in style, color, and dimension. Some carry only a large purse for toting their belongings; others carry a traditional backpack or a messenger bag in addition to a purse. A large number of students enter the school with a small black plastic bag that contains the food they have picked up at a corner store on their way (typically, walk) to school. Sometimes the bag contains what they will consume for breakfast and/or lunch that day, either as a

substitution to the district-provided meal or as an addition to it. Commonly retrieved items from these bags (during meals and at other various times throughout the day, depending on the class period and the teacher) include: 20 oz. plastic bottles of sodas or bottles of Arizona green tea; bags of potato chips, foil-wrapped egg and breakfast-meat sandwiches from a street vendor; and various types of candy.

The 'D' cafeteria fills with about 100-150 girls during the timeframe of 7:30 to 7:55am. More than half of these girls wait in line to receive the school-provided breakfast, which is commonly milk and a cereal such as Cheerios, Rice Krispies, or Kix. The girls sit at the tables with benches, or stand and lounge on the waist-high concrete wall that delineates the cafeteria space from the hall space in which students travel to and from their classes. There is a loud hum in the room as the girls talk and laugh with one another, waiting for the climate staff's whistle to dismiss them to their lockers and 1<sup>st</sup> period classrooms in the other wings of the building. Three or four adults, including one of the police officers, meander around the outside of the cafeteria space, greeting and joking with the girls who have arrived early enough for breakfast before the start of the school day. When the whistle for dismissal is heard a few minutes before 8:00, the girls rise from their seats with various senses of urgency to throw their trash into large gray trashcans positioned around the cafeteria and leave the cafeteria for the start of their school day.

### **Advisory.**

Students' 1<sup>st</sup> period class is scheduled from 8:00-8:16am; it is referred to as the "Advisory" period, but it is commonly understood as 'homeroom.' Two teachers manage the fifteen to twenty-five students who are assigned to each Advisory and grouped mostly

homogeneously by grade level. In the 16-minute window of the period, teachers take attendance, make announcements, and distribute calendars, fliers, and permission slips as needed. As of the 2010-2011 school year, students are encouraged to utilize this time to respond to a school-wide journal prompt. Attending Advisory on time and completing all 5 of the daily journals in a one-week period makes students eligible for inclusion in grade-level raffles on Friday afternoons for prizes such as gift cards to the movie theater or a local restaurant, CDs, or various clothing items with the school's logo or motto. Prior to this year's incentives, and even somewhat despite them this year, it is rare for a teacher to see more than half of the students in his or her Advisory class arrive to the room before the period ends at 8:16am, let alone see them on time at 8:00am.

Sometimes the missing students have not yet arrived at school, or they are taking their time at their lockers and walking through the hallways, despite the attempts by climate staff members to hurry them and shuffle them towards where they need to be when they are seen in the hallways. The student entrance to the school is locked at 8:00am and students who are tardy must enter the building through its main entrance, where they go through another set of metal detectors, get swiped in, and are marked tardy. Students are reminded of the consequence for being late that day if they do not have a note from a parent that offers an excuse: an hour-long after-school detention with one of the school counselors. Between 40 - 60 students trickle into school between 8:10-9:30am every day.

### **Instructional periods.**

Periods 2 through 5 and 7 through 9 are typical periods of academic instruction that last 45 minutes each; however, the Institute classes such as Architecture I and

Architecture II and Accounting I and Accounting II (for the Business Institute) and the AP Calculus class are double-periods that students have scheduled for back-to-back class periods in order to receive 90 minutes of uninterrupted instructional time in the class. Students' interest in their learning material varies greatly, and often depends on the rigor and relevance of the lesson, and sometimes, too, on the relationships they have with their teachers. Students' engagement with and reactions to their academic work will be investigated in Chapter 5.

**“Lunch n’ More.”**

6<sup>th</sup> period is referred to as “Lunch n’ More” for students; the 45-minute block is split into (2) 21-minute sessions, 11:46-12:07 and 12:07-12:31. In the first session, students in grades 7, 8, and 10 have lunch in the “C” or “D” cafeterias while the students in grades 9 and 11 participate in various, typically small-group, enrichment programs with the “specials” teachers or school counselors. The “specials” teachers hold abbreviated sessions of gym, music, and art class, while the school counselors meet with groups of 8-15 students for character and leadership development sessions.

Also during this time, the 12<sup>th</sup> graders meet with the College Pathways counselor, Mrs. Gramercy, for discussion about news and announcements related to college admissions, financial aid, standardized tests, and “senior” events such as prom and graduation. After a few minutes of struggling to get the attention of all of the seniors, who gather in the ‘B’ cafeteria everyday at 11:43am, Mrs. Gramercy tells them about the 15-minute blocks of appointments that she has available that afternoon for one-on-one counseling sessions. The same fifteen girls with an urgent interest for help with their college applications clamor for Mrs. Gramercy’s attention and take the ten appointments,

some even writing their names over others' on the sign-up sheet. The other forty or so seniors remain at their tables in the cafeteria, talking with friends and waiting to be dismissed in order to get lunch from the 'D' cafeteria. Mrs. Gramercy, meanwhile, tries to field questions from the fifteen girls who shout over one another about topics related to all things college: the SAT, financial aid, scholarships, applications, and college representative visits. At 12:07pm, the students transition into the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 6<sup>th</sup> period; the 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders each lunch (the seniors are allowed to eat on their own in the "B" cafeteria) while the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> graders have their "n 'More" sessions following lunch.

#### **"Common Planning Time."**

For content-area teachers, the 6<sup>th</sup> period block is referred to as "Common Planning Time" or "CPT"; it is designated as a time for them to discuss their pedagogy and learn new and effective strategies for the classroom from each other and sometimes from guest speakers. (Students are either at lunch or participating in their "Lunch n' More" groups with the school counselors or the gym, art, or music teachers during this time.) For this 45-minute block of time the Social Studies, Science, Math, and English teachers meet either as a whole group or in small content-area teams for professional development or meetings that focus on instructional planning, data analysis, or interventions for students with academic weaknesses. The school's leadership team chooses the topics for the daily CPT sessions, and it is often teachers, as opposed to administrators, who are asked to present on best practices for their colleagues. Mr. Matthew Kendrick, Harper's 10<sup>th</sup> grade Geometry teacher, explains that his favorite thing about teaching at Harper is "the focus on teaching rather than managing... it's how to be

a better teacher... it's an actual learning environment overall." This time that is dedicated daily to instruction and professional growth helps to ground the staff at the school into the mindset that the students' academic growth is the most important piece of their job and it deserves the most attention.

**The end of the day.**

Between 3:00-3:04pm, either Mrs. Attle or Mrs. Bolton (one of Harper's gym and health teachers) begins to make the daily announcements over Harper's loudspeaker. The announcements often include information for students about schedule changes for after-school activities, reminders about returning permission slips, and words of congratulation for students who have won school raffles, participated in school contests, or competed in district sporting events. The messages to the students at the end of each day, especially when Mrs. Attle shares them, are overwhelmingly positive and motivational; students are encouraged to do their best, told that they are loved, and reminded that they should "learn today, so that you can lead tomorrow." A typical script of the daily afternoon announcement, shared by Ms. Bolton in the school's main office, can be heard as the following:

Good afternoon, Harper students and staff. The time is now 3:04pm and it is time for our afternoon announcements. All student government officers, please meet in the Green Room of the library at 3:15pm this afternoon for a brief meeting. Big Sisters/ Little Sisters will meet today from 3:15-5:30pm in the college suite. Upward Bound is cancelled for today. Ladies! If you would like to try-out for cheerleading, please sign the paper on the door outside Ms. Bolton's office after school today. Try-outs will be held after-school next Thursday. That is all for our afternoon announcements. Remember, ladies, "learn today and you WILL lead tomorrow."

Sometimes, when the announcements that Mrs. Bolton makes end several minutes earlier than the school's dismissal time, Mrs. Attle jumps on the loudspeaker and says, "The

time is 3:05pm. The school day ends at 3:07pm, so we have two minutes left of classroom instruction,” or, prior to a weekend, she often says, “Remember, ladies. I love you; your teachers love you. Be safe this weekend.” When Mrs. Attle decided to grant students the year’s first “dress-down” day in conjunction with Valentine’s Day, she made an announcement to clarify the information included on a flyer that was distributed to students during 9<sup>th</sup> period. “Ladies, you are allowed to wear pink, red, or white shirts with jeans. You must be fully covered up- that means no boobs and no butts,” she said with a smile on her face and in her voice. And finally, at 3:07pm, the last bell of the school day rings and students are dismissed from their 9<sup>th</sup> period classes and from school.

#### **After-school.**

A modest number of students stay at Harper following the dismissal bell at 3:07pm. The majority of students who stay after school do so to participate in one of the school’s sports teams’ practices or games or to participate in the tutoring program of an outside organization called Upward Bound. Others stay after school to serve a teacher’s or a school detention, which keeps them at school an additional 15 to 60 minutes, depending on the severity of the infraction for which they earned the detention. A few students choose to stay in order to get help from a teacher on an assignment or in preparation for a test. There are after-school clubs offered to students, but participation in them is light. An a cappella choir, directed by Mr. Kendrick, Harper’s Geometry teacher, draws 5-8 students every Tuesday afternoon for rehearsal. Mr. Mason, the Art teacher, runs a mural arts club and works on a large mural painting of students’ faces in the ‘Lower A’ hallway; only a handful of girls join him to paint after school on Wednesdays. (Students’ interest, or lack thereof, in the after-school programs offered at Harper will be

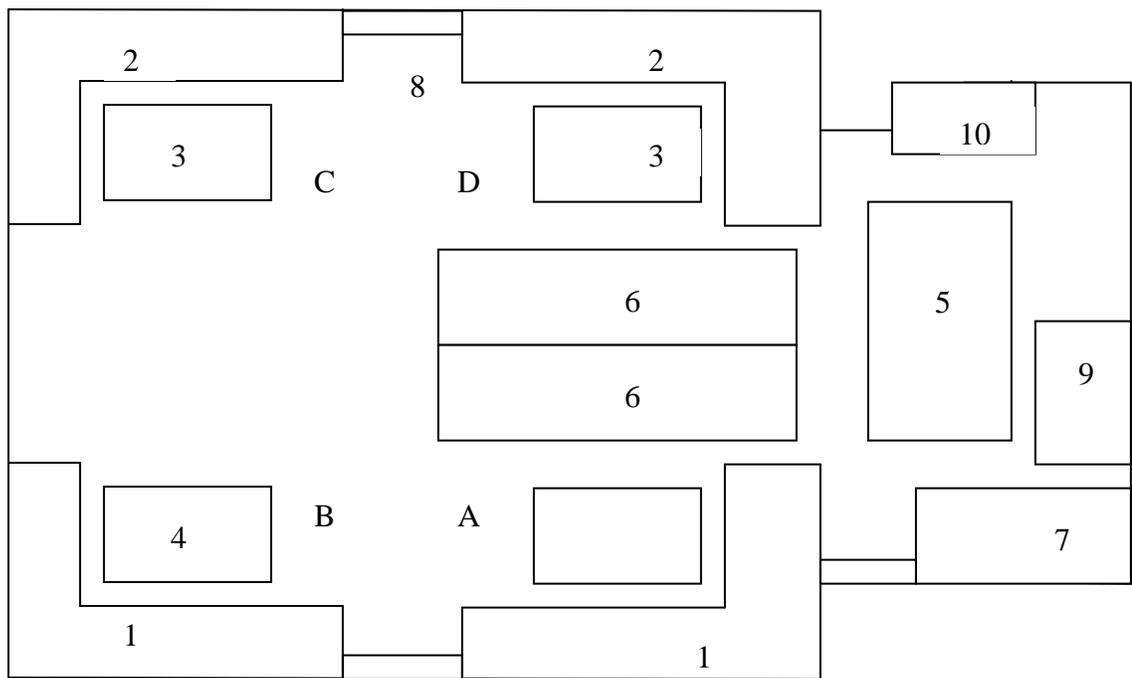
explored in Chapter 5.) It is typical for many teachers to remain in the building for an additional 1-2 hours following the end of the school day. They work with students who have stayed for help, sponsor after-school clubs, grade student work, write lesson plans, and beautify their classrooms. In a new policy enacted in December of this school year in the interest of safety, students are required to leave the building by 5:30pm and teachers are required to leave by 6:30pm. An adult must supervise all students who remain in the building beyond dismissal at 3:07pm.

### **The School Building**

Harper Leadership Academy for Girls is situated in a building constructed in the mid-1960s and was originally designed as a middle school that could accommodate 800 students. The school is two stories, and includes features both typical and unique to many of the district's schools. The first floor includes the following spaces:

- (1) 'Lower' level classrooms utilized by the students in grades 9-12 in the "A" and "B" wings of the building
- (2) 'Lower' level classrooms utilized by the students in grades 7 and 8 in the "C" and "D" wings of the building
- (3) The cafeterias utilized for breakfast and lunch in the "C" and "D" wings
- (4) The cafeteria utilized for lunch by the seniors in the "B" wing
- (5) The school's auditorium (multiple entrances, two levels)
- (6) The school's gym; separated by a temporary wall into 2, one for the middle schoolers' use ("D") and one for the high schoolers' use ("A")
- (7) The school's main entrance and office; the school nurse's office is also located here

- (8) The entrance used by students to enter the building every morning; here they pass through the metal detectors and have their belongings scanned by the x-ray machine, after which they swipe their IDs for attendance and go to breakfast
- (9) The school's art suite (two levels)
- (10) The 'climate' room; students who have been taken out of class for being disruptive 'cool-off' here for various periods of time



*Figure 4.1.* Drawing of Harper's 1<sup>st</sup> floor

The second floor includes the following spaces:

- (1) 'Upper' level classrooms utilized by the students in grades 9-12 in the "A" and "B" wings of the building
- (2) 'Upper' level classrooms utilized by the students in grades 7 and 8 in the "C" and "D" wings of the building

- (3) The school library, with an extensive collection of books of all genres, three computer labs with 20-25 computers in each, open classroom space, and meeting space in the ‘Green Room,’ where many staff and student meetings and professional development sessions take place
- (4) The College Pathways Suite
- (5) The music room
- (6) The Architecture Institute classroom
- (7) The Business Institute classroom
- (8) The former Early Childhood Education Institute classroom
- (9) The ‘Common Planning Time’ or ‘CPT’ room for teachers’ professional development sessions and meetings
- (10) The stairwells that students are allowed to use.

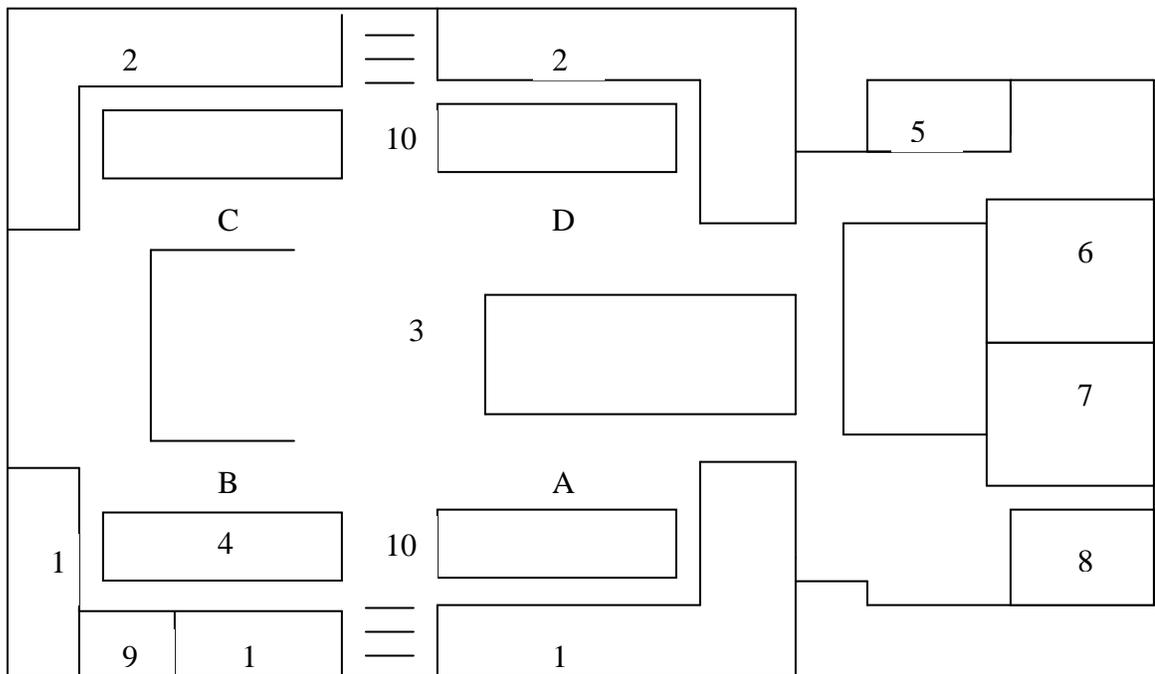


Figure 4.2. Drawing of Harper's 2<sup>nd</sup> floor

The building, illustrated in Figures 4.1 and 4.2, serves as the home of Harper Leadership Academy for Girls. It is important for readers to get a sense of the school's organizational layout in order to understand the context for the examples of student engagement that will be explored in the next chapter.

This first part of Chapter 4 has been the story of Harper Leadership Academy for Girls' transformation into an all-girls school that serves students in grades 7-12. Not only does this summary provide the context for the descriptions of student engagement that follow in Chapter 5, but it also captures some of the mainstays of reform and the challenges involved in Harper's transformation over the last five years. In the part of the chapter that follows next, I introduce the people who have been integral to the school's story of transformation. They have served critical roles in Harper's efforts to provide a high-quality education to the young women from the Riverbend neighborhood.

### **Harper Staff**

#### **Administrators**

##### **Mrs. Wanda Leary.**

Mrs. Wanda Leary, a tall full-figured Black woman, led Harper's transformation into an all-girls school in 2005, and she served as the school's Principal from the 2005-2006 school year through the 2009-2010 school year. Prior to her tenure as Principal of Harper, Mrs. Leary served as Principal of the girls' side of Abbott for two years. Her position there began in November 2003, shortly after the students at Abbott had been split into gender-separate sides of the building by the administration of the school's new Education Management Organization (EMO), EduNation.

On a visit to Abbott two months into the 2003-2004 academic year, an administrator of EduNation observed the school in chaos; the fact that the girls' side's Principal was missing from work certainly seemed to contribute to the school's problems. At that time, Mrs. Leary had just begun her new role at Abbott as a New Teacher Coach in which she supported 21 new teachers at the school, most of whom were affiliated with the alternative certification programs Teach For America and The New Teacher Project. The EduNation administrator believed that the school's chaos stemmed from a lack of teaching in the school; however, after speaking with Mrs. Leary during his 'walk-through' he realized that she was one of the few people who had been able to keep the school's teachers focused on students' learning. He asked Mrs. Leary if she had earned her Principal's certification and when she replied that she had, he begged her to take the job as Principal of the girls' side at Abbott.

Prior to her role at Abbott as a New Teacher Coach, Mrs. Leary had been an Emotional Support teacher (with classes of mostly boys) and a teacher-leader at the same district middle school for 19 years. Though she had never before been a school leader, her commitment to children and to the new teachers of the school left her with little choice but to agree to assume the role as Principal of the girls' side at Abbott. Mrs. Leary led Abbott through the remainder of the 2003-2004 school year and through the 2004-2005 school year before she was asked to take the job as Principal of Harper Leadership Academy for Girls. She left her tenure as Principal of Harper in Summer 2010 when the district Superintendent promoted her to an Assistant Superintendent position with the district's central office. She now uses the experience her leadership during Harper's transformation to inform her new role as supervisor of the district's high schools.

Mrs. Leary is an easily-recognizable figure in both the school and around the district. She wears primarily dark, solid-colored skirt suits with low heels and pantyhose. Her hair is dark in color and grazes her shoulders; she typically wears it down, either styled straight or curled at the ends. Mrs. Leary has a low booming voice that is often heard greeting students and adults in the hallways of Harper when she visits. It is common to see students scurry into the classrooms that they are supposed to be seated in or adjust their clothing to meet the uniform requirements when Mrs. Leary comes into view.

I include Mrs. Leary here due to her previous and current impact on Harper's school culture and academic standing. Many of the study participants referenced her in some way when sharing their sentiments about the school. Students, parents, and teachers alike recognize Mrs. Leary as a no-nonsense leader who has high expectations for student behavior and learning and who (still) demands an extraordinary amount of work and perseverance from everyone at the school. This makes her an icon in the eyes of some and a bit of a tyrant in the eyes of others. Mr. Eric Jones, a 2<sup>nd</sup> year teacher at Harper, had this to say about Mrs. Leary's leadership last year:

Mrs. Leary really inspired me... Originally, I remember that Mrs. Leary was like, 'you're one of the ones that don't make the [state assessment] as important' and things like that. That wasn't really it; I didn't like to focus on testing. But then once I really saw the culture you can build around making a school succeed... I was really into it. I just like the really high expectations environment... the fact that if you really hold students accountable, they will rise to whatever your expectation is or close to it.

Mr. Jones acknowledges that Mrs. Leary's leadership was paramount to the creation of a school culture that focused on high expectations for students. While he shares that he was originally resistant to her strategy of using the standardized test as the vehicle to

support student achievement, he was able to get ‘on board’ with her philosophy when he witnessed the power of a school community that is focused on students’ academic growth. Mr. Jones recognizes, however, that this culture was built through a lot of hard work that often fell on the backs of the teachers, which upset some on the staff:

I wasn’t one of those teachers that were disgruntled by all the work. There is so much work at Harper. It’s not like any other school. The work drives me crazy, but I’m a workaholic. Basically, I [see] the direct benefit of the work we do.

Here Mr. Jones shares that some of the teachers at Harper have been frustrated with the tremendous workload that teachers are expected to manage. These expectations arose under Mrs. Leary’s leadership and have continued under that of Mrs. Attle. He specifies that many teachers have been disgruntled with “analyzing data every five minutes, doing all these huge projects and initiatives at the same time, that [aren’t] even lesson planning,” and they also get “upset by the constant feedback, the constant ‘you need to do it our way’ sort of thing.” When asked how teachers come to have such different expectations than those of the school’s administrators for what a reasonable workload looks like, Mr. Jones shares:

When I was in my interview for Harper [two years ago], I had no idea [about] all this work, all the structure and things like that. But in interviews [this] year, we were a lot clearer. We said ‘this is a very structured environment. How do you respond to not doing things your way?’ and things like that. I do believe that you need to sacrifice a little bit of what you want to do to be on the same page as everyone else.

It is evident through Mr. Jones’ comments that not everyone at Harper is on the same page as to what the responsibilities of the teachers should be. Moreover, some staff members view Mrs. Leary’s leadership style as too demanding and constricting. It also

seems that, like Mr. Jones, they may not have been aware of Mrs. Leary's expectations when they accepted their teaching positions at the school.

Similar to their teachers, students at Harper also have mixed feelings about Mrs. Leary and her leadership. Holly, one of the 12<sup>th</sup> graders in the focus group that was held in June 2010, references Mrs. Leary's communication style when she recalls what she does not like about attending school at Harper:

I don't look forward to people yelling and screaming at me like I'm an animal. [Mrs. Leary] doesn't talk to anybody with respect... There's a certain way to do it. When you're yelling, people are not going to listen; whatever she's talking about is going to go out the window. But if you're sitting there and really talking to somebody and really understand...

Holly's classmate, Jennifer, finishes her thought:

If you're being aggressive with somebody, they're not really gonna hear what you've got to say. It's going to turn into a big argument. If you're being too nasty with somebody, they're not going to listen. If you're being assertive to get your point across, you don't have to say it in a smart way or yell at somebody. It's not what you say, it's how you say it.

These students discuss their struggle to appreciate Mrs. Leary's demands of them and her high expectations for their success alongside their frustration with hearing her yell at them. Jennifer admits, "I feel like she is trying to prepare us for the real world, but she's a little too hard on us. Like, we're still in high school." The 12<sup>th</sup> graders who participated in this focus group understand that Mrs. Leary has high expectations for them, but they would have liked her to take a different approach in her communication of those expectations. While Mrs. Leary's leadership style and approach to education reform at Harper has had its fans and its critics, she certainly commanded a strong presence in her role as Principal and made a number of demands of everyone at the school that have had a lasting impact.

**Mrs. Stacy Attle.**

Harper's current Principal, Mrs. Stacy Attle, is a young White woman who entered the district and the field of education through Teach For America (TFA), an alternative certification program that trains the brightest of the country's recent college graduates as teachers and places them, for a commitment of two years, in high-need, underserved urban and rural public schools. The district assigned Mrs. Attle to teach 8<sup>th</sup> grade English and Science on the girls' side of Abbott; this was her first professional job following her college graduation in May 2004. In the spring of 2005, when it was decided that the girls from Abbott would join the girls from Harper in Harper's building, the teachers were asked if they wanted to make the transition with Mrs. Leary and Abbott's girls to Harper the following year. Mrs. Attle explained that the staffing at Harper and Abbott was "a union issue. We had the choice to stay at Abbott with the boys or follow the administration (Mrs. Leary) to Harper. We had to sign a paper that said we wanted to go to Harper; everyone on the all-girls side of Abbott went to Harper." Mrs. Attle recalls the decision as one that did not take much thought because she recognized Mrs. Leary's leadership at Abbott as being the one thing that had begun to turn that school around.

In her second year of teaching, now at Harper, Mrs. Attle added the responsibility of being the middle school representative on the school's leadership team to her role teaching 8<sup>th</sup> grade English and Social Studies. Over the next three years, Mrs. Attle took on numerous leadership roles, and as a result of her increased focus on the school's growth and her position as an assistant to Mrs. Leary, her teaching load lightened each year.

Mrs. Leary always gave me new responsibilities at the right time; they were stretch positions. I really got to see what the work was like in the trenches. I didn't think about whether or not I'd like it. I trusted Mrs. Leary. I thought, "If it's good for the kids, no problem."

Mrs. Attle succeeded a fellow TFA alum as the school's Roster Chair during the 2007-2008 school year; in this role she was responsible for all of Harper's teachers' and students' daily schedules and ensuring that students earned the appropriate credits towards their high school degree. Mrs. Attle also managed the school's disciplinary process, reviewed 'pink slips' that teachers wrote documenting students' misbehaviors, and met with parents and students when the students were 'reinstated' from their out-of-school suspensions. She also coordinated the school's protocols related to the administration of the district's norm-referenced and the state's criterion-referenced assessments. She reviewed data related to student growth, set goals with the school's leadership team, facilitated professional development workshops for teachers, and handled the scheduling and distribution of materials for all of the school-wide assessments. Mrs. Attle says, "half the time I didn't even know my title- I just did stuff!"

Mrs. Attle was encouraged by Mrs. Leary to return to graduate school for her Principal certification. Mrs. Attle concedes that she "never wanted to be a Principal, ever" but Mrs. Leary convinced her that it was worth it because she would "learn something and acquire a supervisor's credential which may be advantageous someday." So Mrs. Attle worked towards her Principal certification and her second Master's degree, in Education Leadership, at a local university in the evenings during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years. In February 2009, an Assistant Principal position opened at Harper and the district approved Mrs. Attle for that role. This meant that Mrs. Attle played a more prominent role on the school's leadership team (and had the title and

salary to go with it) and took on responsibilities that included the review of teachers' lesson plans and the evaluation of their classroom instruction.

In Summer 2009 the district Superintendent approached Mrs. Leary with an offer of a promotion to a position as an Assistant Superintendent within the district, which meant that she would have to leave the leadership of Harper to someone else. Mrs. Leary insisted that her successor be Mrs. Attle. Mrs. Attle was well qualified for the position of Principal; she had taken on numerous leadership responsibilities during her six years of employment at Harper and she knew the school inside and out. Though overwhelmed by the prospect of leading 47 teachers, another 75 staff members, and 500 or so students to excellence, Mrs. Attle agreed to accept the position as Interim Principal<sup>9</sup> of Harper Leadership Academy for Girls because of her commitment to the school and to her mentor, Mrs. Leary.

Mrs. Attle understands the emotional difficulty that Mrs. Leary faced upon her departure from Harper for her new position with the district: "Harper is not just a school to Mrs. Leary. This transition is personal. She transformed the school!" Mrs. Attle's feelings about her own promotion to Interim Principal of Harper vacillated between feelings of loss and fear: "Mrs. Leary is like my mom, like a drug- we work together that well. It's scary to be Principal and I want to work with Mrs. Leary"; loyalty: "I cannot be someone else's A.P. at Harper"; and resignation: "Alright, I'll do it; I don't know how I'll

---

<sup>9</sup> 'Interim Principal' is a designation that refers to a 1-year temporary appointment at the end of which the district and the candidate determine the candidate's fit for the position of Principal. This designation allows flexibility for both parties; the candidate can opt to take a position another than Principal within the district after that year, rather than feel the need to resign or possibly be fired if it is determined that the position of Principal was not a good fit. The district, meanwhile, can evaluate the candidate's work during this trial period before offering the candidate a permanent promotion to the Principal position.

do it, but whatever you [Mrs. Leary] want.” Mrs. Attle explains that this turn of events occurred in July 2010, just before she and her husband left for a weeklong vacation in the Pacific Northwest. She remembers Mrs. Leary calling her cell phone as she and her husband boarded the plane to Portland, Oregon and Mrs. Leary saying, “I accepted the position as Assistant Superintendent and you’re going to be Principal. Have a safe flight!”

The whirlwind in which Mrs. Attle assumed the position of Principal at Harper has not diminished as the 2010-2011 school year has progressed. Her strategy for the year has been to maintain Mrs. Leary’s focus on the school’s structure and academic instruction. Mrs. Attle says, “Mrs. Leary, with our team, transformed our school. It would be disrespectful - and stupid - on my part to fix something that’s not broken.” There is a lot of pressure on Mrs. Attle and Harper to demonstrate that it is possible for the school to make significant academic gains with the educational framework that Mrs. Leary instituted to Harper, despite the fact that Mrs. Leary herself is not there. There are people across the district looking to see if Harper’s success can be replicated across the district’s neighborhood high schools, and Mrs. Attle feels that pressure daily. As for her confidence in her and Harper’s ability to make Mrs. Leary proud, Mrs. Attle admits: “Harper is really delicate. We’ve been doing okay with Mrs. Leary gone. But we’re not at a sustainable place. Harper is a challenging boat to steer.”

Mrs. Attle’s comment underscores the fact that the leadership shift has had its challenges. Many staff members loyal to Mrs. Leary, particularly those on the climate staff, have had a difficult time adjusting to Mrs. Attle’s leadership, even though Mrs. Attle has altered very little about the school’s structures and programs to date. According

to Mrs. Leary, it became clear to Mrs. Attle early on in the year that she will have to wait for the climate staff to be 'ready' for change when they come out of their 'mourning period' as Mrs. Leary describes it. Until then Mrs. Attle will have to tread slowly and lightly, as she "can't hold [Harper's] climate together without them." The difference in personality that Mrs. Attle brings to the Principalship at Harper is evident in her communication style with and approach to the teachers, which they appreciate. One teacher compares Mrs. Attle's leadership style to that of Mrs. Leary's and says:

I really think Mrs. Attle is a great Principal. She's definitely a huge improvement from Mrs. Leary. Her expectations are so much clearer. She's a lot more levelheaded. She's just doing a really great job. She has a softer approach, but here's the thing: there are no pardons. It's just not personal. Everything felt personal last year [with Mrs. Leary]. You know what I mean? 'She doesn't like me.' And now it's just like, if you don't turn in your lesson plans, you get a memo...

This teacher appreciates that the professional climate at Harper still stresses accountability, but that it has shifted under Mrs. Attle's leadership to include clarity and consistency.

Some students, though, like one of the study's key participants, notice a tangible difference in the school's climate, one they view as negative, as a result of the difference between Mrs. Attle's approach and that of Mrs. Leary. Kelly says:

There is a whole bunch of drama all day, all the time- especially recently. Last year, there wasn't that much. I think it's because of the Principal. It seems like the whole school has gone downhill since Mrs. Leary left because Mrs. Leary was scary. She wasn't scary but I think that's the thing that made the school make sense. She was scary and nobody would do anything because she's so scary. Mrs. Attle- nobody pays her no mind. Everybody just keeps going and ignores her.

Kelly's observation is interesting because it acknowledges a potential reason for an increase in disciplinary issues at Harper from last year. It illuminates the possibility that

students' adherence to school rules the year before may have been related to an extrinsic fear of their Principal, and not an intrinsic desire to maintain the school's expectations for a safe schooling environment that is focused on learning. This could explain why students have pushed boundaries this school year, now that Mrs. Leary is no longer a daily presence in the school. It is also possible that the students are more comfortable with Mrs. Attle because they have known her in various capacities during their schooling at Harper. Many call her or refer to her simply by her maiden name, "Burns," (she married in 2009). This indicates a familiarity that students feel in their relationship with Mrs. Attle that may not be appropriate now that she is the school's leader, yet it is difficult to pull back from after years of frequent usage. Another explanation for students' perceptions of Mrs. Attle and her leadership as a less commanding figure may be the result of the dramatic shift to her style from their fear of Mrs. Leary. I will continue to explore this phenomenon as it relates to student engagement, and specifically, students' feelings of *relatedness* to school staff, in Chapter 5.

At twenty-nine years of age, Mrs. Attle often hears comments from other school administrators about how young she is for holding the position of Interim Principal at Harper. In hopes of being taken seriously by colleagues, teachers, students, and parents, Mrs. Attle wears her long straight light brown hair pulled back in a bun at the nape of her neck. She follows the wardrobe style of her predecessor, sporting skirt- or pantsuits daily (complete with pantyhose), though she often inserts bright- and pastel- colored suits into her wardrobe rotation. She wears high heels on days of meetings with district administrators or important visitors, but she opts for ballet flats or low heels when walking the long hallways of Harper, which she does daily in order to sense the pulse of

and to be a visible presence in the building. The data collected throughout this study indicates that Mrs. Attle's professional and consistent approach to working and communicating with school staff members at Harper has been an effective one in her tenure as Principal, particularly as she has had the difficult task of filling the large shoes of her mentor. Students and parents, who have fewer and more infrequent opportunities to interact with Mrs. Attle than the teachers, may need to be further invested in her leadership in order to get or remain on board with her plans for Harper.

### **Teachers**

The 47 teachers who currently work at Harper represent a wide range of expertise in the education field and years of tenure in the district and at Harper. Five teachers have been working at Harper since before it became an all-girls school in 2003. Over 80% of Harper's current staff members have been in teaching fewer than 3 years. Many of the teachers have come to Harper by way of alternative certification programs; for the 2010-2011 school year 9 teachers secured teaching positions at the school through their affiliation with Teach For America and 10 did so through their affiliation with The New Teacher Project. These teachers, and others who are graduates from local colleges of education, are extended offers to teach at the school after interviewing with the school's Site Selection team, comprised of school administrators and current teachers. A few teachers are placed at Harper by the district via 'forced transfer' from another school.

31 women and 17 men comprise Harper's teaching staff. 75% of the teaching staff identifies as White; 21% identify as Black or African American; 0.5% identifies as Latina, and 0.2% identify as Indian. The nature of alternative certification programs lends

a large majority of the teachers to be young in age (in their 20s and 30s), with all but one of the youngest and newest recruits identifying as White.

Harper has a reputation among teachers in the district as a demanding place to work. The teachers are all expected to submit each week daily lesson plans that are written in a 'five-step' format. They are required to make daily phone calls to the homes of students in their advisories (homerooms) who are absent. Teachers must track student growth on a consistent basis and utilize data in instructional decision-making. There are classroom visits either weekly or more often by school administrators for observation and feedback on the teacher's instructional techniques.

Though the teachers included in this study acknowledge that there is a lot of work for them in their roles, more so they believe than for other teachers in the district, they also recognize that it takes hard work and commitment from the teaching staff in order for Harper to push towards meeting its Big Goals for student achievement. Their desire to be a part of that success for students is what drives the teachers to continue in their work at Harper, either in accordance with or despite the long hours, mounds of paperwork, and high levels of accountability and oversight that they experience. One of the teachers has this to say about the demands of her job at Harper:

The administration expects a lot from us, and if you're not on board with the program, they're going to figure that out real quick. It's not for everybody. There's a lot of expectations. There are also a lot of standards in place, you know: 'this is how we do things,' and some people don't want to be put into that box... And also the amount of work besides just planning our lessons, all the administrative work that we do, is overwhelming. It takes up a ton of time... I don't know that I would do all of it exactly the same if it were up to me, but I do see the purpose in it. I do see results from it so I can't argue with it... It can be really intimidating and it can be really overwhelming, but after three years I feel like it's pretty rewarding, too.

This teacher's sentiments echo those of others included in the study who speak of the least satisfying parts of their jobs as the lack of a work/life balance, given the many varied demands within their roles as teachers at Harper.

However, working at a school that holds high expectations for its students, aims to send all of its students to college, and implements various programs with integrity and intention in support of achieving the school's Big Goals generates pride and commitment for many. This commitment to seeing Harper and its students succeed leads many teachers to participate as after-school club moderators one or more days per week and take on leadership roles within the school as content-area instructional coordinators. Such involvement is a win-win for the promotion of both productivity and a positive culture at the school. "I think that my mindset has changed a little bit this year being part of the instructional leadership team," says Mrs. Sanders, the U.S. History teacher and Social Studies Department Chair, "I can see it from the perspective of the administration why we're doing certain things." One change that she notices is the messaging related to school initiatives that must be implemented by teachers and adds to their workload:

The buddy system that we're doing, which we did last year, where everybody pushes into an English classroom during their prep period twice a week... the way that it was presented last year, it didn't go over great with the staff. This year, it's kind of been reworked completely, and it's being presented by two people on the leadership team who are teachers. I know that Mrs. Attle focuses a lot on buy-in because we do work incredibly hard, and if people are not invested in it, it becomes obvious very quickly.

The majority of teachers remain after school for at least an hour to support students who are having difficulties with the class content and homework assignments or for various committee work. Daily teacher attendance at the school averages 97% and teacher commitment to the school, as measured by the district's Office of Accountability

and reported in its 2010 Annual Report of Harper, ranks in the top 25% of all district schools. When asked about what she likes best about Harper, Mrs. Sanders shares, “the relationships with the girls [and] the relationships with the staff that I’ve been with for a couple of years. I finally feel like I’m a part of this school and that I’m doing something and I’m making a difference.” The commitment of Harper’s teaching staff is incredibly important for students’ investment and achievement. Students’ reactions to their teachers and their perceptions of their teachers’ commitment to their success will be described in the next chapter.

### **‘Climate’ Staff**

Of the 114 staff members at Harper, twenty are members of the school’s ‘climate’ team. This team is comprised of four uniformed city police officers and women from the neighborhood (a few of whom have daughters, granddaughters, or nieces who attend the school) who are employed to monitor students and handle any behavior problems that arise in the school’s classrooms, hallways, and lunchrooms. Harper’s teachers are instructed to utilize their classroom management systems, but when those systems have been exhausted and problems with student behaviors persist, the teachers may call a member of the climate team to escort the student from the classroom to the ‘climate’ room, or to bring her to an administrator or the police district office, depending on the circumstance. All climate staff members wear headsets- an earpiece connected to a walkie-talkie. When office staff members receive calls for assistance from teachers, or climate staff members need assistance from or must share a message to others on their team, these walkie-talkies are used to communicate. The climate staff members are assigned to various duties across the school that include, but are not limited to:

monitoring the school entrance and metal detectors as students enter the building, “checking” students into the attendance tracking system with their school IDs after they have gone through the metal detectors, monitoring the cafeterias during breakfast and lunch, monitoring the hallways during class periods and during transitions, staffing the climate room, making phone calls home to parents of truant or tardy students, and locking and unlocking the bathrooms for student use on an as-needed basis during the instructional periods of the day.

### **Operations Staff**

Harper staff members who are not administrators, teachers, or climate team members comprise the operations staff of the school. They support teachers’ work and students’ learning in a multitude of important ways. The secretarial staff, led by Ms. Carter, supports the work of the school administrators in Harper’s main office, often by addressing the needs of parents and others who call or visit the school. The custodial staff keeps the building clean and safe, the cafeteria staff prepares and serves breakfast and lunch to over 500 students daily, and the school nurse addresses the girls’ daily health needs. All of these district employees are integral to Harper’s efforts in support of students achieving at high academic levels.

### **Harper Students**

The young women who attend Harper primarily live in the Riverbend neighborhood and most previously attended one of the five elementary schools located in Harper’s catchment area. There are currently 574 students enrolled in grades 7-12 and they are typically between 12 and 19 years of age. Ninety-eight and eight-tenths percent (98.8%) of students identify their racial background as Black, four-tenths percent (0.4%)

identify as White, and eight-tenths percent (0.8%) identify as Latina. Eighty-nine and six-tenths percent (89.6%) of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Seventeen and seven-tenths percent (17.7%) of students have an Individualized Education Plan. None of Harper's current students are English Language Learners.

Average daily attendance of Harper students has hovered just above or below eighty percent (80%) for the last four years, which makes Harper "below average" for attendance as compared to all other schools in the district. According to the district's annual report, seventy and seven tenths percent (70.7%) of Harper students are chronically late to school, which is another "below average" indicator for Harper compared to all other district schools. (It should be noted that there are several school-wide interventions and incentive systems that are being utilized this year to increase daily attendance to a goal of ninety percent (90%).) The district cites that Harper experienced a dropout rate of 10% last year, which was an improvement from the twelve and one tenth percent (12.1%) rate the year before but also puts the school at "below average" in comparison to other district schools.<sup>10</sup> These statistics illustrate the complex nature of measuring student achievement and other indicators of school "success." According to the school's self-reported statistics, Harper students experience higher graduation and college acceptance rates than students who attend the district's other *non-selective* public "neighborhood" high schools. It can be concluded, therefore, that Harper students have

---

<sup>10</sup> Educational entities have various ways of calculating their dropout and graduation rates. Harper's reported graduation rate of ninety-seven percent (97%) is the number of 12<sup>th</sup> graders who begin the school year and pass their classes in order to graduate from the school in June of that same year. A graduation rate that encompasses the number of students who enter Harper at some point in grades 7-12 and stay through graduation would be much lower. The district's calculation for Harper's dropout rate here captures the number of students in grades 9-12 who leave Harper and the district and do not enroll in an alternative education program such as a private school.

higher engagement and achievement levels than students in these other *non-selective* schools. Yet the attendance, lateness, and dropout rates calculated by the district paint a more dismal picture than what Harper self-reports. It is important to recognize that Harper often evaluates its performance and student growth against the schools that it most easily compares to in terms of student demographics and its “neighborhood” high school model. On other occasions, Harper uses statistics that highlight the areas in which its students have succeeded, rather than where they have failed (see footnote 5). The school district compares Harper’s numbers with those of all schools across the district, both selective and non-selective. Consequently, Harper’s numbers are lower than originally reported because the selective high schools, as a result of students’ choice to attend them, leads to greater levels of engagement and boost the district average. Issues with schools self-reporting their data and with the district not offering data related to comparable sub-groups of schools make the accuracy of school data as compared to others within the district problematic.

There is a high mobility rate among Harper students, though it has decreased every year for the past four. In the 2007-2008 school year, approximately 130 students withdrew from the school while nearly 200 enrolled. The following year, 120 students withdrew while about the same number enrolled. In the 2009-2010 school year approximately 90 new students entered and 95 withdrew. Reasons for new admittance and withdrawal vary, but many of the cases are related to students moving in or out of the school’s catchment area. Other cases of enrollment are related to, increasingly, Harper’s reputation as a good school as compared to other neighborhood schools; students and their parents have begun to select to attend Harper in the district’s high school admissions

process. An unfortunate reality, as shared with me by Mrs. Leary, is that the district's central office sends students to Harper who have been victims of rape and would therefore feel more comfortable attending school in an all-girls setting. Other cases of withdrawal are related to student and/or parent dissatisfaction with the school, as a result of its strict policies, its discipline structure, the all-girls environment, or personal conflicts with other students, teachers, or administrators.

About Harper students in general, Mrs. Sanders, the school's U.S. History teacher, says:

The students are very interesting. I think they're really smart, and I think that over my three years here I've learned to give them more credit than I did in the beginning because a lot of them have very difficult circumstances that they've come from and they are still really dedicated to school; they're intelligent, and I think that maybe not everyone gives them enough credit.

Mrs. Sanders affirms the students' academic potential while also applauding their tenacity in remaining focused on their work despite the many challenges that they face in their home lives. However, Mrs. Sanders is sure to clarify that her work to keep students on the path to academic success has its frustrations:

They're definitely challenging on a daily basis, and I think part of that is the class sizes, at least for me. It's kind of overwhelming because I feel like I can never give everyone enough attention. I think that they're great. I think they need a lot of adult guidance...

Here she speaks of the critical role that the adults at Harper play in the lives of the students and alludes to the great amount of need that students have for individual support. Moreover, Mrs. Sanders touches on one of the challenges of teaching at an urban public school in an under-funded district – the large class sizes. She cites this policy as one of the institutional barriers that prevents her from being able to give more of her time and

attention to each of her students. (Student-teacher relationships at Harper will be interrogated further in Chapter 5.)

Mrs. Attle believes that every year, Harper students' focus on their academic success at school,

...gets a little better. I hear them say to their teachers, "Hey! Where's our Exit Ticket [a written check-for-understanding students submit at the end of class]?" They get that they should be having more... Kids are more invested in their own learning. The younger kids are wanting to know more.

The school's focus on learning is an important tenet of the culture at Harper and continued messaging in this vein from administrators and teachers further encourages students' focus on their academic growth above the other aspects of their high school experience.

Harper Leadership Academy for Girls is a unique place, given its positionality as an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. Yet it also has many features and challenges that are typical of other high schools in the large city on the East Coast in which it is situated. The context of the school's location, structure, programs, and people described throughout this chapter, sets the stage for understanding student engagement at the school, which is the focus of Chapter 5. In order to provide additional background on the people whose experiences with engagement at Harper are interrogated most frequently and in the most detail in Chapter 5, the following section offers descriptions of the study's four "key" participants.

### **"Key" Participants**

There were four students at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls who served as the "key" participants in this study on student engagement at their school. They

participated in both phases of the study (the focus group sessions and personal interviews), and they agreed to let me shadow them through their days at school and interview their guardians and teachers (see Table 3.1 for an overview of the study's phases). Each young woman is linked to one of the four domains in the engagement and achievement matrix, based on her responses to the initial survey on engagement. She then participated in a domain-specific focus group, and her interview responses were coded in relation to her domain label as well.

		ENGAGEMENT	
		High	Low
ACHIEVEMENT	High	CIERRA "Adjusted"	NAFEESAH "Disconnected"
	Low	RAVEN "Overwhelmed"	KELLY "Disaffected"

*Figure 4.3.* Achievement and engagement matrix with names for each of the four focus groups.

Based on each student's experiences with achievement and engagement at Harper, I assigned names to each of the focus groups for clear and easy reference to the students from these groups in the next chapter (see Figure 4.3).

Below I offer descriptions of each student in order to provide context for the sentiments that they share about their schooling at Harper that are included in Chapter 5. Following the description of each "key" participant, I have included a table that identifies the "witnesses" to the participant's engagement in school- one of her guardians and two

of her teachers. The descriptions here of the four girls are informed by my interactions with them throughout each phase of the research study, with the period of our regular interactions towards the end of the study spanning approximately four months.

### **Cierra – “Adjusted”**

Cierra is a high-achieving, highly engaged 10<sup>th</sup> grader at Harper. She began attending Harper in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade because it was her neighborhood school and because her older sister already attended the school and was happy there. Cierra has a younger sister currently in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade at Harper. Her older sister graduated from Harper last year at the top of her class and is currently in the second semester of her freshman year at a small liberal arts college about two hours away from Cierra’s family’s home.

Cierra typically wears the school uniform with the standard gray pants, but sometimes she changes it up and wears her blue polo shirt with the school’s logo along with the approved plaid skirt. Cierra does not embellish her appearance with accessories other than modest-size drop or hoop metallic earrings. She carries a black messenger bag for storing her books and papers from class, all of which she keeps organized and neat in subject-specific binders. She can be caught wearing a smile on her face, and laughing and talking with friends during her brisk walk to her next class, or as she pulls out her notebook and begins her “Do Now” assignment at the start of class. Cierra is an African American 15-year old young woman of medium skin tone who has black shoulder-length hair that she either wears down or pulled back into a ponytail. She is about 5’4” in height and has a slim and fit build. She always wears black sneakers with her uniform.

Cierra is enthusiastic about just about everything related to her school. She enjoys her classes, her relationships with her teachers, her friends, and her after-school activities.

She believes that she is learning a tremendous amount and that she is being challenged in her classes. She appreciates the school most for its College Pathways program and the support that students receive as they prepare for college- specifically, through the school's college trips, college fair, and college representative visits. Cierra has been enrolled in the Business Institute since the start of her 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, and consequently, has taken two years' worth of coursework in Accounting. As a result of this focus, she now has ambitions of pursuing a business degree in college, and she loves the fact that she's been with the same cohort of students and same teacher throughout her Accounting coursework at Harper.

The two teachers of hers with whom I spoke describe teaching Cierra as “a pleasure”. They portray her as self-motivated and driven to succeed. Cierra participates regularly in class discussions and completes all of her in-class assignments, even if her peers are disruptive or less engaged. The teachers' only complaints about her work, which Cierra recognizes and vows to amend, is that she has not submitted some of her homework assignments this year. Cierra supports her classmates in their learning, and often seeks out her teachers' help after school if she is confused about something from class or would like additional feedback about her work. Cierra has participated as a member of the Harper's field hockey and basketball teams. She is currently a founding member of the school's a cappella choral group and she often assists the art teacher after school with the completion of a mural in the main hallway of the school. Cierra is well liked by her peers, and she floats easily through academic and social situations with girls from various grade levels.

The “adjusted” label fits Cierra because she has found a healthy and happy balance between her drive to succeed academically in school and her interest in being a contributing member of the school community. Cierra’s first priority is always her schoolwork, but she enjoys supplementing her academic experience at Harper with involvement on the school’s sports teams and in its choral group. Her good relationships with her teachers are facilitated by regular conversations, sometimes initiated by Cierra and sometimes by her teachers, about her progress in class. Her relationships with her peers are also good; she enjoys the company of her classmates throughout her school day, and she ignores the peers who are disruptive to her learning. Cierra’s focus on her future and the attainment of a college degree influences the kind of student that she is at Harper. She recognizes what the school is able to offer her in terms of academic challenge and college-bound programming and she takes advantage of every opportunity that comes her way. This description of Cierra as “adjusted” also serves as a general description of the three other students who participated in the high engagement/ high achievement focus group.

Table 4.5.

*Cierra’s ‘Witnesses’*

Role	Name	Demographic Characteristics	Relationship
Guardian	Tonya Herring	Black Woman	Mother
Teacher	Derek Bowman	White Man	4 <sup>th</sup> period; English I
Teacher	Matt Kendrick	White Man	9 <sup>th</sup> period; Geometry Honors

**Nafeesah – “Disconnected”**

Nafeesah is a high-achieving student at Harper, but has demonstrated low levels of engagement academically and socially. She is a current 11<sup>th</sup> grader at Harper, though Nafeesah began attending the school at the start of 10<sup>th</sup> grade, following five years of an online home-schooling program that was facilitated by the state and supervised by her mother. When Nafeesah’s mother began to take classes at the local community college in pursuit of an associate’s degree, she enrolled her children in their district’s neighborhood public schools. This meant that Nafeesah and her younger sister began to attend Harper, while their brother began school at the neighborhood boys’ school, Abbott.

Nafeesah is a slender 16-year old young woman who wears the traditional Muslim burqa, and she wears it in the navy-blue uniform color of the high school students. Nafeesah often accents her clothing with a small purse. She carries a backpack on one shoulder and transports a large binder of her school papers in her arms as she transitions between classes. Nafeesah is a light-skinned young woman who is about 5’7” tall. She speaks of enjoying make-up and fashion, though these two interests are not apparent in either her appearance or in her conversations with classmates.

Nafeesah’s two teacher witnesses would describe her as a bit of a mystery. She is a very bright and capable young woman who began the school year submitting high-quality work, but has neglected to turn in her assignments as of late. She only speaks in class when she is spoken to. Her History teacher is pleasantly surprised with the insights that Nafeesah is able to share when prompted to do so. Otherwise, Nafeesah often appears bored in class and she does not interact much with her teachers or her peers.

Nafeesah speaks of her lack of interest in her schoolwork as being related to an interest in fashion that is not supported through the curriculum at Harper. She was enrolled in the Early Childhood Education Institute last year as a 10<sup>th</sup> grader, which had piqued her interest some in childcare work, but since the teacher of that Institute no longer works at the school, the Institute has become defunct. Nafeesah does not find any of the current offerings of after-school programs appealing to her as she would be interested in a crafts or fashion club, neither of which is available. She is most disgruntled, however, about the distance that she must walk to school – eighteen blocks – without the benefit of a pass for public transportation. She also complains of the strict uniform policy that prevents her from wearing a “non-logo” sweater or jacket if she is cold in class. Nafeesah wishes to return to her online home-schooling situation, as she has gotten tired of the drama among the girls at school, but her mother’s busy school schedule requires that Nafeesah and her siblings continue to attend their neighborhood schools, where they can be supervised by adults during the day.

The best way to describe Nafeesah’s fit within Harper is to explain that she does not really have one, which makes her largely “disconnected” to and within the school. While Nafeesah scores ‘proficient’ on the school’s benchmark assessments and demonstrates the potential to complete all of her academic work at a high level, she has begun to lose interest in her school work and neglect to submit assignments because of the ‘disconnect’ that she experiences with her academics, her peers, her teachers, and the school in general. Nafeesah complains that her classes and assignments are “boring.” She rarely interacts with her peers or her teachers in class, and she is frustrated immensely by the uniform policy at Harper that prevents her from wearing a ‘non-logo’ sweater or

jacket. Nafeesah follows the school rules, though sometimes, begrudgingly. She does not bring a cell phone to school because it, like the uniform policy, is a ‘non-negotiable,’ though large numbers of Harper students are known to sneak them in daily. There are no extra-curricular activities that interest her. She does what she needs to do with her schoolwork because of her and her mother’s expectations for her academic progress. School is “school” – Nafeesah does not identify one thing that makes Harper a special place for her. She has expressed to her mother her interest in transferring to a school that has coursework in her area of interest, fashion design, but her mother explained that she would be more likely to receive scholarship money to college if she graduated in the top of her class of a small school like Harper. For this reason, Nafeesah stays at Harper and almost seems to “endure” her schooling there.

The other four students at Harper who participated in the “disconnected” focus group with Nafeesah have experiences at school that largely mimic hers. Though what makes Nafeesah different from the other four is that she glides through her school day nearly entirely under the radar from others in the school. She does not draw attention to herself in any way, whether to raise her hand and offer a comment or question in class or to speak with someone in the hallway between classes. Nafeesah is not cold or unfriendly; rather, she does not take the initiative to engage in conversation. The other “disconnected” students who participated in Nafeesah’s focus group are not as socially removed from their peers and teachers as she is, though their relationships with others in the school are sometimes contentious. While Nafeesah has some negative comments about a few school staff members and her peers, she does not have negative interactions with them.

Table 4.6.

*Nafeesah's 'Witnesses'*

Role	Name	Demographic Characteristics	Relationship
Guardian	Tammy Anderson	Black Woman	Mother
Teacher	Brooke Sanders	White Woman	7 <sup>th</sup> period; AP U.S. History
Teacher	Eric Jones	White Man	3 <sup>rd</sup> period; English III

**Kelly – “Disaffected”**

Kelly is a 10<sup>th</sup> grader who left Harper in January 2011 to pursue her high school degree from an online home-schooling program operated by the state. She had attended school at Harper since February of her 9<sup>th</sup> grade year when she transferred to the school from a neighborhood school elsewhere in the district. Kelly did not exhibit either academic or social engagement while she attended Harper, nor did she achieve at a high academic level.

Kelly is a slender African American 16-year old young woman who carried a large brown leather purse for storage of her notebook and pen for taking notes in class, and she carried her textbooks in her arms between classes. She sometimes wore ballet flats or Ugg boots with her uniform plaid skirt or gray pants, and she often accessorized with colorful earrings and sometimes with colorful silk scarves (which were not allowed).

Kelly's guardian, her grandmother, explains that she pulled Kelly out of Harper because of the dissatisfaction that she and Kelly had with the school, particularly the perceived lack of academic rigor in Kelly's classes, the lack of involvement in Kelly's academic success from the school staff, and the school's chaotic and punitive climate.

Prior to leaving Harper, Kelly had not been successful academically at the school; this was not because of a lack of talent or potential, said her teachers, but because of Kelly's lack of effort with her classwork and homework. Kelly earned average scores on tests and completed satisfactory to good work on projects, but she was not able to earn high grades in her classes because the majority of her work- classwork and homework- was not submitted. Kelly would often sleep, write notes, talk to her friends, eat chips, and drink iced tea during class. She claimed to not be interested or challenged in her classes. She was not involved in any extra-curricular activities and she regularly arrived to school at 9:00am, a full hour after the start of the official school day. She was frustrated by the 'drama' among the other students, though she was friendly with everyone and became quite close with three girlfriends she met at the school. Kelly has aspirations to attend New York University (NYU) for fashion design. She, too, had issues with the discipline structure of the school, though she only got in trouble for her tardiness. Kelly did not like the lack of *autonomy* she experienced at Harper and she could not understand why a school that wanted to send every one of its students to college would suspend students as regularly as she believed Harper did. Her grandmother hopes that Kelly will be successful with the online schooling-from-home program because the curriculum is tailor-made for Kelly and she can advance at her own, fast pace. Moreover, she received phone calls from two of her online course teachers during the first week of instruction, and her grandmother takes that as a sign that Kelly will be held accountable for her work by her teachers at this school.

The "disaffected" focus group, comprised of Kelly and two others students, Donnera and Drema, received this label because the young women articulated that there

is nothing about Harper that engages them socially or academically. The young women in the group had few friendships with their peers. Kelly was observed to have had a group of three close friends while she was at Harper, yet the time that she spent with them at school did not prevent her from leaving Harper. Donnera was frequently observed in the cafeteria eating lunch across from only one other student with whom she engaged in infrequent conversation. Drema spoke of having a few girlfriends in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Both Donnera and Drema attribute their lack of *relatedness* to their extreme frustrations with the ‘drama’ among the girls at Harper; moreover, they believe that the single-sex nature of the school exacerbates girls’ problems with each other. The girls also talked about their disdain for school policies, the lack of relevance and rigor in their classes, and the lack of extra-curricular activities and school programs that interest them.

It is important to make note of two points when describing the students categorized in the “disaffected” focus group. First, Kelly, Donnera, and Drema do not represent the most disaffected students at Harper. They are often late to school or to class and they have negative things to say about just about everything at Harper, but they are actually attending school and they volunteered to participate in this study. Second, all three of these young women want to feel connected to and do well in school. The most disaffected students at Harper are truant, disruptive in their classes, and/or do not care about their academic work. The data suggest that there are institutional and pedagogical features of Harper that impede these “disaffected” students’ academic and social engagement in school, which then translates into their low achievement. This data will be explored in the next chapter.

Table 4.7.

*Kelly's 'Witnesses'*

Role	Name	Demographic Characteristics	Relationship
Guardian	Laverne Redman	Black Woman	Grandmother
Teacher	Derek Bowman	White Man	4 <sup>th</sup> period; English I
Teacher	Matt Kendrick	White Man	7 <sup>th</sup> period; Geometry

**Raven – “Overwhelmed”**

Raven is a 12<sup>th</sup> grader who seeks to make her mark on the school before graduation in June. She transferred to Harper at the start of her 11<sup>th</sup> grade year from an all-girls magnet public school in the district, following a disagreement with the Principal there. She was skeptical about Harper at first, but quickly found her niche after developing a friendship with her long-lost cousin who helped to ease her transition into the new school. Raven has come to love the school, as she has developed relationships with the adults- relationships that she believed weren't possible at her previous school, where she felt “like a number.” She and her mother believe that she has been able to shine at Harper, and the opportunity to lead other students in the creation of new programs and school initiatives has made her one of the most recognizable students at the school. Unfortunately, Raven's eagerness to participate in the school's social life has compromised her academic success this year. Raven is extremely bright and capable, as demonstrated in her enrollment in the school's only three Advanced Placement (AP) courses: Literature, U.S. History, and Calculus. However, she has struggled to balance the responsibilities of her schoolwork with that of her commitments as the founder and president of the Big Sisters/ Little Sisters program, the 'mail intern' for the College

Pathways office, a member of the field hockey team, a writer on the school newsletter, and an unofficial assistant to Mrs. Attle, Harper's Principal.

Raven is a bubbly and energetic, though sometimes moody, young African American woman of 17 years of age. She accessorizes her uniform with glasses, earrings, bows or headbands, funky shoes, and colorful bracelets and nail polish. She is taller than most of her peers at 5'10" and is a little heavier in size. She gets along with nearly everyone, though she claims she has just a handful of few close friends. She is extremely close to many of the teachers and school staff members, and is the school's biggest fan of the College Pathways program. She takes her future in college very seriously and had submitted several college applications by the early Fall.

Raven and four other students comprise the focus group labeled "overwhelmed" because they have difficulty balancing their academic responsibilities with their involvement in the "fun" aspects of school life at Harper, such as their extra-curricular activities and friendships. Students like Raven, who have the intellectual capacity and instructional background to achieve at high levels, become overwhelmed as a result of the many directions in which they are pulled. These students often defer to a focus on their public persona within the school and neglect the private matter of their schoolwork. This is evident in Raven's experience at Harper; she moves a mile a minute during the school day and says "yes" to all of school staff members' requests for help. Yet, as shared below, Raven confides that she is struggling:

This book I'm reading now, it's more chapters, but they're not as thick. The last book we were reading, we were reading like a hundred pages a night. Then we'd have like 60 questions a night. That's only for one class. How am I supposed to do all my other work? Something wasn't going to be able to get done. I still have to sleep and do my chores at home.... It's like nobody has the perfect grade or somebody who does doesn't have any

social life. I'm just a social person, so the balance is hard to keep all my schoolwork together and what I have to do at home together and my friends and everything else.

The students in the “overwhelmed” focus group are highly engaged in school, which speaks to their positive feelings about their classes, teachers, peers, and extra-curricular activities at Harper. However, they experience low achievement, which may be due to a lack of attention to their schoolwork (as in Raven’s case) or because of poor instruction from their teachers. They have not become disengaged with school, however, because they have been ‘hooked’ by aspects of their educational experience at Harper that are outside of their academic work. Some even “enjoy” their academic work, but their interest and their behavioral engagement in class and in learning activities do not translate into deeper cognitive engagement and academic progress. I will further explore Raven and the “overwhelmed” group’s engagement in the next chapter.

Table 4.9.

*Raven’s ‘Witnesses’*

Role	Name	Demographic Characteristics	Relationship
Guardian	Nancy Cooper	Black Woman	Mother
Teacher	Brooke Sanders	White Woman	7 <sup>th</sup> period; AP U.S. History
Teacher	Eric Jones	White Man	9 <sup>th</sup> period; AP Literature

This chapter has offered descriptions of the school site and the study’s key participants, all of which provide the necessary context for the exploration of student engagement at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls that follows in Chapter 5. The school, in its sixth year as an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school, has seen

the academic achievement of its students grow from three percent (3%) to fifty percent (50%) proficiency on the state assessment. Harper students' achievement has been facilitated by their social and academic engagement in school. In the following chapter, I will describe what student engagement at Harper looks like, in relation to the theoretical frameworks introduced in Chapter 2, and what elements or features of the school that were initially introduced in this chapter facilitate or inhibit student engagement at Harper. This exploration of student engagement at Harper will inform which practices the school should continue and which it should discontinue in its efforts to support students to greater levels of academic achievement.

## CHAPTER 5

## ENGAGEMENT AT HARPER

The findings that have emerged from this study complicate the single-sex literature, specifically the argument by Riordan (in Datnow & Hubbard, 2002) that the *proacademic choice* of students and their parents to attend a single-sex school is the key explanatory variable of single-sex schools' positive effects. Single-sex *public* schools are rare in the United States and those that exist are overwhelmingly magnet schools with admissions criteria. Harper is different in that it is a *neighborhood* high school; the girls who attend school there do so by default of their residence in the Riverbend neighborhood. They do not apply to the school (though 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls in the district who live outside of Harper's catchment area may elect to enroll as 9<sup>th</sup> graders). There are no admissions requirements. According to federal law, attendance at a single-sex public school must be a choice; and to the extent that once they are enrolled at Harper students can request to transfer from the school, and they receive the Principal's permission to do so, it is.

However, the vast majority of students who attend Harper do not view their enrollment in the school as a choice. Even Mrs. Attle, Harper's current Principal, acknowledges that girls who are not admitted into the district's special admission high schools but who live in the neighborhood are required to attend Harper. Furthermore, there are student participants in the study who indicate that they do not like attending an all-girls school and that they wish that either boys attended Harper, too, or that they themselves attended a different school, one that was coeducational. It is, therefore, it incorrect to say that the girls who attend Harper have made a *proacademic choice* to

attend the school, like the clear choice made by students who attend selective single-sex public schools. Yet the students at Harper experience academic success at this all-girls school that either meets or exceeds the levels of students' success at other neighborhood schools in the district, and all but one of those schools (Abbott) is coeducational. These data suggest that the variable of *proacademic choice* may not play the key explanatory role others argue it does in the success of students who attend single-sex schools. The *proacademic choice* variable cannot be measured at Harper because it does not exist there; therefore, students' *proacademic choice* to attend the school was not a critical factor in an explanation of the academic success of students at Harper. The data presented here explore what student engagement looks like at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls and how the features of the school that promote or inhibit student engagement may ultimately influence student achievement in profound ways.

I chose to study student engagement at Harper because I was intrigued by the school's statistics. In 2008, Harper's graduation rate was ninety-seven percent (97%) and its college acceptance rate was ninety-five percent (95%), according to the figures that school staff shared with me and other educators in my professional network. These statistics were impressive both on their own and in juxtaposition to the forty-eight percent (48%) average graduation rate of high school students in the large city on the East Coast in which Harper is located. Given my interest in urban education reform efforts that may stem the dropout crisis, I wondered, "How have Harper students found such tremendous success as compared to their peers in the district? How might the all-girls model of the school contribute to the students' success?"

Through a review of the literature on dropouts, I recognized that *student*

*engagement* is a key aspect of schools' abilities to retain students through graduation. From there I hypothesized that student engagement could be a key component of Harper's success. The "single-sex" literature posits that such a model for schooling is inherently more engaging; however, the studies of single-sex education have been conducted in *selective* schools that their students make a *proacademic choice* to attend. Harper is *non-selective*; the young women from the Riverbend neighborhood automatically attend Harper if they have not been accepted into one of the district's selective high schools. I thought that an exploration of student engagement at an all-girls' *non-selective* public school with such successful outcomes for students was bound to illuminate findings about the benefits of a single-sex school model for students in an urban setting. I hoped to specifically identify what student engagement looks like at Harper, and what features of the school promote, and what features inhibit, students' engagement. I sought data to support answers to the questions floating in the back of my mind: *Could Harper Leadership Academy for Girls offer a school model to emulate within urban education reform efforts designed to stem the dropout crisis? Could the school be a "site of transformation" for students, educating them in ways that lead to social and financial trajectories that are different than those typical of women in the Riverbend neighborhood?*

Soon into my data collection at the school, a different picture of the school began to emerge and I realized that Harper's story was more complex than I had first believed. I learned that the school's graduation rate reflects the percentage of 12<sup>th</sup> graders who graduate at the end of their senior year, not the percentage of students who enrolled at the school in the 7<sup>th</sup> or the 9<sup>th</sup> grades and continued there through graduation. Moreover,

while nearly all of Harper's 12<sup>th</sup> graders are accepted into college, only one-third of Harper students matriculate during the first fall semester following their graduation from Harper. There have been amazing successes in Harper's efforts to be a "site of transformation" for students. However, there have also been tremendous challenges. Harper's stakeholders identify the school as one that is college-prep; yet the supports are not consistently present for all students to experience Harper as a college-prep school. The extent to which students experience Harper as "college prep" and are academically and socially engaged reflects whether or not students experience the school as transformative or reproductive. Understanding what student engagement at Harper looks like, as well as the features of the school that promote or inhibit engagement, will identify how Harper is a "site of transformation" for some students and a "site of reproduction" for others.

This chapter aims to provide analytic descriptions of how engagement or disaffection is experienced by students who attend Harper Leadership Academy for Girls, an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school, and what features of the school promote or inhibit students' engagement. Throughout the analysis of engagement and disaffection in this chapter I will rely on the literature and theoretical frameworks shared in Chapter 2, the methodology of the study explained in Chapter 3, and the context of Harper described in Chapter 4. Conclusions about and implications of the data presented here in Chapter 5 will be addressed in Chapter 6.

### **Academic Achievement and Mobility at Harper**

Harper is considered successful within the urban district in which it is located because of the school's achievement as compared to its district counterparts and because

of its growth in the five years since its turnaround. Students' scores on the state assessment have increased from an average of three percent (3%) proficiency to an average of fifty percent (50%) proficiency over five years. The data suggest that this success may be attributed to the types and levels of students' engagement at Harper, which in turn support their academic achievement in school. Yet Harper's staff, led by Mrs. Stacy Attle, recognizes that the school's present level of success is not good enough for its students. Furthermore, disaffected students are leaving Harper.<sup>11</sup> However, these students may not receive the academic and social support that they left Harper to find at another neighborhood district school or at a charter school, which may lead them to withdraw from high school altogether. Moreover, Harper's vision to interrupt the social reproduction of the Riverbend neighborhood through the education of its young women is compromised if it cannot keep all of its students and support their academic success in the school through graduation.

Harper's mission and vision demand that all students at the school score 'advanced' on the PSSA and be accepted into and ultimately graduate from the colleges or universities of their choice. The data suggest that Harper's current level of academic success, fifty percent (50%) of students scoring 'proficient' or 'advanced' on the state assessment, and current college matriculation rate of thirty-two percent (32%), are not higher because of the varied levels of engagement experienced by the students throughout

---

<sup>11</sup> Students leave Harper either because they move (and Harper is therefore no longer their neighborhood school), or they transfer to another school within the district. It is not known how many students leave Harper for one reason or the other. The only data available are the total enrollment and withdrawal numbers per year. An average of 115 students withdraw from Harper each year. It can be assumed that a number of them leave because they are dissatisfied with some aspect of their educational experience at Harper. Moreover, the most disaffected students who participated in this study have either left Harper or they plan to leave Harper in the near future.

their school days and across the academic year in the *Involvement*, *Structure*, and *Autonomy Support* domains of engagement. However, the data do not suggest that these markers represent Harper students' threshold for academic success. By addressing some of the institutional and pedagogical features of the school that inhibit, interrupt, or cause inconsistencies in students' engagement in the domains of *Relatedness*, *Competence*, and *Autonomy*, I argue that Harper could see its students' academic success and sense of belonging within the school increase. Moreover, fewer students would request transfers to leave Harper as a result of their disaffection, making it more likely that the school will be able to interrupt the social reproduction of the Riverbend neighborhood.

### **A Site of Great Possibilities and Missed Opportunities**

Harper Leadership Academy for Girls is different from all other neighborhood public high schools in the large urban district in which it is located. First, it is an all-girls school with no admissions requirements; girls who live in the Riverbend neighborhood automatically attend Harper if they are not accepted into one of the district's selective high schools. Second, Harper has developed mission and vision statements that communicate the school's instructional focus, and 'college' is positioned as the educational outcome that the school intends to support students to pursue. In this vein it is understood that Harper wants to do something different than other neighborhood schools in the district on behalf of the girls who live in Riverbend. The school's leadership wants to promote *college* as the girls' escape route from the cycle of poverty that plagues their community. This ethos has been the driving force behind Harper's efforts to support students' academic growth throughout the school's five-year history.

There is incredible possibility for Harper to be a "site of transformation" within

the Riverbend neighborhood as it works to alter the social and financial trajectories of its students through their education. Indeed, the possibilities inherent in the college-prep education that Harper makes available to some of its students are great. However, the majority of Harper students are unable to experience a college-prep education at Harper. In fact, their experiences at the school highlight the ways in which Harper often operates as a site of social reproduction, in direct conflict with its mission. By not making a college-prep education available to all of its students, yet promoting a college-prep identity, Harper misses opportunities to engage all of its students in ways that would prove to be transformative rather than reproductive. Consequently, only a small portion of Harper's student body actually experiences the transformation that the school desires to facilitate within its girls and eventually within the Riverbend neighborhood.

The great possibilities and the missed opportunities at Harper are realized in the varied levels of students' engagement in the school. Students who are able to take advantage of the aspects of Harper's college-prep identity are engaged in school and experience academic success. Students who are resigned to the aspects of their school that resemble those of other neighborhood high schools, despite the promises of college-prep that they hear from school staff, disengage from the school and their education, though in different ways and to different extents. The current institutional, pedagogical, and social structures at Harper are most effective for the students in the "adjusted" focus group. For them, an education at Harper offers a great possibility for academic success beyond which that is typically experienced by those in other neighborhood schools in the district. Harper and its various structures are somewhat effective for the students in the "overwhelmed," and "disconnected" focus groups, though the possibility for students to

experience their neighborhood's social reproduction (or not) is present given their varied levels of engagement and achievement. The possibility of experiencing a transformation at Harper is most unlikely for the students in the "disaffected" focus group. Their low levels of engagement and achievement at Harper highlight the many opportunities that the school has missed in its mission to see all students succeed in ways that interrupt the social reproduction present in Riverbend. In order to capitalize on the possibility of being a "site for transformation," it is critical for Harper to understand student engagement at the school, identify places where its structures support students well, and explore opportunities where it can better support all students to engage and achieve at high levels.

### **The Case for 'College'**

The story of engagement at Harper begins with the school's efforts to invest its students in an aspiration to attend college. In its identity as a college-prep school, Harper staff members continually communicate this college message during school events and on bulletin boards around the building. "Harper girls all go to college," is the message that students hear from school administrators during grade-level assemblies on their first day of school. In addition to the auditory references to college, students receive visual ones as well. A bulletin board outside of the library posts the expected salaries of people who graduate from high school, those who have some college education, those with college degrees, and those with advanced degrees. The school hopes that students will be motivated in their pursuit of higher education by the monetary value of each degree. In this explicit way, Harper challenges the girls to recognize the power that their education can have in altering their social and financial life trajectories.

In late August 2009 staff members welcomed the school's newest students to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade New Student Orientation. As the 7<sup>th</sup> graders entered the building for the first time, they were presented with a new assignment planner, a folder emblazoned with a sticker that read, "Smart girls go to Harper," *Smarties* candies, and a t-shirt. The gray t-shirts had "Class of 2015" and "Smart girls go to Harper" printed on them in navy ink, and students were required to wear them for the rest of their day at the school. As the 7<sup>th</sup> graders took their seats in the auditorium and waited for the Orientation program to begin, a Power Point presentation projected onto a large screen scrolled through the graduation photos and college information of Harper's most recent graduating class. It is clear that Harper staff members intended to set the tone early and often for its newest students about the expectation that they will all go to college.

The data indicate that this explicit and early messaging about college is effective. Cierra, the study's key participant from the "adjusted" focus group, says that "college bound" is the first word of any three she would choose to describe her school "because ever since you come here in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, they get you into thinking about things in college, like how to go there... We go on college trips. Get to see campuses and dorm rooms and stuff." Cierra's mother, Ms. Herring, concurs. She says, "I like the College Pathways program. I like that the most [about Harper]. The college tours and the different experiences [the students] get. A lot of high schools don't do that." According to Ms. Herring, Harper is distinct from other neighborhood high schools in the district because of its message about and support for students' enrollment in college. Mr. Matt Kendrick, the 10<sup>th</sup> grade Geometry teacher at Harper, highlights how students' preparation for

college is widely understood to be the foundational premise of the school's academic program:

[The girls] almost all really seem to care about their grades and how well they are doing. I think a lot of that could be attributed to the vision and agenda that Harper pushes on them from the time they are in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and on, because they get that they are going to be going to college... so they really do care about what they are doing.

The data indicate the high value that these stakeholders of Harper have for the school's efforts to present the 'case' for college to the girls.

Harper's reputation as a college-prep school among the district's nonselective neighborhood schools precedes it. As a 12<sup>th</sup> grader applying to college, Raven, the study's key participant from the "overwhelmed" focus group, claims that Harper "has the best college-bound program." When Raven was looking to transfer from a selective all-girls school in the district to a new school for the start of her 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, a district administrator recommended Harper. Raven explains:

He called it the greatest kept secret inside the city because the College Pathways program is really great and they want you to do well. He said it's a way for you to stand out. If you're a good student, you'll stand out really good here. You get money for graduating and all that stuff. Basically, it's a good place to go.

In alignment with the sentiments expressed by the administrator, Raven, Cierra, and Mrs. Herring, a local lifestyle magazine publication recognized Harper in 2009 for having the best college-counseling program among all public schools in the geographic region. As is evident here, Harper's focus on orienting students towards an ambition to attend college is highly important to many of the school's stakeholders and it is something that Harper does well.

The students who attend Harper live in a low-income neighborhood where few adults have graduated from college. This message about college and the school's belief that all students can achieve at that level is a powerful one for students who may have never heard it before. Jennifer, a 12<sup>th</sup> grade student last year, shares about how she had not considered college as an option before hearing Harper's messaging:

In my old school, I wasn't really thinking about college. I was just going to get a job, but now I came here so I've really got something to do. I can get a better education. I wasn't thinking about college or nothing 'til I got to this school.

Another student named Kierra adds, "Since I've been at Harper, I've been on, like, twenty college trips. I found out about colleges I didn't even know existed." A student named Tamika in the "disconnected" focus group also appreciates the school's efforts to support students' aspirations for college. She says, "Even though I complain about all the work, I know that [the teachers] actually are getting us ready for college. I like that a lot." The level of buy-in to the school's message about college that the students express here is critical to Harper's overall mission of supporting its students to achieve at high levels. This is where the possibility for Harper to be a "site of transformation" (Horvat & Davis, 2010) or "liberation" (Freire, 1970; Mehan et al., 1996) is most apparent. The data indicate that Harper effectively messages 'college' to its students. However, only through the academic success of the young women who attend the school can Harper interrupt the social reproduction of the Riverbend neighborhood. The data that I explore throughout the remainder of the chapter highlights the ways in which Harper's 'case' for college is and is not supported within Harper's various structures, as indicated by students' academic and social engagement at the school.

## **Academic Engagement at Harper:**

### **Strengths and Strains of a “College” Prep District School**

As important as it is, Harper’s message about college is compromised by the nature of the instructional program available to the majority of students at Harper. Despite staff members’ constant messaging about college as the goal that the students should work towards, many girls realize that the instructional focus of their academic program is their preparation for the state assessment, not for college. The students who are enrolled in Harper’s Honors and AP classes have access to a college-prep curriculum, but they make up a small group. The contradiction between the promise of college-prep and the reality that their academic instruction is focused on the state assessment is most acute for students who are not enrolled in Honors and AP classes. Consequently, the possibility for Harper to be a “site of transformation” as a result of its identity as a college-prep school is not fully realized. Instead, what results is a missed opportunity to engage students in ways that will ensure their success through high school graduation. Rather than focusing on what skills, tools, and attributes students need to acquire for college, Harper places instructional priority on students’ preparation for the state assessment. This situation threatens Harper’s ability to prepare all of its students for college and to prevent the reproduction of the economic inequality in the Riverbend neighborhood. The specific consequences of the college-prep versus “test prep” tension for students’ engagement in school are significant as they affect Harper’s ability to be a “site of “transformation.” Therefore, the reality of this situation will be described and analyzed throughout the chapter.

**Stress for “the Test”**

The focus of Harper’s instructional program is not discrete benchmarks for students’ preparation for college, but rather targets for students’ growth on the state assessment. This determination is clearly articulated in the school’s Big Goals for student achievement (see Table 4.4). These goals were developed by Harper’s administration at the start of the school year and are printed on large neon posters and posted in every classroom. In Harper’s Big Goals for the 2010-2011 school year, student achievement is measured by gains on the state standardized assessment for 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> graders and by gains in guided group work (a test-preparation strategy) for the school’s 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders.

Harper’s focus on students’ preparation for the state assessment rather than for college is a direct result of the intense pressure from the school district for the improvement in students’ scores on the test. In the era of accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act, there are serious fiscal consequences for schools and districts that do not see dramatic gains in the academic achievement of their students. This achievement is currently measured through students’ performance on an assessment that is administered by the state department of education annually. The intense pressure associated with making “Adequate Yearly Progress” or “AYP” on the state assessment plays out in students’ experiences with academic engagement at Harper in several ways, which will be described throughout this section.

**District-mandated curricula and various test-prep initiatives.**

In an effort to promote consistency in students’ educational experiences and to largely mitigate for the unknown variability in teacher quality, the district mandates

utilization of standardized curricula for all grades and content areas. These curricula include mandates for the texts that teachers across the district must use in their classrooms as well as ‘planning and scheduling timelines’ that dictate exactly what objectives students should learn every day of the school year. These objectives are aligned with state standards in each content area and at each grade level; therefore, they should reflect the potential material included on the state assessment. Also in response to pressure from the district, Harper has developed several of its own initiatives through which students explicitly practice skills that will be tested on the state assessment with test-prep materials; some of the lessons and materials mimic the types of questions, passages, and formatting found on the state assessment. Students practice with these materials during “guided group” instruction with their teachers. Moreover, a “buddy system” is utilized in the months leading up to the state assessment. In this program, a teacher, on two or three occasions per week, provides additional support to students in a “buddy” English teacher’s classroom during his or her prep period. These initiatives are all measures to specifically support students’ access to and mastery of the material that will be included on the state assessment.

#### **Increased workload for teachers.**

One impact of the school’s focus on preparation for the state assessment is evident in a teacher’s description of how he managed the numerous responsibilities of his workload last year. In this example, Mr. Eric Jones admits that he did not have close relationship with the 12<sup>th</sup> graders that he taught last year in English because his attention was focused on his 11<sup>th</sup> graders as they prepared for the state assessment:

The problem was I was teaching 4 other sections of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, which was taking all my focus because of [the state assessment]... I didn't focus on instruction for [the 12<sup>th</sup> graders]- lesson planning and all this other stuff.

Consequently, the 12<sup>th</sup> graders in Mr. Jones' charge received little academic instruction in his English class during their final year at Harper as a result of not being enrolled in a "tested grade." He was able to largely ignore the educational needs of his 12<sup>th</sup> graders because the school's emphasis for instruction is placed on preparation for a test that 12<sup>th</sup> graders do not take.

Other teachers also feel the frustration that Mr. Jones expresses for his workload and the focus on the state assessment. In response to what he likes least about teaching at Harper, Mr. Kendrick replies:

The guided group pre-test and post-test that we have to give I can't stand. I feel like they take out a lot of class time. Just having to pull guided group and teach the material that's on the guided group pre-test and post-test, rather than pull a guided group to teach, re-teach, or mediate a lesson, maybe the lesson from the day before. [The guided group tests] are aligned with the PSSA, so it's not like they don't have to know the stuff, but I feel like for [the students] and for me, it's overwhelming.

In preparing his 10<sup>th</sup> grade Geometry students for the 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSA, Mr. Kendrick has to plan and teach two lessons to each of his classes every day, one that aligns with the district's curriculum and another that aligns specifically with this school initiative and test-prep strategy of "guided groups." He admits that he finds the expectations from school administrators overwhelming as they aim to ensure that all students are prepared to demonstrate academic gains on the state assessment. "I was trying to teach guided group lessons in 5 or 10 minutes that were probably 2- and 3-day lessons from Algebra II that the girls haven't even had yet," Mr. Kendrick adds. He questions whether the time

spent preparing specifically for the state assessment might be better spent on supporting students' mastery of their Geometry coursework that is aligned with the district curricula.

**Different expectations = different “tracks.”**

While Harper messages “college” to all students, the school simultaneously holds different expectations for students' achievement. Table 5.1 summarizes Harper's Big Goals for the percentage of students in each tested grade that the school anticipates will earn ‘proficient’ or ‘advanced’ scores on the state assessment. One can see that the school does not expect more than seventy-five percent (75%) of the students in each tested grade (7, 8, and 11) to score ‘proficient’ or ‘advanced’ on the state assessment. Twenty-five percent (25%) of the school's students are expected to score ‘Basic’ or ‘Below Basic’ on the state assessment this year.

Table 5.1.

*Harper's ‘Big Goals’ for students in the tested grades (2010-2011)*

Grade Level	Reading	Math
7 <sup>th</sup>	65% Proficiency	70% Proficiency
8 <sup>th</sup>	70% Proficiency	75% Proficiency
11 <sup>th</sup>	55% Proficiency	40% Proficiency

The goals above indicate that Harper seeks gains in student achievement of eleven percent (11%) to seventeen percent (17%) over last year's scores. The school's need for students' growth on the state assessment to meet these targets hints of the likelihood that the instruction for the majority of Harper students will focus on “test-prep.” This is despite the fact that Harper wants all of its students to attend college and several of the school's teachers acknowledge that preparation for the state assessment is not the same

as, nor is it an adequate substitution for, college preparation. The students who have already scored ‘proficient’ or ‘advanced’ are enrolled in Harper’s Honors and AP classes, in which the teachers have more flexibility with the curricula and the teachers are some of the most effective in the school. The school’s need to make “AYP” complicates the school’s message about college, as Harper’s instructional focus shifts to preparation for the state assessment for the vast majority of students who are not enrolled in Harper’s Honors and AP classes.

The availability of Honors and AP classes for some students while others are beholden to test-prep clearly delineates that academic “tracking” is present at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls. “Tracking” in schools facilitates social reproduction (Oakes, 1995; Oakes and Saunders, 2008), as students are explicitly prepared for different segments of the workforce. Students in the high “tracks” (the Honors and AP classes at Harper) experience critical and creative thinking, independent decision-making, and *autonomy* in their classes (Anyon, 1980), all of which prepare them for professional jobs. Students in the low “tracks” (those in the ‘regular’ classes at Harper) experience rote, mechanical instruction and are told to complete assignments without question.

While messages communicated to students by staff members indicate that all of Harper’s students will attend college, the school does not currently provide the supports and structures for the majority of its students to fully access and be successful with that opportunity. In fact, the current academic program at Harper, as it is split into college-prep and test-prep tracks, puts some students on the path to college while the ‘college’ message is experienced as empty rhetoric for others. The tracking that Harper engages in is a clear signal that an education at the school will not be transformative for all students,

and this is a reality that directly conflicts with the school's mission and vision to interrupt the social reproduction of the Riverbend neighborhood. In the section that follows, I will describe and analyze how students' experiences in either the college-prep or test-prep track impact their academic engagement in school.

### **Harper's Two Instructional "Tracks"**

#### **"College-prep."**

The comments from Cierra and Raven in "The Case for College" section at the start of the chapter characterize the sentiments of the Harper students from the "adjusted" and "overwhelmed" (highly engaged) focus groups, respectively. These students have clearly invested in Harper's messaging about college and they are enthusiastic about going to college. Moreover, they firmly believe that the academic preparation they receive at Harper will provide them with access to and success with a college education. Features of Harper such as the Honors and AP classes in which Cierra and Raven are enrolled, the relationships that students in these classes have with school staff members, and their connections with the programming of the College Pathways office have facilitated their engagement. As a result of their exposure to these features at Harper, Cierra and Raven very much consider their school to be "college-preparatory." This thrills both young women and pushes them to invest themselves even more during their time at Harper (Cierra through her academic work and Raven through her social commitments).

*Teaching students to be better "problem-solvers": Alternate curricula that emphasize rigor and high expectations.*

Cierra and Raven have access to the "college-preparatory" features of Harper

because both have achieved high scores on the state assessment. Their scores have granted them access to the school's limited-enrollment Honors and AP classes. Unlike most of the other classes that are offered at Harper, the instruction in these classes, comprised of Harper's most talented students, is not geared towards the state assessment. The teachers of these courses have recognized that their students require instruction and curricula that push their abilities to think in the critical and creative ways that will ultimately prepare them for college-level academic work. The tension between preparation for the state assessment and preparation for college has pushed Mr. Kendrick to reconsider how he teaches his 9<sup>th</sup> period Geometry Honors class in which Cierra is a student:

I really want to start trying to get them prepared for SATs. As much as the school district and even Harper is based on "you've got to do well on the [state assessment]," it doesn't prepare them for the SATs by any means...

Here Mr. Kendrick shares that he does not see students' preparation for the state assessment as adequate preparation for the SAT, the test used for colleges' admissions decisions and for predicting how well students will do in college. He has decided to challenge the students in his Honors class with a curriculum that he understands to be more relevant to their futures in college. The problem that he sees with the skills that are tested on the state assessment, and with instruction in explicit preparation for it, is that it is centered on the very performative aspects of mathematics and not on the deep mathematical reasoning involved in problem-solving at higher levels of cognitive functioning. He explains:

I'm trying to attack really two separate issues. One is kind of getting [students] used to problem-solving rather than just step-by-step processes which is really what the [state assessment] is about, and the other is getting the girls who say 'I don't know' and throw their pencil down or

never get a notebook out to realize that the answer is in front of them. They have to work to get it. That's one goal, really developing them as better problem-solvers.

The second point that Mr. Kendrick makes in the quotation shared above is that the girls need *structure* to support their feelings of *competence* with the learning material.

Students do not always have the confidence that they can meet the high expectations that are set for them, and he sees it as part of his job to support students' internalization of their identities as mathematicians.

The instruction in Mrs. Brooke Sanders' U.S. History AP class is largely grounded in "discovery-based learning," in which students conduct research on a question posed by the teacher and then they present their findings to the class. She describes other strategies for how she attempts to engage students in their learning:

I also try to differentiate by my content, so I do a lot of primary sources. So maybe they're doing a photo analysis or they're doing a political cartoon analysis, or they're watching a video and responding to questions about it. Obviously, there's lecture a decent amount of time but sometimes I'll try to do graphic organizers with them to connect things differently. In my guided practice a lot I try to have them stand up and formulate an opinion on something that we just did, so, you know, [I post] chart paper around the room where they take what they learn and put it together in their own opinion. I just try to vary it by my methods of delivery and [have] different visuals for them.

Mrs. Sanders utilizes strategies that include students' opinions, voices, and activity. She recognizes the importance of employing various methods (*structure*) in order to keep students engaged in the learning material by making them feel *competence* as they access and interrogate it. I ask if students are receptive to these strategies and Mrs. Sanders responds:

Yea, I think so. That's another struggle, too, with how much administrative work there is to do because you try to get all this other stuff done that you have to do and sometimes, like, your lesson is what is

suffering because I'd like to spend more time on my planning. There's days that I come in and I wish that I'd put more effort into this. Not that I ever just don't plan anything but there's always times that you feel like you could've been more creative.

While Mrs. Sanders believes that her pedagogical strategies are engaging and effective for her AP students' learning, she admits that the school's administrative tasks and paperwork can sometimes be a barrier to planning and preparing lessons that incorporate them.

Mrs. Sanders also acknowledges that she differentiates the instruction in the AP course she teaches significantly from that of her 'regular' courses. She says, "It's a course that's actually challenging the girls, or I hope it is... There's a lot of analysis, which in my other classes I wouldn't do as much high level questioning, I think, as I do in this class." It is interesting to note that the high expectations that Mrs. Sanders has for the students in her AP U.S. History course are couched alongside and in direct contrast to the low expectations that she seems to have for the students in her regular classes, given the lack of analysis and high-level questions that she includes in them.

When asked how her AP students have responded to the higher expectations, Mrs. Sanders replies:

I think they're doing pretty well. I think I selected a really good group of students. I haven't had anybody totally freak out. I've had a couple of girls say that they wanted to drop the course and then they changed their minds. I think overall they're responding well and they know that this is what's going to be expected of them in a year or two when they go to college, but they are overwhelmed by it – by the amount of reading and outlining and all the expectations outside of class. That no one's there helping them and holding their hand through the process.

Holding high expectations for her AP students as they prepare for college is important; however, it is unclear what level of support Mrs. Sanders offers students in their efforts to

meet her expectations. In addition to a rigorous curriculum, Connell and Wellborn (1991) contend that students need *Autonomy Support* from their teachers to learn how to go about assuming the responsibilities expected of them. Students are not likely to be successful in their academic work if they are “overwhelmed” and “no one’s there helping them.”

*“I think they are ready”: Students’ readiness for college.*

According to the perceptions of their teachers and their parents, the Harper students who are enrolled in the college-preparatory Honors and AP courses will be academically prepared for college. Nafeesah is the study’s main participant from the “disconnected” focus group; she is enrolled in Mrs. Sanders’ AP U.S. History class and in an Algebra 2 Honors class. Her mother, Ms. Anderson, a student herself at the local community college, believes that her daughter is being prepared for college in her classes at Harper. She says:

From what I see of the work that she gets here, the level she gets here is better, even though it is still a neighborhood school. It seems to be better than a couple of my other family members’ children who go to [the district’s other neighborhood high schools]. Harper’s work is more advanced than those as far as the level that they give them. They will hold them accountable for the work. That much I do like about the school. As far as her being prepared for college level, I believe she should be fine as far as that’s concerned.

In direct contrast to the experience of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in his charge last year, Mr. Jones feels confident in the college preparation received by the seniors currently enrolled in his AP Literature class. He says:

I would say most of the students in my AP class, they’re ready [for college]. They will be ready by the end of the year. I just sent out an email to the whole class, this inspirational email, last night, just being, like, “it’s time to do the hard work, it’s time to get your senior project done,” all these different things. I think they are ready.

Here Mr. Jones not only acknowledges his students' *competence* but he also alludes to the responsibility he feels to support them on an emotional level. In an email to the whole class, he expresses his *involvement* through words of encouragement to his students and charges them to "do the hard work" that will ensure that they finish their senior year strongly. To my knowledge, few teachers at Harper have this type of contact with their students, though the content of his message is similar to caring messages that many students cite that they receive from their teachers at Harper on a regular basis.

Raven, the study's key participant from the "overwhelmed" focus group, is enrolled in Mr. Jones AP Literature class; she echoes the confidence that Mr. Jones has in his students' preparation for college. For Raven, the distinction in her educational experience at Harper as compared to that at her former all-girls magnet school is the support she now receives in achieving her goal of going to college. She says:

I knew who Mrs. Gramercy [the college counselor at Harper] was since last year. At my old school, I never knew who my college counselor was. I never knew who my guidance counselor was. It was like I was just a number there. Here, you know you're going to college and you know you're going to get help figuring out what you need to figure out so you can go on with your education. They help you. They care.

Her mother, Ms. Cooper, adds:

Raven is definitely challenged in her schoolwork... Harper has been a good school for her to achieve; she wouldn't have done better at [Raven's old school]. Harper made her apply herself more. It's better for her at Harper. She's getting accolades for being at the top of her class. It's boosted her to think 'I am smart.' At [Raven's old school], they were all smart. Could the outcome be better? I don't think so.

In this comment Ms. Cooper shares that her daughter has found the curriculum at Harper to be a rigorous one. It is interesting to note that she gauges Raven's success in comparison to how Raven would have done at her old school and to the level of her

Harper classmates' success. Many of the accolades that Raven has received at school of late, however, have been related to her social involvement at Harper, and not her academic achievement; the problem that has arisen for Raven as a result of this fact will be explored later in the chapter.

This section of the chapter has focused on the features of schooling at Harper that have framed the educational experiences of the students on a college-prep track, as indicated through their selection for Honors and AP classes. I will now share the perspectives of the students who are not on a college-prep track, but on one that instead focuses on "test-prep."

### **"Test-prep."**

The premise of the curricula and instructional pedagogy employed by Harper teachers who instruct the 'regular' courses is students' preparation for the state standardized assessment. This study's student participants seem incredibly frustrated and dissatisfied by the coursework grounded in Harper's test-prep track. The curricula and/or pedagogy employed by teachers on this track do not capture students' interest or involve them, lack rigor and relevance, and prevent students from feeling *autonomy* within the classroom and *relatedness* in relationship with their teachers. Such experiences with the academic program at Harper lead to students' feelings of "disconnection" and "disaffection." In this section, I will first offer a glimpse into a 'regular' classroom in which the lesson mimics the material and delivery of "test-prep." Then I will share students' various reactions to their classes and teachers at Harper according to themes that emerge from the data. Then I will share possible reasons for why the curricula is

shaped as it is and why teachers teach the way they do, even as students experience such high “disconnection” or “disaffection” with their academics at the school.

*Snapshot glance of instruction based in test-prep curriculum.*

Student participation in a classroom focused on test-prep often looks like students *sitting* demurely and silently at their desks, *listening* to the teacher talk about a particular topic for 10-15 minutes without interruption from their questions or comments, *copying* notes from PowerPoint slides, and *completing* a short written assignment independently before the class’ end and their exit from the room. The dialogue in such a classroom sounds like students’ responses to closed-ended or low-level questions from the teacher and like teachers’ directives to students about assignment and behavior expectations.

Below is a snapshot of a classroom that I believe exemplifies a lesson framed around preparation for the state assessment and acquisition of basic knowledge and skills. It comes from the field notes that I wrote as I observed a 7<sup>th</sup> period U.S. History class taught by a teacher named Mr. Dawson in September 2009:

Mr. Dawson introduces the day’s notes that are projected on the PowerPoint slides. All students begin taking notes as the teacher talks through the information. Two students begin whispering; the teacher softly says, “ladies?” and they stop.

Students’ level of involvement in the new material that Mr. Dawson introduces to them in this lesson is minimal. They are expected to sit silently, read the information written and projected on the Power Point slides, listen to him talk through the information, and copy notes into their notebooks.

The lesson continues and Mr. Dawson asks, “What’s wrong with a government that can’t tax?” The teacher himself answers the question after only a 2-second “wait time.” Mr. Dawson has not considered his students’ need to process the information that

he has them writing down and listening to. He is more concerned about ‘the answer’ than his students’ deep understanding of the question that he poses, as he does not give them the appropriate “wait time” (at least 7 seconds) to consider possible answers. On a positive note, the question that Mr. Dawson poses is a relatively strong one, in that it requires an explanation rather than just a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. However, without giving students the time to think through a potential response, he allows students to abstain from thinking altogether. Students know that if someone does not jump in with an answer right away, he will provide the answer for them. It is unclear whether or not students master the material in Mr. Dawson’s class because there are few checks for understanding in which students share their grasp of the new material.

The field notes continue: “One student gets up to move closer to the screen; Mr. Dawson asks, ‘Where are you going? You need to ask to get up.’” The student attempts to move autonomously within the classroom in order to access the learning material, but Mr. Dawson’s perspective of what classroom management looks like (making sure students remain in their seats at all times) keeps her from doing so. The activity and dialogue in the class up through this point has been rote and teacher-centered. Students start to act out and the following scenario unfolds: “Students begin to grumble about the amount of notes they need to take. One student throws a pen across the room to another. That student throws it back. The teacher says, ‘If I see it thrown again....’” Just a few minutes later, when two students engage in a conversation about the learning material, the teacher shuts them down because their discourse interrupts his continuity of the lesson:

Mr. Dawson introduces the Independent Practice activity: [Students are to respond to the following questions on a sheet of looseleaf that they will

turn-in at the end of class] “In one paragraph, why did the Articles of Confederation need to be replaced? Why was the Constitution an improvement?” Students begin to work on their paragraph response, and some begin talking.

Mr. Dawson: “Ladies, this is not your time to be talking.”

Student: “But we’re talking about this!”

Mr. Dawson: “Not now; this is independent work.”

As necessary as it may be for Mr. Dawson to get a sense of students’ level of independent mastery of the material at the end of the lesson, his students’ conversation indicates the first level of interest that they have had in the material since the beginning of the class period. Mr. Dawson has done his students a disservice by not providing them with adequate opportunities to engage with the learning material in ways that they find meaningful. In stifling his students’ conversation about the lesson he may also be turning them off to him as their instructor and to their learning in his class.

Some students, however, seem invested in their course grade, which indicates that they may have bought into a greater purpose for learning the course material:

Mr. Dawson posts homework on a new PowerPoint slide. Students are instructed to copy the homework assignment, and to drop-off their independent work and Exit Ticket as they leave the room. The teacher says, “If you need to pick up work, come after school.” Five or so students [of 18 in the class] clamor to the back of the classroom to check their grades posted on the back wall as they leave.

It is clear that Mr. Dawson recognizes the importance of involving students in the tracking of their grades in order to encourage their investment in their academic growth. Moreover, by posting updated grades weekly, Mr. Dawson makes students aware that he holds them accountable for submitting their classwork and homework daily. Because students’ grades reflect their mastery of the material and their effort in class during the previous week, students can reflect on their progress and make adjustments to the aspects of their education in Mr. Dawson’s class that are within their locus of control.

This scene portrays a teacher-centered classroom in which instruction engages students in limited and performative ways. Much of the teacher's interaction with the students is related to the managerial tasks of the classroom, and is most often centered on correcting student behavior. While students complete the assigned work, it is not clear that they have been able to deeply internalize the content of the lesson and its significance for their academic preparation for college. Mr. Dawson's inability or unwillingness to involve students in the lesson in meaningful ways makes it likely that they will have a difficult time deeply engaging with the material and identifying any relevance for it in their lives. Students complete their work, though they are not engaged in it in meaningful ways. Some care about their grades, but it is unclear how this translates into students' engagement with the course material itself and their mastery of it.

Many students, particularly those from the "disconnected" and "disaffected" focus groups, are able to see through the contradiction between Harper's message that all students will go to college and Harper's instructional focus on test preparation. They note the lack of interest they have in their lessons, the lack of active participation that their teachers invite into the lesson, the lack of rigor and relevance in their lessons, and for some, the lack of *relatedness* they experience in relationship with one or more of their teachers. These sentiments highlight the problematic nature of their classes at a college-prep school, and as they articulate it, this has largely been what has led them to feel "disconnected" to Harper. The students in the "disconnected" group achieve at academically high levels, despite their lack of engagement in their learning and in the school, because they have internalized Harper's message about college. "Going to college" has become their personal goal, not just that of the school; consequently, they

are determined to work hard to get there, regardless of how they feel about their classes and their teachers. They operate almost in spite of or in defiance of Harper's academic programming, yet they seem more disappointed than they are angry. An education at Harper has at least one or a small smattering of redeeming value for these students, in some aspect of their academic and/or social experiences at the school. The students in the "disaffected" group, however, are angry about the entirety of their educational experience at Harper, and they seek to leave Harper as soon as they can find an alternative situation. Thankfully, because the "disaffected" students care about receiving an education, they do not drop out of school altogether before having secured a new school placement. In the sections that follow, I will share the "disconnected" and "disaffected" students' specific accounts for their lackluster reactions to their academic experience at Harper.

*"I was just so bored": Students' lack of interest and participation.*

The first word that many students in the "disconnected" and "disaffected" groups use to describe their classes is "boring." The girls talk about how the learning material does not interest them, is not relevant to their lives, and that their teachers do not actively involve them in the lesson. Jessica, a 10th grade study participant from the "disconnected" group, has a very strong reaction to the classes she takes at Harper:

Jessica: My classes are boring, all of them. I'm just so bored! All they do is give me work...

JC: What would make classes not boring?

Jessica: Make it something I can relate to. I don't want to learn about the man who had the key and the kite. I don't want to learn about him two-thousand times. Make it interesting. Make it a little bit like the kinda stuff I want to learn about. You just sitting there, explaining to me. I want it interesting. She teaches so boring. I didn't understand what she was saying today. I was just so bored...

Jessica's frustrations here seem to mimic the lack of student engagement I observed in Mr. Dawson's U.S. History class. She alludes to the teacher-centered nature of her classes as she describes the preponderance of "teacher talk" and the expectation that students should sit silently and listen. Moreover, Jessica also attributes the "boring" nature of her classes to her lack of interest in the course material and her difficulty with understanding its relevance to her life. Further, Jessica expresses frustration with learning the same material repeatedly. She seems to desire discovery of new material for herself, as opposed to learning it through the teacher's explanation.

Samantha, another young woman from the "disconnected" group who is in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, agrees with Jessica's characterization of her classes:

I kind of have a problem with boring teachers. My history teacher... I don't think I've ever had a boring history teacher until I came here. I am so serious! ... We had to tell Mr. Bowman when I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade that his Power Point was boring. It was just white. There was nothing behind it so then I kept saying 'your class is so boring' and he eventually started listening to us, and he started changing his Power Points. He started making it fun - slightly.

Samantha's comments seem to suggest that "boring" teachers and "boring" classes are fairly common in her experience at Harper, as she references two teachers of hers this year at Harper in the quotation above. It cannot be assumed that these young women have such negative reactions to their teachers and classes because they are masking a frustration with the difficulty level of the material. Both Jessica and Samantha, as with the other young women from the "disconnected" group, are high-achieving students who accomplish academic success despite their lack of engagement in their classes. In sharing their frustrations within this study, however, they want to give voice to their experiences

in hope that their teachers might make different instructional decisions in the future as a result.

Students in the “disconnected” group can easily distinguish between their current learning experiences at Harper and those that have successfully engaged them:

JC: You said that all your classes were boring. Who have you had maybe in past years that I may or may not know who was not a boring teacher?  
 Jessica: Ms. Lytle [a former Harper teacher]. She made reading so fun. I had her in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I learned something in her class. She made everything interesting. She didn’t tell us “read this story.” She made it like “we are going to read this story, but at the end of the day, we’re going to make it our story.” We had to role play. She made reading fun.

Here Jessica describes an engaging learning experience as one that actively involves her and one in which her teacher makes the learning “interesting,” “fun,” and students’ own.

In this vein of our conversation, Samantha, too, becomes nostalgic about one of her former teachers:

When I was in New York, my history teacher, he was really fun. His name was Mr. Scott. He was so cool. He made it so much fun to sit there and learn.

JC: What kind of stuff made it fun?

Samantha: Like how he taught. I don’t know how to explain it. His voice. The way he used his tone. Super energetic. We just naturally paid attention. Instead of giving us a textbook and making us read it every single day, he made Power Points. He let us watch movies that had to do with what we were learning.

In addition to appreciating her former history teacher’s enthusiasm, Samantha fondly recalls how her teacher employed different strategies to present the learning material. It seems as though her teacher recognized the importance of getting, and keeping, his students’ attention in the process of engaging them in the lesson for their eventual mastery of the material.

Students experience much higher levels of engagement when they are encouraged

to actively participate in class discussions, projects, and activities and when teachers employ various pedagogical strategies to assist students in their mastery of the material. Together with classmates in their English II/ British Literature class, Kelly, the “key” participant from the “disaffected” group, and Cierra, the “key” participant” from the “adjusted” group, watch video depictions of the literature that they have read in order to bring to life key themes and literary elements present in the texts. (This plan for instruction employed by Mr. Bowman engages many students, including Cierra, but does very little for Kelly.) In Raven’s AP Literature class with Mr. Jones, students actively voice their comments and opinions during small and large group discussions. They answer key questions related to the literature that their teacher poses, and they converse about the connections they identify between the text’s characters and plot sequences and people and experiences in their own lives. I was able to observe a direct connection between students’ active involvement with the learning material and their mastery of it throughout a given class period. It stands to reason that students’ interest and involvement in the learning material would be an advantageous precursor to their achievement in class.

*“Smart-notes” and worksheets: A lack of rigor.*

In addition to their frustrations with uninteresting lessons, students also complain that their lessons lack rigor. Tamika is another young woman from the same “disconnected” focus group as Jessica and Samantha. She is frustrated about the rote nature of the instruction she receives in class:

Some teachers don’t try hard enough. The only teacher I have right now that is trying to encourage us is Ms. Mason. Ms. Keen, she just gives us worksheets, does stuff on the board, and gives us notes and all that stuff. Mr. Finch, he’s okay, but he does the same thing. Mr. Tanner- oh god. The

only one who's trying is Ms. Mason. The rest of them just give us work or write stuff on the board or in the textbook.

Once again, Tamika highlights why she experiences disaffection in the majority of her classes; in fact, she claims that she perceives only one of her teachers is even "trying," which is a sad statement for this 8<sup>th</sup> grader to make. She alludes to the *lack of structure* she experiences, which translates into her feelings of *incompetence* with the material she is supposed to learn in these classes. She has four more years of schooling at Harper to complete and one hopes that her current frustrations do not overwhelm her desire to get to college and cause her to leave school before graduation.

When other students in the "disconnected" focus group are asked if they feel like they are learning a lot at Harper, Samantha says:

[My teacher] is not a good instructor. This is her first year of teaching- I understand that. We're supposed to give her a chance and all that stuff, but she used 'smart notes' [like "Cliff's notes, they are secondary sources that summarize texts and offer analysis] and that bugged me majorly.

JC: What are you learning? What text?

Samantha: We are reading *The Crucible*, and she pulled out 'smart notes' in front of us and started reading it. I was, like, "how dare you!"

Samantha takes offense when her teacher attempts to "dumb down" the curriculum by teaching the text from a secondary source. It is clear that this class lacks the rigor and critical and creative thinking that Samantha desires for her teachers to provide.

The lack of academic engagement that Kelly, the study's "key" participant from the "disaffected" group, experiences in school is largely attributed to the lack of rigor in her classes, as facilitated by boring teachers:

In English, it's like we do the same thing every day. We write or do guided group stuff and then we read or watch a little piece of a movie and then we do a worksheet and then we leave or do our Exit Ticket and we leave. It's not hard or challenging. It's just a class.

Or, teachers who do not teach:

In History, we don't ever do work. We just go in, we do our Do Now and we write notes and we write our Exit Ticket and we leave. There is no work that we do except on Thursday when we do our little computer thing where we have to do our [test-prep exercises]. I just write [the notes] because we have to. Sometimes I don't write anything because I'm not going to look at them ever again. I could write them but I'm not ever going to open that notebook to look at them.

Or, teachers she cannot understand:

Oh, I don't like [biology] class at all. I don't understand anything that comes out of her mouth. We don't do any work in her class either. She puts on a Power Point and we write and then we do our Exit Ticket and we leave. Most of the time, people don't pay attention to her because they don't know what she's saying. I don't pay attention to her either. I write my notes. What she says I can understand but sometimes it doesn't make sense. When you ask her a question, she doesn't answer your question. She turns it into something else and you get irritated so you just quit.

Here Kelly acknowledges that she is likely to “quit” her work when she becomes exasperated with her teacher. Kelly's tendency to give up is directly related to her disaffection. The lack of *relatedness* and *competence* that she experiences in her Biology and African American History classes are the result of the lack of *involvement* and *structure* provided by her teachers.

Kelly's grandmother, Ms. Redman, is her guardian, and about Kelly's teachers at Harper, she says, “They are the pits. I have nothing good to say about her teachers- especially the foreign teacher teaching biology.” Ms. Redman laments, “Kelly is smart. She started reading at age five. The stuff her teachers were giving her [at Harper]- she knew it already. They wasn't teaching her anything. It wasn't a challenge for her.” She elaborates by explaining how the lack of challenge has translated into behaviors that she deems unacceptable behavior for school when her granddaughter should be learning:

Kelly never had homework. She would be coming to me complaining that they wasn't teaching nothing in the classroom. I asked her what she did in class. "I was asleep," she told me, "It's nothing unusual, that's what we do." Lay down and sleep? No. No. ... This stuff she's telling me – I had never heard before in my life!

The frequency with which Kelly has had substitute teachers contributes greatly to her disaffection in school. Her grandmother asserts, "They had substitutes all the time- and they weren't teaching! That lady was 105 years old! They wasn't learning in that class."

Ms. Redman contends that her granddaughter's disaffection in school is perfectly reasonable, given the reality of her situation:

[Kelly] was late to school everyday – she never made it to the start of her first class. She didn't care about the school, whether she was there or not. It was not worth getting up and making it to the bus on time. She wasn't wasting her time.

Kelly and her grandmother became so disaffected with Kelly's educational experience at Harper that Kelly left Harper and enrolled in an online 'cyber' school after Winter Break in January 2011. Now Kelly's classes are entirely conducted online through a school run by the state, which Ms. Redman heard about in a commercial on television. Ms. Redman explains, "Her grades wasn't good. She had always been an A/B student, but she got a D, C- and maybe one A and one B on her last report card." When asked what she had wanted Kelly to experience at Harper, Ms. Redman said, "a regular classroom setting with a teacher there all the time with a real interest in teaching children and seeing them progress. They'd have an organized lesson plan and follow it, organized in a sequence so children can understand."

The rigor of students' lessons varies widely and depends largely on which teachers students have for class. It is common for many teachers at Harper to project Power Point slides that contain information on the material for the day and direct students

to copy the information on these slides at notes. (The fact that the school has computers, projectors, and ‘Smart Boards’ for teachers’ use is testament to the school administration’s strategic use of resources.) However, employment of this technology sometimes leads teachers to abdicate their responsibility to “teach” the material to students. “Copying notes” often comprises the bulk of the instructional period, leaving little, if any, time for student practice with the material. Teachers in these classes rarely facilitate activities or conversations related to their lessons’ material that are engaging to students. In Kelly’s Biology class, the instruction for the day is regularly reflected in three Power Point slides that students are told to copy and the remainder of the period is left for students to talk amongst themselves. It is no wonder that students lose interest in their school work when faced with such a scenario.

*“We’re not in kindergarten anymore”: Teachers’ low expectations.*

Mrs. Sanders claims to have altered her expectations for the students in her ‘regular’ sections of U.S. History as a result of her experience teaching the AP U.S. History course:

It’s made me really feel like I need to step up even my other classes because I think that I noticed for myself and I’m sure a lot of other teachers here weren’t holding the students to high enough expectations... I think that I need to work on changing that mindset and having the highest expectations for everyone and just varying the way that I support them.

Though she wants to raise her expectations for students, Mrs. Sanders does not anticipate being able to have the same expectations for her students in her ‘regular’ classes as she does for her AP students:

I think it would be really overwhelming and I think I worry that I would lose a lot of them that way. Also, my other classes, all three of my regular American History classes, have at least 30 students and a lot of students have IEPs or behavioral or emotional issues, and it’s just very difficult to

feel like I can give everyone enough attention versus having 13 high-performing students in my AP class.

In the latter part of Mrs. Sanders' comment, she illuminates her frustration with not being able to support all of her students due, she believes, to the large number of students enrolled in her 'regular' classes. Class size determination, and the budgetary constraints that prevent Harper from hiring more teachers, are related to Harper's identity as a neighborhood school. Because Harper is situated in an under-funded district, it is an under-resourced school, which means that it has to "do more with less" despite wanting more by way of college-prep for its students. In the former part of her comment, Mrs. Sanders highlights the clear tracking of students into different academic trajectories as a direct result of the different expectations that teachers have for their students. This makes one wonder how Harper can promote the message that all students at the school can gain access to college when it is clear that only some students are academically challenged and supported to meet that level of rigor, at least in how Mrs. Sanders describes her classes. Moreover, as is described throughout this chapter, students at Harper internalize the level of expectation that their teachers have for them. One can imagine how teachers' expectations for students, whether high or low, translate into self-fulfilling prophecies for their academic success (Merton, 1948; Jussim, 1989, 2005).

Jessica, from the "disconnected" group explains that she is not challenged in her course work. She attributes the lack of rigor to what she perceives as low expectations from her teachers:

We [are] in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and still we'll be given a vocabulary test. Who does that? I feel like I'm still in kindergarten, you giving me vocabulary tests. Who does that? I didn't do it. I felt way too smart to be sitting there figuring out what is a noun, verb, adverb- I'm past that level. We're not in kindergarten anymore.

Though Jessica is insulted by the lack of rigor that her teacher incorporates into her lessons, the disconnect that I observe here is actually the result of her teacher being unclear about the rationale for the vocabulary tests. Many high school students study vocabulary in preparation for the SAT and ACT tests for college admission. It could be that Jessica's teacher has incorporated vocabulary into the 10<sup>th</sup> grade class as a step in the college-preparation process. However, Jessica would not be aware of this if the teacher had not explicitly communicated it. As mentioned earlier, many students are unaware of what it actually takes to 'get' to college. They have very little knowledge about the SAT and ACT tests, let alone a sense of how knowledge and skills are assessed on the tests. Jessica's teacher should provide her with an explanation as to why she is studying vocabulary and taking vocabulary tests in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade if Jessica does not know what those reasons are. Jessica's teacher's failure to provide an explanation of the assignment's purpose contributes to Jessica's disaffection. Additional examples of the critical importance of teachers' acknowledgement of how the lesson is meaningful to students' education and/or life experiences follow in the next subsection.

*"How does it benefit me?": A lack of purpose.*

Jessica recognizes the importance of her teachers providing her with a rationale for learning. When they do not, her engagement with the material spirals downward and can lead to potentially antagonistic relationships between her and her teachers. Below, Jessica describes how she responds to her teachers' neglect to provide a purpose for learning:

I'm a person that if you give me work and you don't explain it, I'm not doing it. You give me a paper and say 'do this' then you've got to tell me why I'm doing it because I'm not going to just sit there and do it. If you

won't tell me how does it benefit me in your class, I'm not doing it. Like Mr. Bowman, I tell him all the time: "I'm not reading this story until you tell me how is learning this benefiting me." You've got to tell me something. Let me know why I'm reading this story. I want school to make me learn something, but I don't want to be told, "just do this." If I'm being told, pretty much I'm not going to do it.

Some teachers are not forthcoming about the reasoning behind what students study and why. Others neglect to provide the *structure* necessary for students to complete their assignments to their expectation. Samantha tells of having to seek out help from a former teacher in order to complete her class assignments because her current teacher is unable or unwilling to provide it:

If we have a question about anything- like, she doesn't explain our homework or any kind of work. She just gives it to us, tells us to do it, so some of us ended up going back to Ms. Cook who was our original teacher and asking her to help explain it to us, so that's what we did.

It seems problematic that Samantha's teacher provides so little direction to she and her classmates that they have to ask another teacher for help. However, it is clear that there are teachers, such as Ms. Cook, who are willing to support students, even when they are not their current teachers of record.

Samantha speaks about being invested in her learning when one of her teachers, Ms. Larson, provides the rationale for why an assignment is worth completing:

She'll give us homework, but not if we don't finish the lesson. She'll give us homework, but she'll ask us why we think it's going to benefit us before she actually gives it to us and then she'll give us an answer of why she thinks it's going to benefit us... That's really helpful because she's telling us why it is going to help and not just giving it to us just to do. It makes it so much easier to learn in her class.

Samantha's willingness to learn and take interest in the material shifts in a positive way when her teacher explains the rationale for the assignments and learning in her class. The teacher sets her students up for success by also making sure that they have mastered the

material from the lesson before expecting students to practice with the material on their own for homework. Samantha's teacher provides *structure* for her, which makes her feel *competent* in her schoolwork. Samantha appreciates that her teacher motivates the class in their learning by clarifying the purpose of the assignment. This furthers Samantha's feelings of *relatedness* to the teacher, given the positive *involvement* she experiences in her interactions with the teacher. Samantha's academic and social engagement in school grow positively as a result.

The examples that have been described illuminate students' perceptions of some Harper teachers' behaviors and attitudes that seem to indicate that their teachers are simply 'going through the motions' of their jobs. It is possible that teachers themselves experience disaffection in their teaching due to their own disinterest in curricula geared towards students' preparation for the state assessment. Yet if this is the case, one wonders how students can be expected to also remain invested in their learning when no purpose for learning is provided and their teachers are visibly disinterested. With similar experiences of disengagement across multiple classes, students not only begin to feel disconnected from their work, they also become antagonistic towards it. This can trigger students' disaffection towards school not only in an academic sense but in a social one as well if their relationships with teachers and classmates are affected. The following subsection illuminates the lack of *relatedness* that students feel in relationship with their teachers, which also impacts their "disconnection" or "disaffection" in their academics at Harper.

*“What does that have to do with any of us?”: A lack of relatedness.*

For students in the “disconnected” focus group, the “disconnect” that they experience is not just a result of their teachers’ pedagogy; it is also manifested through the lack of trust that they have for some of the adults responsible for their education. I ask Jessica, “do you ever feel like you can offer suggestions or feedback to your teacher?” She replies, “we did, but she don’t know how to do it.” Samantha, who shares this class with Jessica, elaborates:

She gives us these little post-it notes [in order to write feedback on them] and we stick them on the board. She reads them, but she never really does what she said she is going to do. So, like, some issues with the homework... she will ask how we would make it interesting, so [Jessica] was like, “make it so that it relates to us.” Today, she gives us homework talking about if we were school class president. We were like, ‘what does that have to do with any of us?’ What if that is not what we want to do or want to be? Ask us what we want to do and we’ll tell you.

Here Samantha seems bewildered with her teacher’s inability or unwillingness to get to know the students in her class in order to make the learning material and course assignments meaningful and relevant. Jessica provides another example of teachers’ inability to connect with students, despite the teachers most likely believing that they have made full-fledged efforts to do so:

I hate teachers that give us rap songs and tell us to analyze it. Don’t think that you’re going to give me a rap song and I’m going to read it. Don’t think that because I rap it, I want to read it on a piece of paper. I like it better with music... Mr. Bowman today, he gave us Tupac Shakur and said, “analyze it.” No. Ms. Wilcox did the same thing- put on some Lil’ Wayne and said, “analyze something.” No.

JC: This is funny because I’m thinking from the teachers’ perspective they are probably thinking, “well, they listen to music, and they want to do something fun, so they would like this.” So what’s wrong with that?

Nafeesah: All the teachers keep hitting on all this rap music. I don’t like rap music.

JC: So it’s all these assumptions about what you like as opposed to [your teachers] asking.

Nafeesah: I like Indian music and Korean and Japanese. I don't like R&B. I only like pop, Japanese pop, Korean...

Samantha: I listen to rock music.

Jessica: I don't want to sit there and keep analyzing these songs. And with Ms. Cook last year, we watched a movie. I hate it when she tries to make it like *Freedom Writers* [a movie about a teacher who inspires her urban students to achieve at high levels, believe in themselves, and get along with each other]. Everybody is not going to write in a journal. I know I'm not. I'm not nobody on TV. I haven't got all those personal problems. I don't watch a movie thinking that's how people are going to be. No, it's not a movie, this is real life, and we're not going to do that. Be realistic. I'm not going to sit here and write my feelings in nobody's journal. I don't need to write in a diary.

It is clear that Jessica, Samantha, and Nafeesah are frustrated by their teachers' inability to connect with them and to connect the learning material to their lives. It seems as though several of their teachers at Harper make assumptions about the girls and about what they would be interested in doing for class activities based on what appears to be stereotypical ideas and media portrayals of students in urban settings. This may be due, in part, to their lack of familiarity with youth, urban, and city cultures. Consequently (and unfortunately), these teachers utilize popular culture, media portrayals, and superficial observations of young people of color from urban communities as frames of reference for their understandings of topics and issues related to the girls' lives, which, in reality, they do not know much about. Many of the newest, youngest, and most inexperienced teachers are White men and women from places other than the large city on the East Coast in which Harper is located. In not getting to know their students at deep(er) levels, teachers rely on stereotypical and at times, inaccurate, information for their instructional decisions. This impacts not only students' engagement with the lessons but students' feelings of *relatedness* with their teachers.

Students in the “disconnected” group want their teachers to get to know them in ways and at levels that would genuinely inform their instructional decisions about class material and activities. Samantha explains:

I think sometimes they try too hard to impress us or like, make us want to learn. I'm not saying those kids don't want to learn- we do, some of us, but don't try and force what you think we want to do. Ask us instead of assuming that's what we're going to do.

Samantha seems not to mind if a teacher admits to ‘not knowing’ and asks students for their opinions rather than feign expertise in a certain area. When Samantha knows that her teachers do not know what they are talking about, yet they act as if they do, she loses all faith in them. Moreover, it is likely that an antagonistic interpersonal relationship will develop between them. She follows-up the previous comment about the teacher who used ‘smart notes’ to teach her class about *The Crucible*:

I'm not feeling her very much. I'm not. She rubbed me the wrong way. The way she teaches- she is, like, a business teacher- so she finds different ways to rub it into our face that she went to business school. We're like, “we're still in high school! We don't all know what we want to do with our lives, so for you to come here and rub it in our face that you went to business school... why are you an English teacher?”

Samantha's lack of *relatedness* that she experiences in her relationship with her teacher and the learning material in the class is directly related to the lack of or negative *involvement* that she perceives from the teacher. In an environment in which Samantha expects to be supported and encouraged, she is irked when her teacher puts students down and behaves competitively with them.

Kelly's disconnect in school is actually labeled as “disaffection,” as she is both academically and socially ‘checked out’ of her education at Harper. Part of this is likely

attributed to the fact that none of Kelly's teachers describes having a relationship with her, knowing much about her, or having talked to her outside of class. When asked to describe Kelly's achievement in his class, Mr. Bowman, her English teacher, replies:

I'm not sure how much she has learned from me, unfortunately. I think all the skills that she has shown she's already had, and she's not really willing to bring it to the next level. She doesn't turn in essays. She does her class work if I hassle her. I'm actually doing a new seating chart tomorrow, and she's one of the reasons. She's consistently talking to her friend in the back. It's not disrespectful talking- they'll be very quiet... They're being respectful, but she's not doing her work... She's wasting what she has.

Here Mr. Bowman attributes Kelly's lack of achievement in his class to her lack of engagement in the class. It is clear that he puts the "onus" of responsibility for Kelly's lack of engagement and achievement on her by describing what she is "unwilling" to do.

Our conversation about Kelly continues:

JC: Have you talked with her about that?

Mr. Bowman: I try to. The problem is that I try to catch [students] in the halls before school or in class before class starts- and I actually was just going to say that she's always late. She's late often. The only time I do see her, and I'm probably going to say something, is when I will be prepping and making copies and she's at her locker just now getting to school. I actually did think about calling her over to talk to her in my class, but then I kept thinking that she's missing whatever class she's missing. There is not time for it. The things that she does in class she'll do well on but then she's still barely passing because of her attendance, her guided practice, and projects like essays...

Mr. Bowman does not recognize that part of the responsibility for Kelly's lack of investment in the class is his. As her teacher, he needs to provide Kelly with a purpose for learning that she buys into and that intrinsically motivates her to complete her work. In order to do this, they must have some kind of relationship beyond the one they currently have. Mr. Bowman makes a series of excuses for why he has not had a personal conversation with Kelly about her academic performance in his class even six

months into the school year. By doing so, Mr. Bowman seems to abdicate his responsibility for (*involvement* with) Kelly outside of the forty-five minutes that she is present in his classroom. Despite having identified opportunities to talk with her in the hallway, and the always-present options to either request a meeting with her after school or call her grandmother's home to share his concerns, Mr. Bowman has not talked with Kelly in an effort to interrupt her pattern of disaffection.

One can only speculate as to why this is, but the comment Mr. Bowman shares at the end of the conversation is very telling. He says, "I would hope that she has high aspirations [for her goals beyond high school], but I would guess from her attitude in class that her aspirations are low." Mr. Bowman misunderstands Kelly's disaffection to mean that she does not care about her school work and that she does not have aspirations for the future. In so believing, Mr. Bowman likely thinks that anything that he says to Kelly would fall on "deaf" ears and therefore, the conversation would not be worth his time. However, the fact of the matter is that Kelly has very high aspirations for the future; she wishes to attend New York University's fashion design program. Mr. Bowman has not talked to Kelly about her aspirations; therefore, he does not know what they are. Consequently, he neglects to encourage her to meet her goals through her performance in his class. Instead, he has taken her disaffection to mean that she does not care, and he has, for all intents and purposes, written her off. Kelly's disaffection in his class and her others continues, and she eventually leaves Harper altogether.

*"Shut up" and "no": Teachers' control and students' lack of autonomy.*

Samantha relates part of her "disconnect" in her learning to the negative control that one of her teachers exerts over the class:

It's not going well, and [the teacher] has an attitude problem. She tells us to shut up every 5 seconds. She does not let us talk at all, ever, in her class. If we talk, we immediately get kicked out and need to go to the climate room.

JC: Samantha, what is the problem with that? Why do you think you should be allowed to talk in her class?

Samantha: Say [the teacher] was in 'guided group' [working with a small group of students at the back of the classroom while the rest of the class completes independent work at their desks], and a student needs help. Somebody is either going to come to me or somebody else who understands it. She won't let them do that, and you can't interrupt a teacher because they don't like that... why wouldn't [someone who doesn't understand] come to another student if they understand it? She says no.

What Samantha expresses here is her frustration with the lack of *autonomy* that she experiences in the classroom. It seems perfectly reasonable to her that students should be able to help each other with the learning material when the teacher is unavailable. Her teacher's policy against this, for the sake of silence in the classroom, bewilders Samantha, and without a logical explanation from her teacher, she questions her teacher's professional and personal commitment to the academic growth of her and her classmates.

In their efforts to prepare students to make gains on the state assessment, Harper teachers focus on helping students to read, write, and problem-solve at very basic levels, via pedagogy that largely fails to engage students. Students certainly need to master reading, writing, and problem-solving skills in order to be successful academically through high school and college. However, pedagogy aligned with college-prep curricula differs in that teachers intentionally coach students on this track to think critically and creatively, include material that is relevant and meaningful to students' lives and their futures in college, elevate the rigor of the learning material, and support students' academic and social *autonomy*. The academic program of the students on the "regular" or test-prep track includes lesson material and pedagogy that students do not find

interesting, rigorous, relevant, or purposeful. The data suggest that the current learning experiences of Harper students are mixed and vary widely according to the teachers that students have for their classes and whether or not they are enrolled in the Honors or AP classes. In the next section, I will offer explanations for why the students' experiences on Harper's test-prep track differ so profoundly from those on Harper's college-prep track.

### **Explanations for Differences in the Instructional Quality of Harper's "Tracks"**

In alignment with Harper's messages about 'college,' college-prep curricula are available to students enrolled in the school's Honors and AP classes. The staff members who teach these courses employ pedagogical strategies and utilize material that either falls outside of or extends beyond the parameters of preparation for the state assessment. Moreover, the instructors of these courses tend to be the most experienced and/or effective teachers in their content-area departments. However, only a small number of Harper students are eligible to enroll in these courses that boast the best quality instruction. The majority of Harper's students are enrolled in 'regular' level classes. The instructional quality in these classes vary according to how well the teacher can make the test-prep lesson material, which is aligned with the district curricula and/or the school's test-prep initiatives, interesting, rigorous, relevant, and purposeful for students. The fact that the instructors for these courses are inexperienced and/or ineffective teachers indicates that the quality of students' learning experiences is extremely tenuous.

The college-prep track is distinct from the test-prep track in the quality of the students' learning experiences given the curricula utilized and the teachers assigned to lead the courses. The manifestation of these two academic "tracks" at Harper eventually leads to different academic outcomes for students, depending on the track to which the

students have been assigned. The viability of Harper's strategy to prepare all of its students for college is called into question given the different expectations for and experiences of students in these two "tracks." This tracking is also counter to Harper's goal of interrupting the social reproduction of the Riverbend neighborhood, as only a segment of its students, those in the college-prep track, will be academically prepared for college.

### **Expectations.**

Despite the positive growth from three percent (3%) to fifty percent (50%) in the percentage of Harper students who have scored proficient or advanced on the state assessment over the last five years and the fact that the school's 7<sup>th</sup> graders have scored at the district's average, Mrs. Attle acknowledges that significantly more progress must be made. "One of Harper's biggest challenges is continuing to improve. Moving kids from 'Below Basic' and 'Basic' [on the state assessment] is different from moving them from 'Basic' to 'Advanced,'" she says. Mrs. Attle concedes that in order for the school to meet its Big Goals there needs to be "a culture shift for teachers. They have to challenge their own expectations [about what is possible for students' achievement]." She shares that many teachers were surprised to learn the school's 'Big Goal' for seniors is that one hundred percent (100%) of them will be accepted into college. "Excellence starts in the classroom; even the best teachers can have low expectations," says Mrs. Attle.

So while teachers at Harper may *say* that they have high expectations for all of their students' growth, the data indicate that the teachers of the AP and Honors classes are the ones that most consistently provide students with the supports that best communicate high expectations to students and enable them to meet those expectations.

The test-prep track teachers' low expectations may be a result of their own expectations for students' potential, the expectations put forth by the school in its Big Goals for student achievement, the expectations put forth by the district in its mandated curricula, or some combination of the three. Nevertheless, the different expectations for students' academic growth, as realized in the educational experiences of students in their delineations of the college-prep and test-prep tracks, compromise Harper's ability to be a "site of transformation" for all of its students and for the Riverbend neighborhood.

**Curricular quality.**

Academic instruction at Harper generally follows a 'five-step' lesson plan format required by the school's administrators. The five-step lesson plan includes (1) an introduction to the lesson's objective, (2) direct instruction of that objective led by the teacher, (3) guided group practice with the objective, (4) independent practice with the objective, and (5) a closing that summarizes the day's learning. Each lesson's introduction, in every class, includes a 'Do Now' assignment for students, which they are to complete upon their entrance into the class. Each lesson's closing, in every class, includes an 'Exit Ticket,' which serves as an informal assessment or 'check for understanding' to gauge students' mastery of the objective covered during that instructional period. Such a lesson plan structure can be utilized by teachers either effectively or ineffectively, and be employed as either teacher-centered or student-centered, as students' descriptions earlier in the chapter indicated.

Mrs. Attle knows that Harper must "take instruction to the next level" but admits, "I don't know what that would look like- I'm not sure how to lead the staff there; I have to learn how to coach teachers to make their instruction more rigorous." The critical

necessity of students' growth in achievement, for the viability of their own futures, makes the situation at Harper an urgent one. Much of Mrs. Attle's energy has been focused on ensuring that the teachers at Harper master the basics of classroom instruction since so many of her teachers are inexperienced or ineffective. As a result, she has not been able to adequately support the handful of teachers who could be pushed to grow in their instructional planning and delivery by planning more rigorous and engaging lessons for students. Instead, she has had to reinforce the basic tenets of teaching like how to write measurable and student-centered lesson objectives and how to check for understanding during direct instruction. This is another example of how the district's staffing procedures, and the lack of resources for additional administrative support, make directing Harper in its identity as a "college-preparatory" school very challenging.

#### **Teacher quality.**

The composition of Harper's teaching staff greatly impacts what instruction in the two "tracks" at the school looks like. Preparation for the state assessment does not always have to look like test-prep exercises or feel rote, uninteresting, or meaningless outside of the actual assessment. Experienced and effective teachers have the know-how to be able to differentiate instruction within the district's mandated curricula in order to meet their students' needs. However, a large number of teachers at Harper are either inexperienced or ineffective, which means that they are much less likely to either know how to or to invest the time and energy needed to develop lesson plans that meet the mandates but also to engage students in meaningful ways. The administration at Harper does what it can to ensure that its teachers deliver lessons of high instructional quality to its students; however, supporting 47 teachers to this end is challenging for a school with the limited

resources of an urban public school.

*Inexperienced teachers.*

According to Mrs. Attle, eighty percent (80%) of Harper's teachers during the 2010-2011 school year have been employed within the district for fewer than three years. A majority of these teachers are new to the field of education, and they entered the teaching profession through alternative certification programs with abbreviated training sessions the summer prior to their first year in the classroom. They were offered positions at Harper after interviews with the school's "Site Selection" committee because staff vacancies needed to be filled. Teachers with little to no experience (from either Teach For America's highly selective program of recent college graduates or The New Teacher Project's program for career-changers) are, more often than not, better than no teachers at all for the open positions at the school. However, as were illuminated through the examples of students' disaffection shared in this chapter, they are largely less effective than experienced teachers in that they are less able to adapt the district's curricula to meet the needs of their students.

All of Harper's teachers are held accountable for following the 'planning and scheduling timelines' mandated by the district in its curricula guides. In the daily lesson plans that the teachers submit each week and in classroom teaching observations conducted each week or so, school administrators look to see that teachers are following the pace that the district has set and utilizing the curricula guides to determine the lessons' content. For these reasons, new teachers typically adhere very closely to the district's standardized curricula, especially as they try to grasp the art of teaching during their first few months and years in the classroom. However, these teachers' sole reliance

on the district curricula limits the rigor and relevance of the lessons that their students experience. Consequently, students become disengaged in the classes in which the teachers' lessons are not designed to meet their specific needs or interests.

*Ineffective teachers.*

Other teachers at Harper are ineffective, and despite the administration's knowledge of this, these teachers are secure in their union-protected jobs until a Principal engages in months' worth of painstaking documentation and countless review meetings needed for a teacher's removal. Such teachers are engaged in what has recently been referred to as "the lemon dance" in *Waiting For 'Superman,'* a 2010 documentary film about public education in the U.S. In this "dance," School Principals pass bad teachers around to each other through "forced transfers." According to Mrs. Attle, the time and energy it takes to actually have a teacher removed from employment with the district is so consuming that many Principals choose to not even attempt the process. Instead, when the school year ends, the Principal closes the position that the 'lemon' had filled, pushing that person out and into another school that has a vacancy for that position. The district's hiring and firing processes and policies, in accordance with the teachers' union contract, have a direct effect on Harper's inability to attract and retain the most experienced *and* effective teachers for its students. This affects the quality of instruction that students receive from their teachers, which directly translates into either students' engagement or disaffection in their learning and in school overall.

*Teacher absences and substitute teachers.*

Harper's position as a neighborhood school makes it beholden to the district's policies related to the employment of teachers hired under contract with the teachers'

union. Kelly's Spanish teacher left the school for elective knee surgery just six weeks into the school year. The school was not able to replace this teacher because she did not resign from her position but took medical and sick leave for the duration of her absence. This meant that for several months, Kelly (and Cierra and nearly 100 other Harper students) had a series of substitute teachers for their Spanish class. These teachers were either other Harper teachers who covered the class during their prep periods, or they were people hired by the district to come in for the day or a series of days. Content-based teaching rarely occurred in these classes; the most that students would get in terms of instruction from a substitute was a crossword puzzle with Spanish vocabulary words that they could complete during the 45-minute period if they wanted to. On a daily basis, Kelly and her classmates talked, ate and drank snacks, slept, completed homework, or listened to music on i-pods during what should have been their Spanish class. The waste of instructional time, especially as students should be working to acquire skills in a second language, is a direct result of the contract between the district and the teachers' union. Unfortunately, Harper cannot escape the ramifications as a result of its position as a neighborhood school within the district. Harper's students suffer the consequences, because with ineffective substitute teachers and the complete absence of instruction for one period daily over the course of months, students' disaffection grows.

### **What Happened to 'College'?**

Because of the instructional focus on the state assessment for the majority of Harper students, students' preparation for college does not have a formal place in the school's Big Goals or in the district's mandated curricula. There is no clarity around when, where, or how college preparation is a deliberate component of the academic

curriculum at Harper. When asked if he ever talks with his 10<sup>th</sup> graders about what it means to go to college, Mr. Matthew Kendrick, Harper's Geometry teacher, replies, "That's one thing that was my goal for the year, but I haven't really pushed that on them, which I should think about doing a better job of." Here the teacher acknowledges that explicit conversations in class about college were his goal (not the school's), and they are not currently a component of the classroom instruction that he offers to his students, though he believes they should be.

**Little college-prep available at a college-prep school.**

Not having access to a curriculum that specifically prepares students for college hurts their chances of getting accepted into college as well as the likelihood that they will be successful once there. The 'Big Goal' for Harper's 12<sup>th</sup> graders this year is that one hundred percent (100%) of students will be accepted into a 4-year college or university. Yet students' low scores on the state assessment in the basic skill areas of reading, writing, and problem-solving indicate that they are not academically prepared for college. According to the Big Goals (see Table 4.4), only fifty-five percent (55%) of 11<sup>th</sup> graders are expected to score 'proficient' or 'advanced' in Reading on the state assessment this year and only forty percent (40%) are expected to do so in Math; however, they will be expected to apply to and be accepted into college by the end of next school year, despite their lack of preparation for college-level work.

While nearly all of Harper's graduates from the last several years have been accepted into 2- and 4- year colleges and universities, far fewer of those students actually matriculate during the first fall semester following their graduation from Harper. Only thirty-two percent (32%) of the students who graduated from Harper in June 2009

matriculated into college during Fall 2009, the first fall semester following their graduation from the school (National Student Clearinghouse Report, 2009).<sup>12</sup> In this way, Harper seems to ‘set-up’ its students with the high expectation that they will all attend college (and presumably be successful through it), knowing that not all of its students are adequately prepared, even with the most basic skills, for that level of post-secondary education.

*Lack of structure.*

As most people are aware, admittance into college is based on students’ academic performance through their junior year of high school and on their scores on the SAT or ACT tests designed to predict students’ success in college. It is unclear how students’ efforts on the state assessment, which state, district, and school use to measure achievement, translate into students’ grades on their transcripts, which, again, is another important measure that colleges use to gauge achievement. Confusion arises for me about how the school administration rectifies Harper’s stated ‘Big Goals,’ which focus on students’ achievement on the state assessment, with its messaging that all students will attend college. This confusion is furthered with the realization that with the exception of the school’s most talented students, the majority of Harper students do not experience a college-prep curriculum. Again, it is unclear to what extent the measure of achievement as indicated by the state assessment captures the degree to which Harper students are prepared for college by the end of their senior year, particularly because the goals for their achievement as 11<sup>th</sup> graders are centered on their gains on the state assessment.

---

<sup>12</sup> The number of Harper’s graduates who remain in college through graduation is not known, as the students from Harper’s first graduating class, the Class of 2007, will graduate from college in June 2011.

Students who enroll at Harper at the start of their 7<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade years are made aware of the goal that they will all go to college from their very first day at school. However, there is little institutional support to heighten students' awareness and understanding in the early grades of why a college degree is so important and what it takes to be eligible for college admittance. Many teachers talk about college with their students but these conversations tend to be sporadic and informal. (An outside agency supports approximately twenty-five students in an *Upward Bound* program that hosts free after-school tutoring and summer college tours for students who will be the first in their families to attend college.)

Harper hosts a college fair on campus every fall that is attended by representatives from over forty local colleges and universities, but it is only open to 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. At the 12<sup>th</sup> grade Orientation at the start of the school year Mrs. Gramercy shares Harper's expectations that all seniors at the school will take the SAT twice, complete the FAFSA forms, apply to at least ten colleges, and apply for at least five scholarships within the year. While such direction in their senior year is invaluable, students must be formally supported in their and the school's goal to attend college from their first days at the school. They need to focus on their academic preparation and build resumes or portfolios that emphasize their qualifications for college. In order to truly disrupt the social reproduction of the neighborhood, the students at Harper need to dedicate years to making themselves competitive for college admittance and retention as their peers in higher-income neighborhoods and schools do.

One of the numerous school events to message 'college' as *the* next step for Harper students following their graduation from school is the College Fair that Mrs.

Gramercy organizes through sponsorship from the Educational Partnership for Young Women (EPYW). College representatives from schools around the region are in attendance to greet the girls, tell them about their schools, and field the girls' questions. Raven, the study's key participant from the "overwhelmed" focus group, is 'the college mail intern' at Harper. Raven dedicates her 9<sup>th</sup> grade free period on a daily basis to helping Mrs. Gramercy keep the College Pathways office organized and efficient. When asked to describe the attitude of the 12<sup>th</sup> graders when it comes to the "college stuff" and school work, Raven replies:

Some of them are losing hope, and it's sad to see. Out of the 12<sup>th</sup> graders who think they're 12<sup>th</sup> graders because they were in 11<sup>th</sup> grade last year (I think there's, like, 52 of us), only 46 of us are actually seniors [meaning that they have earned enough credits to be considered 12<sup>th</sup> graders]. I'd say about 75% of them have less than a 2.0 [grade point average]. It's impossible. They're not going to SAT preps. They're not trying to get help. If you have a low GPA and you do extra-curriculars, okay, maybe somebody would understand or you went through something. You have to try. You have to keep continuing to pursue whatever you want to be. Nothing is going to stop me from completing my dreams. That's just it. Friends or not.

As Raven describes it, there seems to be a significant disconnect between what the school expects of its students academically and what the students expect of or currently want for themselves. Potential reasons for this disaffection have been and will continue to be explored throughout the chapter.

*Lack of autonomy support.*

This contradiction about the school's goal for all students to attend college and its lack of support in the process is highlighted, though in a different way, by Raven's own circumstances. She is the quintessential 'engaged' student at Harper, involved in everything and relied on by Mrs. Gramercy, Mrs. Attle, teachers, and students alike for

leadership in school initiatives. She is enrolled in all three of Harper's AP classes (U.S. History, Calculus, and Literature) and she scored 'Advanced' on the state assessment as an 11<sup>th</sup> grader. However, she has struggled significantly with her academic work since the beginning of this school year, and no one at Harper has told her that she should, or must, cut back on her commitments until her grades improve. Raven's intense desire to go to college has clouded her own ability to rationally grasp the danger that she puts her college applications into if she does not maintain her grades. Mr. Jones was annoyed when Raven sent him an automated request for a letter of recommendation via the online "common" college application, despite the fact that she has not submitted months' worth of assignments:

[Raven] understands she needs a recommendation letter. She understands that I would be a really good person to go to. She understands that she needs to apply to college. She's applying to all of these really great colleges, but she won't turn in a paper.

Even though he is frustrated by this, Mr. Jones does not want to put an ultimatum on Raven's ability to stay involved only if her grades improve, because, he says, "I wouldn't want to squelch that- then what do we have? A kid doing nothing?" This comment seems to illuminate a low expectation that Mr. Jones has for Raven, as it demonstrates that he sees her interest in school leadership as contingent on her ability to do what she pleases when it comes to her school work. When in fact, she may not put much effort into her school work because she has not needed to in order to retain the privileges that she enjoys at Harper.

The perspective shared by Mr. Jones frustrates Raven's mother, Ms. Cooper, because she knows that her daughter "wants to participate and be the kid that everybody

knows. [If the school took away her privileges], it would motivate her. She'd be angry. If you're not taking nothing, she's not giving it her all." She explains:

At Harper, students with a D- can still play on sports teams, attend school functions and extra-curriculars; at [Raven's previous all-girls magnet school], students had to have a C or better. Raven wants to be a part of this and that for a pat on the back, for kudos, but is that going to help her academically? ... the school is sending a mixed signal.

Raven, one of the school's most promising students, puts her future in college at risk by devoting her time to her activities rather than to her studies. The disinterest of school staff members to hold Raven accountable for her work through *autonomy support*, perhaps because of the tremendous assistance that she provides them and the school, is not in Raven's best interest. Raven is ambitious and knows that success for her means going to a prestigious college, but as Mr. Jones senses, "she doesn't have the building blocks to get there."

Raven, however, admits feeling "overwhelmed" with her schoolwork and extra-curricular activities, and she tries her best to manage her responsibilities by taking on fewer commitments:

JC: Are there any classes that you feel like you could be doing better in than you are currently?

Raven: English AP- all my AP classes.

JC: What's it going to take?

Raven: I don't know. I'm trying to give it my all. I didn't play a sport this season. I'm trying really hard.

JC: That was a conscious decision?

Raven: I had to really think about it. Every year, I'm always in something. My mom was like, "why are you not at practice?" I was like, "I didn't join any team for the winter."

Raven is hesitant to ask others to help her find the balance she is looking for, and it seems as though the image that she has promoted of herself at school means that the school staff members, and even her mother, believe that she is able to figure it all out on her own.

Raven is extremely focused on college as the next step on her path to eventually becoming a corporate lawyer. She wants to have good grades on the transcripts that will be submitted with her college applications. While her teachers express frustration with Raven's poor performance in their classes, no one has stepped in to curtail her social involvement until her grades improve, and in fact, staff members continue to request her help with planning school events. Consequently, Raven experiences mixed messages about where her priorities should lie, which overwhelms her further because those who want the best, a college education, for her are not adequately supporting her efforts to reach that goal.

In light of Raven's example, it is clear that even students who are fully invested in and have the academic potential for a college education are missing the 'building blocks' to figure out on their own how to get there. School staff members need to illuminate the 'hidden curriculum' of what preparation and level of success is necessary for students' access to college and not assume that even the most talented students might not need some form of support. *Structure and Autonomy Support* (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) are necessary to ensure that students get to college and that they have developed the tools necessary to find success there.

"Preparing girls to be successful in college – academically and socially" is one of the things that Mrs. Attle wishes that Harper did better. "The girls don't know how to navigate things like financial aid. Somehow we need to figure out what preparing them for the real world looks like," she says, "college may be a different community – they might not have much support." It is important to Mrs. Attle that the students at Harper "realize that college is an option – if they haven't already – and make that a reality. They

need to be prepared to go to college or know how to navigate foreign systems. We need to provide them with the tools to be successful.” The tools that Mrs. Attle speaks of here are specific features related to students’ literal access to a college education. Mrs. Attle misses the opportunity to acknowledge how the academic program at Harper, currently separated into two “tracks,” must also be reconfigured in order to ensure that all of Harper’s students are academically prepared for success in college.

While he is confident that the students in his AP Literature class will be academically prepared for college, Mr. Jones has concerns about other aspects of students’ ‘fit’ in a college setting. He is unsure about whether or not Harper’s academic program and the social capital that students have gained through their time at the school have truly prepared them for the academic and social challenges that he anticipates awaits them in college:

Here’s my biggest fear. My biggest fear is that they are going to be ‘the Black girl’ in class when they get to college. The student that people don’t perceive is as smart as them. I really don’t want that for them. All the stereotypes associated with being a Black female - but also to the other extent, I was just talking about this the other day - I also *want* them to be ‘the Black girl’ in class. I want them to value who they are and really represent that, but I definitely wouldn’t want them to sort of , like, acquiesce and sort of start shutting down because of their new role. They’ve gone to an all Black school and now a lot of them are going off to [local and state colleges and universities] and I really want to get them ready for being able to adapt to that. I think that’s going to be really hard for some girls.

Here Mr. Jones pinpoints the difficulty that students may have in accessing the language of the ‘culture of power’ (Delpit, 1988) when they leave Harper. He is concerned that the school’s overwhelming focus on students’ academic growth has overshadowed their need for *autonomy support*. This is ironic given Mr. Jones’ perspective on the lack of

leadership development at Harper that will be explored in the next section of the chapter. It seems likely based on the current structure of Harper's academic program that not all students will be prepared to access and succeed in college. The next section highlights the extent to which Harper recognizes this fact and supports students' access to alternative post-secondary education opportunities.

**Preparation for other post-secondary educational opportunities: The 'Institutes.'**

Harper's mission statement asserts that all of its graduates will be adequately prepared to meet the academic and social rigors of college. Moreover, it is Harper's vision that its graduates are competitive in their academic classes and that they graduate from college competent to pursue successful careers in a multitude of professional fields. This is problematic because not all students at Harper are prepared for college-level work when they graduate from the school, as evident in the 12<sup>th</sup> graders' scores on the state assessment last year when they were 11<sup>th</sup> graders (see Table 4.1).

In addition to the lack of clarity around *how* exactly students are explicitly academically prepared for college through their years at Harper, students also do not hear about opportunities for post-secondary education other than college. Harper's mission and vision statements articulate that the school will support students' pursuit of various post-secondary educational opportunities, yet there is little evidence that this is the case. The 'Institutes,' which come out of the district's Career and Technical Education (CTE) program, are currently the only programming available at Harper situated in the vein of vocational education. Upon the completion of two years' coursework in a given Institute program, students receive certification in that area of study, which indicates a certain level of proficiency with skills in the given field. The two Institutes that are currently

offered at Harper are Business/Accounting and Architecture, as these are the only the CTE programs for which Harper teachers are “CTE-certified.”

Access to these ‘Institutes’ is limited, however, because only one Harper teacher is CTE-certified to teach the Business/Accounting courses (I and II) and one is certified to teach the Architecture courses (I and II). Each class is held across two instructional periods, which limits the availability of the two CTE-certified teachers to leading one section of each course per day. Approximately 20 students are enrolled in each of the four courses. The students who are enrolled in Level II of each Institute are the students who took the Level I course in the Institute during the previous year. The special certification required for teachers and the intensive instructional demands of the programs for these teachers and their students means that Harper’s two CTE-certified teachers are only available to teach (2) two-period classes per day. Consequently, fewer than half of the students in grades 9 and 10 are able to take courses in either the Business/Accounting or the Architecture programs.

Because the capacity of the program is limited, the school selects the students who will be enrolled in the Institute elective courses. Enrollment is based on 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders’ scores in math on the state assessment the previous year. Kelly, the key participant from the “disaffected” focus group, was assigned to the Architecture ‘Institute.’ The school called her over the summer before she began 10<sup>th</sup> grade to ask her whether she would like to choose Business/Accounting or Architecture. She explains:

I didn’t want either one, so I was just, like, they can put me wherever they put me... when I came to school they gave me Architecture. I was like ‘okay.’ I didn’t really know anything about it. Then I found out that the class was so long and I just got annoyed. It’s not hard or anything. It’s really easy, but it’s just really long. I can’t sit down for two hours. That’s too long to sit down. I need to get up.

JC: How do you feel about Ms. Roberts and the material?

Kelly: All it is is like extra math.

JC: You don't sound very interested or excited about Architecture.

Kelly: I'm not.

Kelly's Architecture class takes place during a block of the first two instructional periods of the school day; she is late for it every day because she is anywhere between thirty to sixty minutes tardy to school every day.

JC: So, Ms. Roberts and Architecture, you're not interested. You don't like to sit that long. Do you just do the work to do it?

Kelly: Yes, because I have to, and it's a grade.

JC: So it doesn't bother you that you come in that late? Do you feel like you can catch up? Does Ms. Roberts talk to you about it?

Kelly: She's like, "[You] need to stop coming in late," but it's not affecting my work. As long as I catch up, then I feel okay.

Kelly's overall engagement in the class is low, but she later shares that she has developed more of an interest in the course now that her teacher is incorporating hands-on projects into the class work:

JC: Are there any of your teachers or classes that you had either this year or last year that didn't feel repetitive, and you were really interested in and you enjoyed going to that class?

Kelly: Architecture. Even though I don't like that class. Most of the time we come in, we open our books. We find this little thing and it tells you what to do on the computer. But now, recently, she has us doing a thing with the blocks and drawing and stuff.

JC: So you enjoy that more?

Kelly: Yes.

Kelly's experience in the Architecture Institute has not influenced her career interests. She maintains that she wants to pursue "fashion merchandising, styling, cosmetology, or event planning." Kelly does not have a dramatically different interest level in the Institute course in which she is enrolled than in the other classes she takes at Harper, with the exception that Architecture is slightly more engaging at times.

For as insignificant as Kelly describes her Institute placement to be for her, the opposite is true for Cierra, the study's main participant from the "adjusted" focus group. Cierra was assigned to the Business/Accounting 'Institutes' prior to the start of her 9<sup>th</sup> grade year because, as she acknowledges, "[my] scores on the [math] PSSA were high." She took 'Business' as a 9<sup>th</sup> grader last year, and this year she is enrolled in 'Accounting' as a 10<sup>th</sup> grader (years one and two of the Business/Accounting Institute curriculum). Cierra describes her Institute class as "real fun" and explains, "everybody pretty much likes it because we were all together last year, and we all moved as a class." She also likes that she has had the same teacher for a second year. She enjoys the Institute class so much, in fact, that she wants to be an accountant and major in business in college:

When I was little, I wanted to be a builder like construction worker and then I wanted to be a clothes designer and then I wanted to be an architect and then I wanted to be a lawyer. I didn't really think about accounting or business or stuff. Then I had this class.

As part of her Institute coursework, Cierra and her classmates spent a week over the summer in an accounting program on the campus of a local university: "They introduced us to accountants and stuff and they told us about their career and why they chose it and what they do." When asked if attending school at Harper has been a positive experience, Cierra replies, "I like it because it gives me more career options, like what I want to be when I grow up. It gives me a sense of direction." This comment highlights the significance of Cierra's educational experience within the Business/Architecture 'Institute.'

Students' experiences with the Institutes are mixed. This may be due to the course offerings currently available, the instructional pedagogy employed by the teachers, and/or students' varied levels of interest in the classes at their start. Yet it is clear through

Cierra's example that the Institute coursework has the power to be transformative, not only for a student's achievement and engagement during high school, but for her sense of direction for the future as well. The Institute courses do serve to engage some students in learning, given the curriculum, the relationships developed among students in the cohort, the relationship developed with the teacher, and the out-of-class opportunities that are made available to students.

However, not all students at Harper have access to the Institute program and the electives offered in Business/Accounting and in Architecture. In fact, it is the students who are most likely to qualify for and be accepted into college who currently have access to the 'Institutes,' because their selection into the program is based on their high scores on the state assessment. In leaving out the students who do not have high scores on the state assessment, the school misses an opportunity to engage them in ways similar to what Cierra has experienced. Furthermore, reserving the seats in the 'Institutes' for the students at Harper who have already demonstrated achievement on the state assessment eliminates the benefit of an alternative preparation program for students with lower achievement, who may not qualify for college as they graduate from high school. If they are locked out of the 'Institutes,' there are ostensibly no opportunities for students at Harper to access a curriculum or program that supports pathways to post-secondary education opportunities that are alternatives to college. Students need school structures and staff members to help them gain awareness of multiple post-secondary educational opportunities, so that they do not become deterred in their desire to finish high school if college seems out of reach.

### **Social Engagement at Harper**

In addition to the academic aspects of schooling at Harper, the social aspects of the institution also affect students' overall engagement or disaffection in school. These social aspects are largely reflected in the school's overall culture, which includes Harper's rules, discipline policy, extra-curricular activities and student-life programming, and students' relationships with their peers. Once again I analyze the data for evidence of students' experiences of *relatedness* and *autonomy* as facilitated by the *involvement* and *autonomy support* of the school and its staff members.

### **The 'Non-negotiables': Obedience Versus Autonomy**

Harper's school culture is grounded in the non-negotiables for student behavior that Mrs. Leary instituted as the school's key structure when it became all-girls in 2005. The term 'non-negotiable' communicates to students, parents, and teachers that the parameters of these school rules are not up for debate. The "no violence" non-negotiable stipulates that anyone who engages in physical or verbal violence against another student, whether "in-school, on the way to school, or on the way home from school" receives an automatic 5-day suspension. "No profanity" is also included as a non-negotiable at Harper, in an effort to shift the culture of the building away from that of the neighborhood's negative influences and reinforce the idea that students should see themselves as college-bound professional young women. Prior to Harper's transition to an all-girls school under Mrs. Leary, it was known that many violent and illicit activities took place in the school's stairwells. For students' safety, several of the stairwells in the school are designated as "forbidden stairwells," which means that any student caught in them or using them is automatically suspended. Only staff members or students escorted

by staff members are allowed to use these points of access between the first and second floors of the school building. Violations of any of these non-negotiables result in multi-day suspensions.

The articulation of rules and consequences for the establishment of order and safety in the school is absolutely essential. Moreover, the consistent reinforcement of those rules is important to give legitimacy to the school's leadership and structure. However, labeling something as 'non-negotiable' strips the possibility of any student autonomy; therefore, the non-negotiables themselves limit the *autonomy* of students at Harper. Several examples of students' limited *autonomy* under the school's non-negotiables and the subsequent disaffection that results will be explored throughout this chapter.

Holly, a member of Harper's Class of 2010, describes how she believes the school's rigid structure has affected students: "I think it's, like, too much pressure. That's why a lot of people dropped out, because they had too much pressure. Every year, the rules get sterner." Here Holly provides a possible explanation for why not all of the classmates with which she began her schooling at Harper graduated with her in June 2010. Her comments highlight the tension that the school navigates between providing *structure* for the girls, for their safety and the facilitation of their learning, and providing *autonomy support* for girls' opportunities to express themselves and act responsibly within certain freedoms.

Students who participated in this study overwhelmingly find Harper's uniform policy frustrating. In fact, the students in the "adjusted" focus group mention it as the thing they like least about attending school at Harper. Cierra, the study's key participant

from the group, is the only student from any of the focus groups who speaks favorably of the uniform's purpose. She says:

I think it's good we have uniforms. It prevents more problems because I think if we didn't have uniforms there would be more fights because some people don't like what you wear because you can't wear the good stuff or whatever.

Other students' problems with the uniform include the color scheme of the required logo shirts and accompanying pants or skirt, the "no jacket or 'hoodie'" policy when it is cold, and the "no jeans" policy for their gray pants, as "it's hard to find gray pants, very hard, and when you find them, the majority of time, they're jeans," says Raven. What is clear is that the student participants, even those in the "adjusted" group with Cierra, do not take pride in or recognize a strong need for the school uniform. Raven asks, "Why should we not be allowed to wear a 'hoodie' or our own sweater on top?" She continues:

That's so much money. I hear kids complaining saying they don't have any money. The hoodies from this school cost more than a name brand 'hoodie,' and it's \$30 or \$40 for sweaters and cardigans. It's pointless when somebody could just wear what they have at home and wear it at school. It doesn't make sense.

When asked "If you could change one thing about Harper, what would it be and why?" Nafeesah's mother, Ms. Cooper, replies, "It's a lot of little silly things like the whole thing with the jackets with the kids. When they know it's cold I don't see why they can't wear their jackets or whatever." Once again, the lack of a clear rationale for a policy frustrates students and their guardians alike. Rather than have students and parents be bothered by such policies, Harper could explain the reasoning behind the policy and/or make adjustments to it based on feedback from students and their guardians. This would reduce the disaffection that Harper students experience with their school, which begins, ostensibly, when they dress in the morning and before they even walk through the

building's doors. There is a disconnect here between what the school envisions its students to look like in a college-prep environment and what the students expect in terms of their personal comfort and freedoms. Moreover, the reality that many students come from low-income families seems to compound the issues related to the school's uniform, as some believe that purchasing the required garments is cost-prohibitive.

In the same vein of 'control' that the non-negotiables establish as the premise of the school's culture, students' movements throughout the school are extremely regulated. There are two stairwells that students are allowed to use. They must get hall passes from teachers and carry them any time they travel through the building if they do so outside the official passing time between classes. Students must ask a climate staff member to unlock the doors to the bathroom every time they need to use it. Moreover, the bathrooms are only available at particular times of the day and students who use them must sign in and out in a logbook at the end of each hallway that is monitored by the staff member assigned to that particular hallway. Climate staff personnel monitor every hallway-checking the hall passes of any student who leaves a classroom during the instructional periods and opening bathrooms during the allotted windows for their use.

There is a clear visual image that highlights the strain between the school's efforts to control the students and its interest in developing students' *autonomy* for academic success. Outside of the suite in Upper B that houses the College Pathways office is a bulletin board that advertises upcoming campus visits from college representatives from around the region and news related to the college application process. Just to the right of this bulletin board is the women's bathroom, which the Harper girls must have unlocked by a staff member in order to use, and which they are only allowed to access during

certain times of the day. This visual begs the question that I often heard students ask throughout the study: how is it that students are expected to push themselves for eventual admittance into and success in college when they are not trusted to behave in ways that would be reflective of adult, college-student behavior?

“I don’t like how they don’t trust us,” is Raven’s response to a question about the thing that she likes least about attending school at Harper. She explains:

I feel there’s not enough trust between the students and the staff. In high school, we shouldn’t have to have the bathroom unlocked for us. That’s a little disrespectful to us to have to get the bathroom unlocked. You call us the “Leadership Academy for Girls,” but yet you treat us like we’re five, because no one should have to unlock the bathroom for us. I’m pretty sure that we can walk in and out of the bathroom on our own.

It is clear that Raven does not appreciate the lack of *autonomy* that she experiences at Harper in this example. She attributes the tight restrictions on students’ access to and mobility around the building as an issue of trust between the staff and students. What Raven describes is the “criminalization of youth” that students in many urban schools around the country have to experience regularly (Noguera, 2003). While this bathroom policy is most likely a mandate in the interest of student safety, students understand the policy to be ‘against’ them, rather than ‘for’ them. With such restrictive policies, at what point will students ever have the opportunity to earn the trust of the school staff? The non-negotiables are not differentiated for students who demonstrate both responsibility with their academic work and appropriate behavior. Aside from the 12<sup>th</sup> graders being allowed to have lunch on their own in the “B” cafeteria, students are not given any particular privileges based on their grade level, the number of years they have been students at the school, their history of responsible behavior, or their level of academic achievement. How can students believe that the school administrators are genuine in their

desire for students' academic success to and through college if they are not able to flex the various freedoms that should be granted to college-bound students?

Harper's administration touts "student safety" as the reason for policies that limit students' mobility within the building. Yet these policies are reflective of a neighborhood school that fears its students and what they might do when they are given *autonomy* of their own movement (Noguera, 2003). It would not be a leap to assume that students at Harper feel criminalized, either consciously or subconsciously, by such policies and the constant monitoring of adults that they experience throughout their school day. I would imagine that this makes it difficult for students to believe in the sincerity of Harper's messages about college, as it is unlikely that such restrictions would be present in a college-prep school. Consequently, students experience disaffection in school, particularly directed towards the institution as a whole, when they internalize this contradiction. All study participants referenced their lack of *autonomy* within the school's rules as something they did not like about attending Harper, but Raven, as a 12<sup>th</sup> grader, and the students in the "disaffected" group, were the most troubled by it.

### **Discipline at Harper**

In addition to students' frustrations with the 'non-negotiables,' many also take issue with Harper's strategy for handling difficult students and with the school's discipline policy. Raven says:

The climate room – I don't understand. You want us to go and "cool off" for 10 minutes, but if somebody made us that mad that we have to be kicked out of the classroom, why would you send us right back in 10 minutes? It doesn't do anything but add fuel to the fire! My feeling is somebody should get kicked out almost the whole class.

Raven speaks to the need for alternative interventions for students who experience

problems during the class period, and to her, sending someone back to the classroom from which she just left, after only sitting silently in another space for a short period of time, is illogical. Kelly, the study's main participant from the "disaffected" group, also questions Harper's discipline policy and, specifically, the frequent use of suspensions as a consequence for misbehavior:

I think in the last week, they had to have suspended, like, over 100 people because nobody is here. Most of the time they keep getting suspended for fighting or dumb stuff like jackets or cell phones. Most of the time it's fighting. Most of the time it's outside of school and they're still getting suspended for it. When you suspend them, they don't care because, to them, it's like a vacation so they come and keep doing what they've been doing.

Kelly points out the empty rhetoric behind a discipline policy that prevents students' access to their instruction while also fails to seek an understanding of the root causes of students' misbehavior.

As a neighborhood school in an under-resourced district, Harper is strapped for additional personnel on its counseling staff. There are currently two full-time counselors employed at Harper- one for students in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades and one for students in the 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. They cannot handle the volume of issues that the Harper students often need support to deal with. If, however, Harper has the resources to be able to hire additional counselors and/or the money used to pay for the salaries of some the school's 20 climate staff members is reallocated, the climate at Harper may shift considerably. A team of counselors would constitute the personnel necessary to provide adequate emotional support for students who currently express their feelings by lashing out in anger or by being destructive. These students could receive counseling appropriate to their needs, which may reduce or eliminate the problem behaviors. Instead, the school

responds in a reactive way by removing the student, and therefore, the problem, for another few days. Meanwhile, the antecedent to the student's misbehavior goes unrecognized and unaddressed, and it is likely to manifest itself again sometime in the near future, through a violent or inappropriate incident. Furthermore, the student who is suspended misses valuable classroom instruction, which sets her up for frustration and possibly failure upon her return to school following 'reinstatement.' Thus, this cycle continues over and over again, resulting in the extreme disaffection of students who are suspended regularly, and likely, resulting in their eventual premature departure from school as well.

Kelly finds the school's reliance on suspensions particularly problematic given its misalignment with the school's mission for its students to attend college:

This school goes on and on about how they want you to be successful. I don't see how you could be successful and have 100 suspensions on your record. It's not going to work. If you're giving suspensions every 5 seconds, it's not going to help them. It's just going to hurt them.

Kelly feels so strongly about the hypocrisy in Harper's reliance on suspensions to manage student behavior given its message about college that she puts no stock in the school's message about college at all; she does not believe it is genuine, so she experiences complete disaffection from the school and its administration.

The girls in the Kelly's focus group have not been suspended themselves, but they do receive a lot of detentions, mostly for being late to school and late to class. Donnera explains:

I [get] most of my detentions for being late. I don't think they should give detention for being late to class because sometimes it's not your fault. If you're playing in the hallway, then yeah, that's your fault, but if you don't know where your class is or one of your classes is in "Lower C" and the

other one “Upper A” [on opposite sides of the building], then it shouldn’t really be that big of a deal.

Kelly travels to school by a public bus from a neighborhood that is thirty minutes away from Harper by car. She adds:

I agree with the late thing because I deal with it a lot. Most of the people that go here live around here... Most people live, like, 2 blocks away. The people that live in whole other neighborhoods, we’ve got to deal with the same stuff they’ve got to deal with [getting ready in the morning]. I have to wake up at 5:00 or 5:30 just to get here on time.

In response to this conversation, Drema says:

Say if you’re late for, like, 30 minutes- that’s how long your detention should be, not an hour. What if you have to go do something after school? We should have demerits... say if you get caught with a sweater. You should get a demerit for that. It’s not as bad. You shouldn’t get a detention. If you keep adding up, then you should get suspended , like, after 9 [demerits].

Detentions are considered large penalties for infractions that students consider small or could not be helped. Staying after school for many students is difficult, if not impossible, because of responsibilities at home, such as the care of siblings or household chores, for which they must leave school right away. One would think that the difficulty of staying after school for a detention would be a deterrent for students and lead them to avoid the behavior that leads to the detention. But again, students do not believe that what they do to earn the detention is wrong, or it is not done with intent or advanced consideration of the consequences.

From these quotations it is clear to see that some students either do not understand Harper’s discipline structure, do not appreciate it, or both. These students from the “disaffected” focus group, whose quotations are included above, view the current disciplinary structure as punitive because the consequences enforced seem illogical in

response to the transgressions. Consequently, the students in this group seem to be on the defensive against what they allude to as a punitive environment. While other groups of students comment on their dislike of some of the Harper's school rules, particularly those related to the non-negotiable of the dress code, they do not question the validity of the rules to the degree that this group does. Students' varied reactions to the non-negotiables and discipline at Harper translate into their varied levels of engagement with the school itself. Some students do not find Harper's messages about high expectations and students' attainment of 'college' credible, given the structures in place at the school that limit students' *autonomy*. They are the most "disaffected" student participants in this study.

### **"Leadership" at Harper**

In addition to the frustrations and concerns surrounding Harper's non-negotiables and discipline structure, there is also confusion among the school's stakeholders about what exactly drives the school's identity. While students' adherence to the non-negotiables is the foundation of the school's culture, it seems as though "leadership" would have a prominent role given the school's moniker "Harper Leadership Academy for Girls." Yet the interpretation of the school's motto, "Learn Today. Lead Tomorrow," varies among the school's stakeholders. Mrs. Leary says, "For me, it means that if you educate yourself, [and] set your sights on learning, then you can lead your way through life, out of the darkness." Parents and students interviewed for this study believe it signals that Harper Leadership Academy for Girls is committed to developing the leadership skills of its students during their time at the school. Mr. Eric Jones, an 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher at Harper, believes the message of the motto is "listen to

what you're told now and you'll be able to do this later: learn today, lead tomorrow...

We want you to listen up so you can lead *tomorrow*." There is a general sentiment that whatever the motto's true meaning, "leadership" has a place at Harper; however many believe that the characteristics and skills of leaders are not adequately encouraged or developed in the girls who attend Harper. Ms. Redman, Kelly's guardian, sums up her exasperation with what she believes is at the root of her own disaffection with Harper:

The name – "Leadership Academy" - come on! That's misleading! That's one of the things that attracted me to the school. I thought they were interested in turning out leaders- the curriculum and everything would be producing leaders. I thought the air of the school would be structured in that area.

The statement above conveys Ms. Redman's disappointment in what she alludes to as "false advertising" about Harper's programming. Her perception seems to be on target, given how a Harper teacher responds to a question about how leadership is developed at the school:

I actually don't think leadership is really developed at Harper. There's a lot of superficial ways that it is, like student government- it's the first year we've done it with validity- but nothing about our school develops leadership I don't think. First of all, our whole school is about obedience. Like, there's a saying in the office. I think it says, "In youth we learn, in adulthood we understand." It's on the "white board" in the office. Nothing to me seems to foster leadership in any way.

The teacher concedes that Harper's focus is on the control of its students, and he sees this philosophy, that students should defer to the leadership and knowledge of adults, promoted at the school. He continues:

With that being said, just because I don't think that's our focus doesn't mean I don't think we're setting the girls up for that in the future. To a big extent, a lot of our girls are leaders. They're natural leaders, and we can foster that outside of school or different things they do with the assemblies that the girls take over and put together.

The teacher believes that students are given the opportunity to be leaders even though they are not specifically developed to be leaders. He accepts this and offers his own reasoning behind the school's stance:

We don't want our students to be loudmouth leaders without having real working knowledge because, one, they'd be adhering to a terrible stereotype about Black women, and no one is going to take them seriously unless they have knowledge to back it up. So I think that, more than anything, they need adults to be like, "listen, you don't know everything. You need to sit down and really evaluate yourself and take on your own understanding of things and then you can speak with some type of authority."

It becomes clear that Harper students' gender and racial backgrounds come into play in how this teacher, a White man in his mid-twenties, understands the school's positions on both obedience and leadership. It is concerning to me to think that students' submission into particular modes of behavior and language are valued at Harper, at least according to this teacher. Black Feminist and Social Reproduction Theorists would suggest an approach to the education of young women of color from a low-income community that empowers them to come into their own, not to be educated in an environment in which they experience the "double whammy" of oppression (NCLC, 1997). It is problematic that leadership is not consciously developed among all students, or at the very least, in the students who seek out leadership opportunities. Harper wants to alter the life trajectories of its students and the Riverbend neighborhood in which they live. Students need leadership development in order to be ready and feel confident to face head-on the various challenges that they will experience as young women of color when they enter college where few minority students are often enrolled. Moreover, students and their families expect leadership development when they attend Harper. The school's failure to provide the programming that is expected given the school's moniker and motto fosters

disaffection among students at the school as they recognize their schooling espouses empty promises.

While some semblance of order and control is present in nearly all schools, one wonders to what degree the extreme rigidity of Harper's non-negotiables and the lack of *autonomy* students experience at the school is necessary. It is concerning both because of the students' needs to feel empowered to access a college education that other women of color from low-income communities have largely been shut out of, and because of the *autonomy* that they will need to experience and be supported to negotiate as they prepare for the academic and social freedoms of college. Without supporting students in these ways, one wonders how they will be adequately prepared to succeed to and *through* college.

There is clear misalignment between what the school communicates to its stakeholders about its purpose and what teachers, students, and parents believe its purpose to be. It seems likely that students' engagement is affected by this tension, to the degree that they feel controlled by the school and its staff members and not empowered as young women leaders as a result of the school's focus on obedience. This section has illuminated various perspectives on Harper's institutional features, namely the non-negotiables that serve as the foundation of the school's culture. Confusion around the tension between demands for students' obedience at a school that touts "leadership" may, as a result of students' disaffection, ultimately hold the school back from its plans to fully facilitate ambitious gains in student achievement.

### **Extra-curricular Activities & Student Life Programming**

Extra-curricular activities are typically offered at schools for students' social

and/or academic development outside of the classroom. Student life programming is implemented in order to foster a sense of community among the school's stakeholders, particularly among the students themselves. Harper's foci over the last five years have been on the creation of a school environment in which learning can take place, as recognized in the 'non-negotiables,' and on the establishment of learning as a primary aspect of schooling, as recognized in Harper's 'Big Goals.' The pressure for success on the state assessment and the desire to keep students under control leaves little time or space designated for strong and intentional development around student life programming. Thus, most students who participated in this study speak about their reactions to the school based on what they experience through their classes- their teachers, their instruction, and their peers. Most do not seem to have a relationship with Harper, the institution, outside of the discipline they sometimes receive as a result of not adhering to a 'non-negotiable,' and outside of the instruction they receive in their classes. This may be because there are limited opportunities to be involved with school-level activities or because the opportunities that are available to students are unappealing to them.

The teachers at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls anchor the after-school programming offered at the school. For an extra stipend in their pay based on the level of their weekly commitment, teachers coordinate and run the sports teams, daily after-school tutoring and homework help programs in both reading and math, and a half dozen club offerings. Sports are in season during the Fall, Winter, and Spring. There is field hockey, basketball, bowling, badminton, softball, track, and cheerleading available for students to participate in at the high school level. There is field hockey, basketball,

volleyball, track, and cheerleading at the middle school level. Math and literacy tutoring is held every Tuesday and Thursday after school. Clubs include the a cappella choir, the charm club (in which students learn “proper etiquette”), the fitness club, the Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA), student government, and the mural arts club.

Students tend to participate in the after-school programs if they have a prior interest or experience in the sport or club, or if they have a strong relationship with the teacher who is the club’s moderator. The same 40 or so girls comprise the membership of Harper’s various sports teams, as evident by the group of young women recognized at the Sports Banquet for their participation in school athletics at the end of the 2009-2010 school year. The weekly meetings of the after-school clubs are sparsely attended. Mr. Kendrick’s a capella choir has interested five young women, all of high school age, for its group practices on Tuesday afternoons. He says, “It’s been really fun. It’s actually all 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders, and Cierra, so that’s like another group of girls [at the school] that I know.” Mr. Calvin, the moderator of the school’s mural art club, has directed one or two girls each Wednesday and Thursday afternoon of the school year in the completion of a large mural on the Lower A hallway.

Harper’s student government, initiated at the start of this school year, has two faculty advisors, and Mrs. Sanders, the Social Studies Department Chair, is also very involved with the club. The students who participate in the club were elected as class representatives by their peers after being nominated and hosting campaigns complete with speeches and posters. According to Mrs. Sanders:

We have a really good group of 10 girls, which I think is a good start for a new organization, and we have people represented from every grade. They came up with a lot of the initiatives that we’re going to do this year, and I just think it’s another positive step in building a culture here [at Harper].

Moreover, she says, the initiatives are “fun, [the students] are volunteering, they’re purposeful, and we can get a lot of people involved.” While Mrs. Sanders believes there are leadership opportunities, such as student government, that are available to students, she does not think that enough students take advantage of them. “I just think it seems to be the same girls who do everything,” she says.

The GSA has been a standing club for a few years now and its moderator, Mr. Jones, has transferred much of the facilitation of the club to its student leaders. The agenda for the group’s weekly meetings takes on one of three forms. Mr. Jones explains:

There is 3 focuses [sic] of GSA. Some GSAs adopt one focus over another but we’re kind of all over the place. It can either be education and awareness like “here are the issues, let’s learn about them,” or be more supportive, like students sitting in a circle, talking about their problems, talking about the challenges, or it can be advocacy like where you’re trying to advocate for certain rights or things like that. Most of the time, ours is towards the supportive discussion sort of thing. We talk a lot about roles, expectations of ‘coming out,’ and things like that.

The participants are mostly 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders, as they are the ones most familiar and comfortable with Mr. Jones, whom many of them have or have had for English.

Middle schoolers typically do not participate in the GSA, which Mr. Jones attributes to their lack of familiarity with him and the upperclass(wo)men who run the leadership of the club. He also acknowledges that they may be more timid to participate in a club that addresses issues of sexual orientation, whether they are gay, straight, or questioning.

“I’ve talked to the middle school teachers [about encouraging the middle school students to participate in GSA], but they feel uncomfortable broaching the issue,” Mr. Jones says.

Raven, the key participant from the “Overwhelmed” focus group, took the initiative to begin her own club called *Big Sisters Little Sisters*. Raven’s idea behind the

club is to foster sisterhood between 12<sup>th</sup> grade mentors and the leaders of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade classes. She received institutional support from Mrs. Attle in selecting the students for participation in the club and in being allowed to submit afternoon announcement reminders for club meetings. Raven was given space in the college suite for the club's meetings by Mrs. Gramercy, and was granted permission to post flyers around the school to advertise club fundraisers.

Raven voices many frustrations with her leadership role within the club. She has had difficulty scheduling meetings that the mentors (Big Sisters) are able to attend given their commitments to other school activities (she wants to hold them twice weekly for two hours after school each day). She has asked several faculty members to attend the BSLS club meetings as the Faculty Advisor of record, but many of them have not shown up. On the day that I shadowed Raven and attended the meeting of the BSLS, not much transpired as far as club business or activity, as members, particularly the 12<sup>th</sup> graders, came and went. Raven was late to the meeting and many of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders became frustrated with the lack of action, articulated purpose, or agenda for the meeting, and they left.

One of the teachers that Raven approached about missing the meeting after school told her that she had simply forgotten about the club meeting and would be helped by a reminder earlier in the day. Another teacher, who did come to the meeting around 3:30, left about twenty minutes later as nothing productive had transpired. Both faculty members were confused about what Raven expected of them in her requests for them to attend the meetings. Raven also became frustrated with trying to get the attention of those who were present for the meeting and to get them involved in the icebreaker activity that

she had planned for them. Raven is a self-appointed leader as she takes the initiative that many of her peers do not, but in terms of being effective in that leadership, Raven could use additional support.

Several students from the “adjusted,” “overwhelmed,” and “disconnected” focus groups participate in extra-curricular activities, and they primarily do so via their involvement with Harper’s sports teams. However, Nafeesah, from the “disconnected” group, does not stay after-school for any club activities; she laments that there are no craft-type clubs offered, nor is there anything available for students with an interest in fashion design. Kelly attends ballet classes at a studio about twenty minutes away from her home each Friday afternoon after school. Before she transferred from Harper, she conceded that she might be persuaded to participate in after-school activities at Harper if dance or drama were offered. The current “clique-ish” nature of the school’s cheerleading squad prevented her from trying out for that team. Drema played basketball at her former school. She says that if Harper formed a girls’ football team, she would play; the current sports offerings do not appeal to her. A few students spoke of their need to go home directly after school because of responsibilities such as house chores and care for their siblings. These students make it sound unlikely that they would be able to stay at school past 3:15pm, no matter what they may be interested to participate in.

As a district neighborhood school, Harper employs a teaching staff that by contract, must be allowed to end their day at 3:07pm. Therefore, only those teachers who volunteer to remain after school for modest compensation are available to moderate clubs at Harper. Consequently, the only clubs offered at Harper are the ones that their teachers are interested and competent in to lead. The school’s status as a neighborhood school in

an under-funded district prevents the school from offering more money for after-school club facilitation, which would perhaps entice more teachers to stay past 3:07pm to lead a club and would diversify the school's current club offerings to students. Alternatively, students could be encouraged, like Raven was, to form their own clubs in interest areas that are not currently represented; however, these students would need to be provided with support and leadership development so that the experience, and the club, would be successful.

In addition, it is not likely that Harper's "clubs" could be fit into the school day, perhaps during 6<sup>th</sup> period, because by union contract, teachers cannot be required to "teach" or advise such programs. Moreover, the district's intense pressure related to Harper students' growth on the state assessment completely shatters the idea that teachers' planning time would focus on either preparing for or facilitating students' extra-curricular pursuits. All of this is in despite of the fact that college-prep schools typically offer a wide array of extra-curricular activities for the involvement of as many of its students as possible. Membership in clubs and participation on sports teams are desirable attributes of students that colleges look for when deciding who to admit into their student body.

On another note, these activities promote students' positive relationships with one another and with school staff members. Moreover, they generate a sense of school spirit and students' feelings of belonging with the institution. While there are grade-specific events throughout the school year, there are few whole-school events to bring everyone at Harper together as one community. There was one all-school assembly at the start of the 2010-2011 school year when Mrs. Leary visited the girls to explain her departure from

Harper and her new role within the district. Scheduling difficulties, the interruption of instruction, and concerns about student behavior have all been reasons cited by Mrs. Attle as to why Harper does not have all whole-school assemblies. While many schools have assemblies that include all students for school-wide pep rallies, guest speakers, special programs, award ceremonies, and student talent showcases, Harper does not. Some grade-level assemblies occur throughout the year when guest speakers visit the school to tell students about their careers or discuss topics of “leadership,” but these are fairly infrequent.

‘All-school’ events are not valued at Harper, despite the fact that data from this study indicates their positive impact on student engagement. For example, at the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year, Harper hosted a “Progress Party” for the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders who took the state assessment last spring. The party was organized to celebrate the academic gains that the students made on the test; it included t-shirts, baked treats, and a DJ. The students in the “disconnected” group describe it as having been a fun time. Students in the “overwhelmed” focus group share that, “everybody got along. They had fun. They didn’t worry about anything that was going on. They had fun and took their problems out like having fun dancing.” These students recognize that, “when we have group parties and school parties, I think that’s when everybody gets along and moves away [from] our problems and just have [sic] fun.” They appreciate the parties for the fun but fundamentally view them as opportunities for the students of the school to come together outside of class time and interact with each other in different and positive ways. Special programs at Harper that are celebratory in nature and have a similar effect on students’ engagement, school spirit, and peer relationships are the grade-level

“Retreats” in the Fall and the district-wide cheerleading competition in January. There are several such events at the end of the school year: Field Day for the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders, the Junior and Senior Proms, the Senior Awards Breakfast, and the end-of-year Sports Banquet.

In June 2010 I observed one of the 12<sup>th</sup> graders’ graduation practices. This selection from my field notes highlights the high levels of engagement that the girls experienced during this time with their peers and their teacher. In this scenario the students worked cooperatively with one another and their teacher to rehearse a song for their graduation ceremony. The song, “You’re My Sister Always,” is the school’s theme song and it was adopted from the Educational Partnership for Young Women (EPYW). The students learned the song for the first time during graduation rehearsal because it is only utilized each year during Harper’s graduation ceremony.

Though the seniors did not choose to sing this song as a part of their commencement exercises they seem to relate with the words of the song and are enthusiastic to share this experience with each other. This is demonstrated by their excitement and investment in making the most of their rehearsal time so that they sound and look good during their ceremony:

The girls appear excited to be singing because they are energetic and smiling. When Ms. Smith (the music teacher) tells them that they sound good they begin to sing more loudly and with more confidence. Many girls are swaying side to side and stepping while they sing. Charisse is the most enthusiastic- she’s practically jumping out of her skin dancing as she sings along.

The girls have enjoyed celebrating together as a class during these rehearsals and they are jubilant on the eve of their graduation. They have surmounted many obstacles, individually and as a class, in order to graduate high school and be accepted into college

for the fall. The positive energy that flows among them is palpable to others: “Graduation rehearsal ends with the 3:04 announcements and the students dismiss from Ms. Smith’s classroom. They’re all in a buzz. A student in the hallway says, ‘Ya’ll got the school spirit comin’ outta there!’” This example highlights findings from the study that indicate that the students at Harper will gladly participate, and even lead others, in community-building when they are given the space and voice to do so. Social engagement, through the solidarity it fosters among the girls and the caring relationships that they are able to build with teachers, helps students to invest further in their school and in their goals to remain at Harper through their graduation from high school.

These opportunities in which students come together for fun are not only important to encourage school spirit and for students to develop a positive identity with Harper. They help the girls learn to get along with each other and interact with one another in constructive ways. The students who participated in this study cite many challenges that the students have in their interpersonal relationships. The students in the “disaffected” focus group speak as though the social context of the school contributes to their disaffection just as much, if not more so, than their frustrations with Harper’s academic program. Furthermore, many of the study participants attribute these issues to the all-girls aspect of the school. How Harper’s single-sex model affects students’ *relatedness* to one another will be explored in the next section.

### **‘All-girls’**

When Harper Middle School was reorganized as an all-girls 7-12 school in Summer 2005, EduNation, the EMO that facilitated the transition and brought in Mrs. Leary to lead the school, believed that a single-sex model would help transform the

school. Mrs. Leary agreed to follow the girls from Abbott to Harper because she had become attached to them, but she did not have a previous philosophy on single-sex schooling, nor, she says, would she have minded leading a school with boys or of all boys. Six years later, however, as a district administrator who monitors high schools across Harper's urban district, Mrs. Leary has a strong conviction about the power of a single-sex education for girls. She says:

You've got to see the girls who went to Harper and to the other schools. I run into them at their new schools and I say, "I told you, didn't I?" And they look at me and say, "Yes, Mrs. Leary, you did." It keeps me going, the girls who transferred to the other schools. What blows my mind is how far ahead of the pack we [at Harper] are. I see how girls carry themselves, look in school, their expectations of their teachers, their expectations of themselves. Most of the schools have no limits. The boys take over the room. I see how ostracized the large girls [at the other schools] are and think, 'If ya'll was at Harper, you'd be okay.' Harper- it looks different, it feels different. 'All-girls' has legs. I wouldn't do it differently.

Mrs. Leary identifies distinctions that she recognizes in girls who attend Harper and in girls (some of whom have left Harper) who attend other neighborhood high schools in the district. She speaks to the different type of place that Harper is for girls, with a focus on academic instruction, a consistent school structure, and high expectations. She asserts that the girls at Harper have a different sense of self than girls who attend school elsewhere in the district because they blossom without the competition from boys; they can be confident in themselves, academically and socially.

The decision for Harper to become an all-girls school and then to remain one over the last five years was and is an intentional one. However, many of the school's stakeholders are unclear as to why Harper is all-girls and what the single-sex model for the school means for its identity. The justification for educating Harper students in an all-girls setting must be communicated to the school's stakeholders in order for everyone to

be purposeful in their work to support the school's mission, vision, and the philosophy of single-sex schooling.

### **Teachers' reactions.**

The teachers who participated in this study respond well to the school's all-girls model, and a few of them either sought jobs at the school or became pleasantly intrigued with the model once they learned that it was single-sex upon applying for a position. Mr. Kendrick explains his interest in teaching at an all-girls school:

For one, with some of my graduate classes last year I did some readings on single-sex schools and particularly that all-girls schools usually achieve better than when girls are mixed in with boys. Guy-girl interactions last year [at my former school] were definitely not productive for learning. I had heard that from a lot of different people, too, and I kind of liked the idea of not having to put up with boys and the immaturity of boys.

Mr. Kendrick accepted the 10<sup>th</sup> grade Geometry teaching position at Harper because of some knowledge he had of the potential benefits of learning and teaching in an all-girls setting. His experience over the last six months has affirmed his position as he says, "I've really liked the teaching aspect of it. I've really liked my student and teacher interaction."

Mr. Jones admits that he only thinks about the fact that he teaches in a single-sex environment "when someone brings it up." When asked what the all-girls environment means for his students, he shares:

I don't think it does matter for the girls. I think it's just there's certain things that happen at an all-girls school that go without saying, and girls are in leadership roles but we don't need to talk about it. You know what I mean? The girls aren't distracted by boys in the classroom. They feel stronger I think. I mean, wouldn't it have to be that way? I would think.

As for how the all-girls nature of his classes influences his classroom instruction Mr.

Jones says, "I'm concerned about the students' role in the community and their roles as women rising above and those types of things- we address gender roles and those sorts of

things a lot.”

“Being all-girls and being a female teacher I have a different kind of bond with my students because there is just that closeness that you can have that would be different if it was boys and girls,” explains Mrs. Sanders, Harper’s U.S. History teacher. She adds that she does not think that her students at Harper pay much attention to the ‘single-sex’ aspect of their education:

I rarely hear them talking about wishing that boys were here or being happy that boys aren’t here. I just think it’s kind of accepted that that’s how it is. I think that it’s great in that all of the leadership positions and all of the athletics and everything is filled by girls. I think that it offers them a lot of opportunity that maybe they wouldn’t seek if they were at a [co-ed] school.

Mrs. Sanders contends that the all-girls composition of the students at Harper is seen as a matter of fact and not something that generates a lot of attention from the girls. She recognizes how the single-sex model of the school benefits them, even if the girls themselves do not.

Teachers at Harper credit the school’s single-sex model for the relationships that they are able to build with students and for the control they feel like they are able to have in their classrooms. Furthermore, they believe they would not have the same level of success with either if they taught at a co-ed school. However, the teachers are largely unaware of the school’s overall purpose for being all-girls and what it might or should mean for their instruction. Mr. Kendrick concedes that he has “no idea” why the school is all girls “aside from the connection with the Educational Partnership for Young Women and kind of what their vision is or what our vision is with that. I don’t know why they split [Harper and Abbott] initially or anything like that.”

Aside from their reports of having overwhelmingly positive relationships with

students, teachers say that the all-girls composition of their classes does not alter their approach to instruction. In one way, this is good because teachers have similar expectations for all students, and the teachers' expectations are not different (particularly in a negative sense) for the girls just because boys are not present. However, there are missed opportunities for teachers to consciously help facilitate the interruption of the social reproduction of the Riverbend neighborhood. By having pointed conversations with girls about academic disciplines in which women have been pioneers, in which women have been historically underrepresented, and in discussing issues that are relevant to women's lives, the teachers at Harper can provide alternate lenses with which to look at the world and students' place in it. Conversations that explore issues in the lives of women of color (similar to the one about gender roles that Mr. Jones investigated and discussed with his AP Literature class while they read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) can acknowledge students' voices and lived experiences, and make them feel empowered to "find their own way."

Carrying on as normal or not seeing gender warrants the critique similar to that of someone who says "I don't see color" when referring to the racial background of students (Carr, 1997; Parker, 1999). Teachers have a responsibility to recognize the lived experiences of their students. We know from data presented earlier in this chapter that neglecting to do this promotes disaffection within students' academic and social experiences in the classroom. Students' educational experiences at Harper and their beliefs about a future in college, when facilitated by teachers who seem disconnected to students' lives, become less meaningful and less honest. Students with complex lives want to be acknowledged for who they are and provided with opportunities to give voice

to their experiences. Moreover, these conversations are critical to young women of color at Harper feeling empowered to push themselves beyond the expectations of and challenges within a society that oppresses them for both their racial and their gender backgrounds.

### **Students' reactions.**

The data suggest that students' reactions to the school being all-girls is mixed. Those in the "adjusted" focus group recognize and appreciate the all-girls environment for its academic and social benefits. In response to what it is like to go to school with all girls, Cierra says, "I think it's easier to focus in class." Amber agrees with Cierra that an all-girls school "is better" and adds, "if there were boys here, we might not be focusing and be stuck on boys." Stephanie admits, "I'm kinda boy crazy myself. I'm glad I'm here because I focus more around girls." Aliyah thinks there is a lot of drama at their all-girls school because, "people like to argue and fight," but "it would be worse" if the school was co-ed.

Students in the "overwhelmed" focus group also like Harper as an all-girls school for the academic and social benefits. Chanice says, "What I like about it is that we can learn more. Boys are not here to distract us." Marissa adds, "You stay focused and don't have to worry about girl and boy drama." For Nahla, going to school with all girls means that, "the girls are not shy." "An all-girls school is always more sisterhood, and it's easier for you to connect with girls," Raven points out. The all-girls setting has its challenges, though, as Chanice from the "overwhelmed" group explains. "There are certain girls that fight. Certain girls that think they are tough. They pick on puny kids that are sweet and innocent. Some people want to pick on them because they're not arguing back with

them,” she says. Marissa from the group adds:

Some [who pick fights] are straight A students. My cousin graduated last year. She was a great student, but she picked on everybody. She just wanted to make somebody feel bad. They’d pick on me sometimes because they say I’m slow. I’m not slow. I just don’t want to associate with everybody. I do want to associate with people, [there are] just certain people I don’t want to associate with because I don’t know you like that, and I’m scared that you’re going to turn your back on me.”

Thankfully for Marissa, there are other students at and other aspects of the school that keep her engaged in her learning at Harper, despite the difficulties she experiences with some of her peers. The girls in the “disconnected” group seem fairly ambivalent about their school’s all-girls status, except when their peers complain that their school is single-sex. Jessica says:

It’s okay, but I just hate it when people complain about it being an all-girls school. Don’t come here. You already know it’s an all-girls school. You’re not going to find no boys in here so this is not the school for you to come to if you want to meet a boy.

Samantha admits:

I didn’t want to come here, but I had to. I accepted it. Even though you know it’s an all-girls school and you don’t want to be here, just deal with it for the time being. I mean, it’s only four years of your life. You’ll go to college to be around guys, I guess. I think you should grow up.

As to what it means for her to attend an all-girls school, Samantha says, “It matures you, sort of. It teaches you how to be respectful of yourself and how to be respectful of others.” The students in the “disconnected” group may not love the fact that their school is all-girls, but they do not want to waste time being upset about it. They “accept” it, and in Samantha’s case, recognize the positive aspects of a single-sex education. The girls in the “adjusted,” “overwhelmed,” and “disconnected” groups just stay away from and outside of the “drama” they speak of between other students as much as possible.

For the students in the “disaffected” group, however, their frustrations with the school are compounded by their lack of connectedness with their peers at Harper at large. They are incredibly bothered by the fact that they attend a school that is all-girls. They claim that the perpetual ‘drama’ among the students at the school is a result of Harper’s position as an all-girls school, because social issues between or among girls are amplified. Donnera shares, “There are too many fights. There are too many things. When I was in my co-ed school, they worried about stuff like boyfriends, but here in this school, it’s like we fight over things like whose clothes look better, whose hair looks better and all that.” It is interesting to note that Donnera provides a reason here for Harper’s uniform policy, as even with restrictions on students’ dress, ‘drama’ unfolds related to students’ pants, shoes, and accessories. Drema admits:

It’s stressing. I wake up every morning and see a whole bunch of girls all the time. In my old school, I used to be teased by boys, and I come to school and then all these girls tease me. It’s like, “Wow.” I’m more shy around girls than boys.

Donnera adds, “It’s horrible. I don’t like it. Just the fact that there are so many girls. There’s just too much going on. Everybody has drama... There’s too much going on because girls have smart mouths.” Those in the “disaffected” group, represented here by Drema and Donnera, believe that the ‘drama’ among students at their school represents the student culture at Harper and results from its all-girls environment. They have actually become distressed about school, both because they are the subjects of derision from their peers, but also because they experience a negative school culture that has arisen from constant issues that various girls have with one another. This experience, in conjunction with their negative academic experience, contributes to their complete disaffection from Harper.

Data from an original qualitative study that explores what student engagement looks like at an all-girls urban neighborhood public school and what features of the school promote or inhibit engagement have been presented in this chapter. It is clear from a review of these data that students' educational experiences at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls are mixed, as they vary greatly according to students' reports of their academic and social engagement in school. The realization of Harper as a "site of transformation" requires that all of its students are engaged at high levels in order that they achieve at levels that ensures they have access to and experience success in college. Currently, only a segment of Harper's student population has such an educational experience. The majority of students at Harper are subject to the social reproduction of the Riverbend neighborhood as a result of the missed opportunities to engage all of its students fully and meaningfully in the school's college-prep identity. The significance of these findings, for understanding engagement, single-sex education, the dropout crisis, and social reproduction are explored in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 6

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This qualitative case study has explored what student engagement looks like at an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. It has also determined what features of the school promote and what features of the school inhibit student engagement. The perspectives shared in Chapters 4 and 5 are primarily those of current and former students at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls, a 7-12 school located in the low-income Riverbend neighborhood of a large city on the East Coast. Data on students' engagement at the school were collected through focus groups, interviews, and observations. Analysis of these data has illuminated the complex ways in which students engage in school at Harper. Moreover, there are particular features of students' education at Harper that promote and/or inhibit engagement for some subset of the student population. Consequently, the educational experiences of students at Harper are transformative for some and reproductive for others. This chapter will summarize the study's findings and identify the implications of this research for Harper and for the literature. Moreover, I will also share how I hope that this work informs future education reform efforts that address the 'dropout crisis' in urban schools.

**Understanding Student Engagement at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls**

Riordan (in Datnow and Hubbard, 2002) contends that the "key explanatory variable" for the high levels of academic achievement experienced by students in single-sex schools is the students' *proacademic choice* to attend schools that are known to focus on academics and reject the values of youth culture. However, this argument does not adequately explain the achievement of students who attend Harper Leadership Academy

for Girls, because it is an all-girls *non-selective neighborhood* public 7-12 school in a large urban district. The young women who live in the Riverbend neighborhood of the city automatically attend the school, unless they have been accepted into one of the district's selective public high schools. Most do not actively choose to attend the school.

In order for a young woman from the Riverbend neighborhood to forgo her schooling at Harper in favor of another neighborhood high school, she must first enroll at Harper and solicit the principal to approve a transfer request. This happens on occasion, though not as frequently as one might think given the unique nature of Harper's all-girls environment and students' lack of familiarity with single-sex educational settings. Some students actively choose to stay at Harper though they have the agency to leave, because they like one or more aspects of their educational experience at the school. It seems, however, that the overwhelming majority of students enrolled at Harper make a passive decision to remain at the school. They are either unaware of their agency to request a transfer to another neighborhood school or they cannot afford transportation to another district school in a different neighborhood, so they remain at Harper.

This study of student engagement at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls, an all-girls *non-selective* public school, has illuminated that the single-sex nature of the school does not automatically translate into high engagement levels for students, as has previously been found in studies of students who attend selective single-sex schools. The girls who attend Harper experience engagement along a spectrum from high to low. When students' engagement is paired with their achievement, students' experiences at Harper fall within a 2x2 table that encompasses four groups: 1) Harper's most successful and enthusiastic students, the highly engaged high achievers, or "adjusted" students, 2)

Harper's least successful and least enthusiastic students, the less-engaged low achievers, or "disaffected" students, 3) those who are highly engaged but low achievers, the "overwhelmed" students, and 4) those who are less-engaged high achievers, the "disconnected" students. The exact positions of students within all of these groups are not fixed; rather, they vacillate according to the variable of engagement that is interrogated at any given time for any particular student.

Students' experiences differ according to their academic engagement and their social engagement. They respond with various sentiments of *relatedness*, *competence*, and *autonomy* to the *structure* of the academic program and the school culture at Harper, the *involvement* of their teachers, and the *autonomy support* provided by school staff throughout students' maturation as young women. The theoretical framework of "self-motivation" developed by Connell and Wellborn (1991) and furthered by Skinner and Belmont (1993) suggests that the *involvement*, *structure*, and *autonomy support* of the educational context precedes and facilitates students' feelings of *relatedness*, *competence*, and *autonomy*, respectively. Students' feelings of *relatedness*, *competence*, and *autonomy* (or lack thereof) therefore precede and facilitate students' engagement or disaffection in school, ultimately impacting their achievement. Through the data discussed and analyzed in Chapter 5 I have identified how the variations in students' educational and social experiences in the *relatedness*, *competence*, and *autonomy* domains are impacted by the educational context, Harper Leadership Academy for Girls, in the domains of *involvement*, *structure*, and *autonomy support*.

The major difference that I have identified among the four groups directly relates to Harper's identity as a college-prep neighborhood public school that encourages its

students to aspire to attend college. The academic and social aspects of Harper that promote a “college-preparatory” schooling experience and environment largely and positively affect students’ engagement in school. To the extent that the students at Harper have access to and positively experience the college-prep nature of school, they are engaged at high levels and are likely to achieve at high levels as well. Harper’s identity as a college-prep school is a source of pride for many students, but only a small number of students are able to access a truly college-prep experience. Consequently, several students internalize this extreme disconnect between their desire for a college-prep experience at Harper and the reality of their experience, which does not include academic and social support on a college-prep track. The girls, however, have been promised a college-prep education; students’ expectations have been heightened for an experience that is either more or better than what is typically offered in the district’s other neighborhood schools. The girls whose experiences reflect those of students at a typical neighborhood district school experience the “Harper girls all go to college” message as empty rhetoric. Without other academic and/or social components at Harper with which to engage, students become disaffected in school, making it likely that they will slowly begin to spend less time in school, which is a dangerous slippery slope that could lead to them dropping out altogether.

### **Overview of the Study’s Findings**

#### **“What Does Student Engagement at Harper Look Like?”**

The *behavioral*, *emotional*, and *cognitive* engagement of students within the academic and social features of Harper Leadership Academy for Girls vary widely between the four groups of students who participated in this study. An understanding of

what student engagement looks like at Harper portrays the complexity of students' experiences at the school.

**“Adjusted.”**

There are students for whom the academics and social atmosphere of Harper just “click,” and they experience both high engagement and high achievement. The students who fit this description are included in the “adjusted” group. They are overwhelmingly on-board with the school’s all-girls model, very invested in Harper’s messages about college, and not bothered by the school’s rules and the subsequent limitations on their freedom in school. They are also enrolled in the Honors and AP courses, so they experience college-prep curricula that engage them through the rigor and relevance of, and the rationale for, the material. Teachers’ *involvement*, the academic *structure* of their classes, the social *structure* of the school, and the *autonomy support* provided by school staff all promote students’ feelings of *relatedness*, *competence*, and *autonomy*. In these ways, students in the “adjusted” group are highly engaged with their education at Harper and they are incredibly invested in, and relish the support they receive for, reaching their goal of attending college.

**“Overwhelmed.”**

For students in the “overwhelmed” group, their high level of engagement at Harper does not translate into their academic success. One possible explanation for this is that students are overwhelmed by their social commitments at the school, as they have overextended themselves to the point where they neglect to focus on their academic assignments. Students in this group tend to participate in school activities, such as the sports teams, that facilitate positive relationships with their peers and their teachers and

feelings of *relatedness*. However, if teachers do not get *involved* and demonstrate *autonomy support* for students and coach them on how to adequately manage their many responsibilities, then the great possibility of students in this group experiencing academic success in conjunction with their engagement at school becomes a missed opportunity. Another explanation is that no matter how much they may experience feelings of *relatedness* with their teachers and their classmates, students also need exposure to the *structure* of high-quality instruction (not currently present for many students on the test-prep track); without this students are not likely to achieve at high levels.

**“Disconnected.”**

It is clear through analysis of the data collected for this study that there are students who are not engaged at high levels during their time at Harper. However, students in the “disconnected” group achieve at high levels. This complicates the literature on engagement, as it is clear that students can still achieve at high levels though they experience low levels of engagement. While their engagement may be low, the students in the “disconnected” group have to be engaged in *some* aspect of Harper’s academic or social features in order to maintain their motivation to achieve at such high levels. For the students with whom I spoke in this group, their personal expectations for their academic success, in conjunction with the programming of the College Pathways office, keeps students focused on their end-goal. They are minimally engaged, and they achieve at high levels, despite their disappointment with Harper’s test-prep academic track. Though they may not experience feelings of *relatedness* with their teachers or peers, *autonomy* in many of their classes and around the school, and they are frustrated

with the lack of *structure* in their teachers' instruction, the students in the "disconnected" group work towards their *competence* with the lesson material.

**"Disaffected."**

There is a group of students at Harper who experience significant academic and social disaffection at the school. They either leave or regularly talk about leaving Harper. Moreover, these students' academic records illuminate that they experience low levels of academic achievement in school as well. According to research that suggests students' engagement in school precedes and facilitates students' achievement in school (Rumberger, 2004a), one may speculate that a causal relationship between students' low engagement and their low achievement could also exist. The "disaffected" group represents a segment of Harper's students who are the least engaged in school. Those in this group are interested in achieving academic success and belonging to a school community. However, they do not believe this is possible at Harper given their frustrations with their teachers (lack of *involvement*) and with their instruction (lack of *structure*) at Harper. Furthermore, they perceive a negative school culture due to the school's *structure* based in the non-negotiables and discipline system, a lack of *relatedness* among the girls in the school, and a lack of *autonomy* for students to exert their independence as they prepare for college. The most disaffected students at Harper do not attend school (nor did they volunteer to participate in this study). I do not know what exactly accounts for their disaffection, though I can imagine that components of what the "disaffected" study participants describe as contributing factors to their disaffection in school are likely similar.

The reasons that account for students' engagement or disaffection in school vary within each of the four groups. An understanding of the complex nature of student engagement at Harper is critical when considering the possibility for Harper to be a "site of transformation" or a "site of reproduction." The next section will revisit the specific features of the school that were found to have either promoted or inhibited student engagement.

### **"What Features of Harper Either Promote or Inhibit Engagement?"**

Students' engagement at Harper differs according to the variations in the learning and social experiences that they have at Harper. All students hear the message that "Harper girls go to college," which is powerful for two reasons: (1) many Harper students will be the first in their families to attend college and (2) students who attend other neighborhood high schools in this district drop out of high school at an alarming rate of forty-eight percent (48%). Yet Harper students' investment in this message and in the intentions of those who share it depend largely on the credibility with which the college message is supported throughout students' experiences with academic and social engagement at Harper, which will be described below.

#### **Academic engagement.**

Students' academic instruction is currently split along two "tracks," which delineate between two different programs of classroom instruction. Students who have scored "proficient" or "advanced" on the state assessment are enrolled in Honors and AP classes, and they follow a college-prep curriculum. They are generally engaged at higher levels than students who follow a test-prep curriculum centered on and aligned with preparation for the annual state assessment. Often such instruction, taught by

inexperienced and/or ineffective teachers lacks the rigor, relevance, and intrigue that students expect of an academic program that is supposed to prepare them for success to and through college. Consequently, students' engagement in school is largely affected by and a consequence of the *structure* of their academic experiences at Harper and their subsequent feelings of *competence* as they work towards their goal of accessing and succeeding through a college education.

### **Social engagement.**

Students' social engagement at Harper also varies, mostly according to students' frustration levels with one or more of the following structures at the school: the non-negotiables for student behavior, the discipline system, leadership development, and students' relationships with their peers. Students' reactions to the non-negotiables, as experienced primarily through Harper's uniform policy and the restrictions on students' movement around the building, highlight the lack of *autonomy* that students enjoy at their school. Many take issue with the non-negotiables and the enforcement of them through suspensions because they seem to fly in the face of Harper's messages about college.

Moreover, the students who participated in the study witness many fights and they contend that the pervasive "drama" between students at their school contributes to a negative school climate. A few come to resent the all-girls composition of the school, believing that the abundance of girls present facilitates the drama. Regardless of this issue specifically, students and teachers alike express difficulty with articulating exactly what single-sex schooling at Harper is supposed to look like or why it was instituted in the first place. While the school has the opportunity to capitalize on its all-girls model, especially in light of its mission to interrupt the social reproduction of the Harper neighborhood, it

misses them; there are few school programs outside of class time that encourage students to build positive relationships with one another. Furthermore, the lack of all-school events and leadership programming (despite the school's moniker and motto) hurt students' sense of belonging within Harper and their sense of identity as members of the student body. According to the theoretical framework for engagement utilized in this study, students must experience feelings of *relatedness* and *autonomy* in order to experience social engagement at school.

### **Consequences.**

Of the ninety-four percent (94%) of Harper seniors who graduate from the school and who are accepted into college on an annual basis, only thirty-two percent (32%) matriculate in college during the first fall following their graduation from Harper. This indicates that students' engagement at Harper, which saw them through their graduation from high school, did not translate into many students' enrollment in college. One wonders if students' academic engagement at Harper does not support students' feelings of *competence* for their pursuit of higher education. If so, this stresses the need for Harper to provide college-prep curricula for all students and/or make pathways for post-secondary educational opportunities other than college available for students at the school. Likewise, it is possible that students' social engagement at Harper does not adequately support the *autonomy* that would make students feel prepared to navigate the social norms of and level of individual responsibility required in college.

### **Accounting for the Findings**

Much of the variations in students' experiences with their academic and social engagement at school can be attributed to the difficulty that Harper experiences as it

works to fit into its identity as a college-prep school while facing the realities of its identity as a neighborhood one. Much of what Harper students appreciate about their school are its college-prep features. However, when students recognize that elements of their schooling seem to not support, or at times directly contradict, the school's message of "Harper girls all go to college," then they become disaffected. The students who find nothing advantageous or enjoyable about their education at Harper are the most disaffected. This is troublesome as many of these young women will leave Harper, and possibly leave high school altogether. It also problematic in that girls may not be engaged to the extent that they need to be in order to become adequately prepared, both academically and socially, for their pursuit of higher education. While it is important for students to graduate high school, it is even more important that they graduate from college or some other type of post-secondary education; this is the only way that the young women can escape the intergenerational cycle of poverty that stifles the social and financial futures of those from the Riverbend neighborhood.

Its identity as a neighborhood school impacts what Harper is able to accomplish for and with its students for several reasons. First, the pressure from the district for the students' scores on the state assessment to increase strips away much of Harper's autonomy to decide how best to educate students. Harper teachers must follow curricula guides that establish what skill must be taught and what materials must be used to teach those skills. Experienced and effective teachers can work within these restrictions to make their material rigorous, relevant, and interesting for students. However, in following district hiring and firing guidelines, the school is relegated to including on staff many new and inexperienced teachers, as well as some experienced but ineffective ones.

This means that a large number of Harper students experience classroom instruction that is framed largely around the state assessment and is often delivered by teachers who do not have track records of leading students to academic success. Additionally, there is a significant amount of teacher turnover at Harper, which impacts the school's ability to maintain consistency with implementing school initiatives, which affect students' abilities to trust their instructors to not leave them.

Harper's ability to support its students to college may be more easily facilitated if it was not beholden to the district's policies related to curricula, teacher hiring and firing, and its limited resources. However, it is important that Harper retain its designation as a neighborhood school within the district in order to have the opportunity to interrupt the social reproduction of the Riverbend neighborhood through the education of its young women. Reconstituting itself as a magnet school would make Harper's admissions selective. The criteria for admission and an application process would serve young women in the district who are already academically talented and who already have a sense of agency to pursue opportunities that will set them up for future success. As a charter school, Harper's admissions would be determined by a lottery, which again would benefit students with the agency and know-how to enter their names for random selection. Also, the students who would seek enrollment in Harper if it were a magnet school or a charter school would most likely understand the potential benefits of a single-sex education. By remaining a neighborhood school, Harper intends to 'capture' the students who do not necessarily have a sense of either their potential for academic success via their pursuit of a college degree or the benefits of schooling in an all-girls

environment. Harper wants to push its girls to realize dreams that they never knew were possible.

### **Implications for Harper**

Harper students' lack of engagement in school has the potential to translate into their academic failure. If students do not have positive relationships with their teachers or peers or there are not extra-curricular activities that they participate in that promote their *social* engagement in school, then one of three potential consequences is likely: (1) students will remain in school but they will begin or continue to fail academically as a result of their disengagement, (2) students will transfer from Harper to another school, or (3) students will drop out of school altogether. Harper has not communicated to students that there are post-secondary educational opportunities other than college available. Once students realize that college is out of their grasp due to their failing grades, possibly as a result of the disaffection they experience in their classes, then it seems likely that they will disengage further from Harper and leave school altogether. Harper's goal to interrupt the social reproduction of the Riverbend neighborhood depends, at the very least, on students' academic and/or social engagement and their subsequent achievement throughout their years in high school. However, various aspects of schooling at Harper, including, ironically, the message of 'college' (because it is the school's only explicit message), negatively impact the likelihood that some students will complete high school, let alone pursue post-secondary education.

Harper has to better navigate the challenges that its identity as a neighborhood school in an under-funded urban district presents. The strain on resources available to a public neighborhood district school prevents Harper's administration from either

recruiting more CTE-certified teachers to the school or to pay for current Harper teachers to become CTE-certified in order to provide additional programming for students.

However, a true commitment to a college-prep curriculum (in the vein in which the 'Institutes' are currently structured) or to a curriculum that provides students with access to a range of post-secondary options would require that Harper invest in additional career-focused and employment-oriented programming. Not only does such coursework positively impact students' engagement in their academic work, it provides students with the assurance that whether through college or another opportunity for post-secondary education, they will be prepared for the futures they choose through their education at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls. Staff members should work with all students to create individualized plans that identify the steps that students need to take and benchmarks they need to make that will ensure they reach their goals, whatever they are, and staff members need to hold students accountable to their goals.

In order to boost students' social engagement, it would be beneficial for Harper to communicate more regularly and more pointedly to students and staff alike the rationale behind its single-sex model and how it is expected to contribute to the goal of all students graduating from high school and going to college. Being aware of the rationale and the potential benefits of schooling with all-girls may open girls' minds to the opportunity, even if they did not choose it, and make them more thoughtful about their role in the school and what the school can offer them. Additionally, more opportunities should be made available for students to interact with each other, within and across grade levels, outside of class and through fun activities that build community and team work. In this way, girls can develop more positive relationships with each other and foster a school

culture where negative relationships are not tolerated, students and staff encourage one another in their work, and students can feel empowered through their identification with attending an all-girls school for their education.

### **Implications for the Literature**

This qualitative study has helped to clarify what an education at a *non-selective* all-girls urban neighborhood public high school can offer to young women of color from a low-income neighborhood. It is clear that through a schooling experience grounded in high expectations, high-quality instruction, and caring relationships, students can not only imagine, but also achieve, an education through and beyond high school. The possibility of students accessing an alternative social and financial life trajectory to the one they grew up knowing in Riverbend is something many of the young women at Harper were only exposed to upon enrolling at Harper. It is quite possible that Harper Leadership Academy for Girls could prove to be a “site of transformation” for students and their neighborhood.

However, any aspect of Harper’s structure, programming, or institutional features does not facilitate a transformative experience for students on its own. Education within an all-girls school by itself is not going to keep students from dropping-out of school. ‘Messages’ about college, without the necessary instructional and social supports to give them credibility, are not transformative for students. Rather, *involvement* of the staff members, *structure* of the academic and social mainstays of the school that support students’ *competence* and *autonomy*, and *autonomy support* for students as they mature into college-bound young women all must be present and positive in order for students to experience increased levels of engagement and achievement.

### Implications for Reform

What is also clearly apparent in the story of student engagement at Harper is the irrefutable fact that the policy context of reform matters. Harper's dual identity as both a college-prep school and a "neighborhood public" school in an urban district presents complications as Harper does its best to support its students to achieve high academic gains. The school's tether to the district, and therefore, the AYP growth targets, keeps it from being able to design its own curricula, hire and fire teachers, and hire more staff (either teachers or counselors). The implications for students' engagement as a result of the various policies and mandates of the district make it very challenging for Harper to take such a firm stand in its mission to interrupt the social reproduction of the Riverbend neighborhood.

However, in its charge to be a "site of transformation," Harper must do all it can to lessen the impact of the district in its daily efforts to ultimately support students to and through college. The current context of accountability under NCLB, as materialized in the district's mandates and oversight measures, almost ensures that the socioeconomic inequalities of the Riverbend neighborhood will be reproduced. Harper will have to fight hard to continue the work it has already done on behalf of its students. In spite of this tense accountability climate, Harper must work to see the levels of students' engagement and achievement in school increase by doing even more to facilitate students' feelings of *relatedness, competence, and autonomy* within the *involvement, structure, and autonomy support* domains of their education.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Future research related to the academic and social engagement of students who attend a *non-selective* single-sex public high school should continue to investigate the likelihood of such a school being a “site of transformation” or a “site of reproduction.” A longitudinal study could demonstrate whether Harper students’ ‘habitus’ is changed or altered as a result of their education at the school (Horvat & Davis, 2010). This may be learned through focus groups with and interview of Harper graduates to learn about their educational, social, and financial trajectories after graduating from Harper.

Also intriguing to me are the stories of engagement that were not heard in this study; those of the students who have left Harper to attend another school or who dropped-out altogether. I would want to confirm or refute the dropout literature as to why students left school. Moreover, I would want to see if there was anything about the time that these former students spent at Harper that altered their perceptions of themselves in any way.

Comparative studies between non-selective single-sex public schools, non-selective and selective single-sex public schools, non-selective single-sex and non-selective coeducational, and non-selective all-boys and non-selective all girls schools would be interesting in order to learn about students’ different experiences with engagement between, across, and among schools. Would the same four groups (*adjusted, overwhelmed, disconnected, disaffected*) be present? How might Connell and Wellborn’s (1991) work on engagement as included in their theory of self-determination framework illuminate what engagement “looks like” for students in these schools?

For the sake of the young women who attend Harper Leadership Academy for Girls and for the sake of the Riverbend neighborhood, an education at Harper must be a transformative one for all students. The school has made great strides over the past five years since its transformation as an all-girls school. Student achievement on the state assessment continues to rise and violence at the school continues to decline. However, these are not the markers of success at a college-prep school. Such tenets of success would be the number of *National Merit Finalists* and *National Merit Semi-Finalists*, the average SAT and ACT score, the amount of scholarship money awarded to the graduating class, and the names of the prestigious colleges and universities that students plan to attend. Conversations such as these at Harper will be the telltale signs that Harper has become a “site for transformation” in its noble goal to permanently interrupt the cycle of poverty in the Riverbend neighborhood.

There is hard work ahead, however. The gains that Harper has made are tenuous, as the district faces a financial crisis, and lay-offs loom for more than a dozen of Harper’s teachers. The pressure to focus on the state assessment in classroom instruction will be great, but as was described here, such material and the pedagogy that supports it are damaging to students’ academic engagement in school. Moreover, the test-prep curriculum, in juxtaposition to promises of a college-prep curriculum for all students and the availability of a college-prep curriculum for some students, threatens to undermine the credibility of Harper’s leaders as students feel deceived. Furthermore, the lack of autonomy students experience in the building, despite the sense of safety and order that it provides, discredits the message that Harper students are college-bound as it makes them feel untrustworthy. It will be interesting to see, as Harper aims to reach higher in the

coming years with fewer resources, how the school thinks about engagement and the role of engagement in supporting students' achievement.

## REFERENCES CITED

- American Association of University Women. (2000). *Tech-Savvy: Educating Girls in the New Computer Age*. Washington, D.C.: The American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.
- American Association of University Women. (1998a). *Separated by Sex: A Critical Look at Single-Sex Education for Girls*. Washington, D.C.: The American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.
- American Association of University Women. (1998b). *Gender Gaps: Where Schools Still Fail Our Children*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- American Association of University Women. (1992). *How Schools Shortchange Girls*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- American Association of University Women. (1991). *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*. Washington, D.C.: The American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.
- Adams, C., Bartelt, D., Elesh, D., & Goldstein, A. (2008). *Restructuring the Philadelphia region: Metropolitan divisions and inequality*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Anyon, J. (1980). Social class and the hidden curriculum or work. *Journal of Education*, 162(1).
- Azmitia, M., & Cooper, C.R. (2001). Good or Bad? Peer Influences on Latino and European American Adolescents' Pathways Through School. *Journal of Education for Student Placed at Risk*, 6(1&2), 45-71.
- Bae, Y., Choy, S., Sable, J., & Snyder, T. (2000). *Trends in Educational Equity of Girls and Women*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics; AAUW Educational Foundation.
- Barton, P.E. (2005). "One-third of a nation: Rising dropout rates and declining opportunities," Policy Information Report. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Services, Policy Information Center.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*. London: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Bryk, A.S., & Driscoll, M.E. (1988). *The High School as Community: Contextual Influences and Consequences for Students and Teachers*. Madison, Wisconsin: National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, University of Wisconsin.

- Certo, J.L., Cauley, K.M., and Chafin, C. (2003). Students' perspectives on their high school experience. *Adolescence*, 38(152), 705-724.
- The College Board. (1999). *Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement*. Princeton, NJ: Author.
- Collins, P.H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Connell, J.P. & Wellborn, J.G. (1991). Competence, autonomy, and relatedness: A motivational analysis of self-esteem processes. In M.R. Gunnar & L.A. Sroufe (Eds.), *Self processes and development. The Minnesota symposium on child psychology*. (pp. 43-77). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2009). *Learning from the student's perspective: A sourcebook for effective teaching*. Paradigm Publishers.
- Crosnoe, R., Cavanagh, S., & Elder, G. H., Jr. (2003). Adolescent friendships as academic resources: The intersection of friendship, race, and school disadvantage. *Sociological Perspectives*, 46(3), 331-352.
- Datnow, A. and Hubbard, L. (Eds.). (2002a). *Gender in policy and practice: Perspectives on single-sex and coeducational schooling*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Datnow, A. & Hubbard, L. (2002b). "Introduction." In A. Datnow and L. Hubbard (Eds.), *Gender in policy and practice: Perspectives on single-sex and coeducational schooling* (pp. 2-9). New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- DeBare, I. (2004). *Where girls come first: The rise, fall, and surprising revival of girls' schools*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher / Penguin.
- Deiro, J.A. (1996). *Teaching with heart: Making healthy connections with students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- DiMartino, J., Clarke, J., and Lachat, M.A. (2002). Creating student-centered high schools. *Principal Leadership*, 2(5), 44-50.
- Feinberg, W. & Soltis, J.F. (2004). *School and society*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban high school*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Fine, M., & Weis, L. (2003). *Silenced voices and extraordinary conversations: Re-imagining schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Finn, J.D. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research*, 59, 117-142.
- Finn, J.D. (1993). *School Engagement & Students at Risk*. Washington, DC.: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 59-109.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Furlong, M.J., & Christenson, S.L. (2008). Engaging students at school and with learning: A relevant construct for *all* students. *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(5), 365-368.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ginsberg, A.E., Shapiro J.P., & Brown, S.P. (2004). *Gender in urban education: Strategies for student achievement*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Greene, J.P., & Winters, M. (2006). *Leaving Boys Behind: Public High School Graduation Rates*, Manhattan Institute Civic Report No. 48. Retrieved March 15, 2009 from [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_48.htm#05](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_48.htm#05)
- Gurian, M. (1998). *A Fine Young Man: What Parents, Mentors and Educators Can Do To Shape Adolescent Boys into Exceptional Men*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.
- Horvat, E.M. & Davis, J.E. (2010). Schools as sties for transformation: Exploring the contribution of habitus. *Youth and Society*, 43(1), 142-170.
- Jessor, R. (1993). Successful adolescent development among youth in high-risk settings. *American Psychologist*, 48, 117-126.
- Johnson, L.S. (2008). Relationship of instructional methods to student engagement in two public high schools. *American Secondary Education*, 36(2), 69-87.
- Joselowsky, F. (2007). Youth engagement, high school reform, and improved learning outcomes: Building systemic approaches for youth engagement. *NASSP Bulletin*, 91(3), 257-276.
- Kelly, S. (2004). Race, social class, and student engagement in middle school English classrooms. *Social Science Research*, 37( 2), 434-448.

- Kleinfeld, J. (1999). Student performance: Males versus females. *The Public Interest*, 134, p. 3.
- Kuykendall, C. (1991). *From rage to hope: Strategies for reclaiming Black and Hispanic students*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.
- Lee, V.E. (1997). "Gender Equity and the Organization of Schools.." In B.J. Bank and P.M. Hall (Eds.), *Gender, Equity, and Schooling*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Lee, V.E., & Marks, H.M. (1990). "Sustained Effects of the Single-Sex Secondary School Experience on Student Achievement and Attitudes." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82(3), 378-392.
- Lee, V.E., Marks, H.M., & Byrd, T. (1994). Sexism in single-sex and coeducational independent secondary school classrooms. *Sociology of Education*, 67(2).
- Lewis, A.C. (2006). Redefining what high school students learn. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 87(8), 564-565.
- Lincoln, Y. (1995). In search of student voices. *Theory into practice*, 34, (2), 88-93.
- MacLeod, J. (1987, 1995, 2004). *Ain't no makin' it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc.
- Mael, F.A. (1998). Single-sex schooling and coeducational schooling: Relationships to socioemotional and academic development. *Review of Educational Research*, 68, (2), 101-129/
- McAdoo, H.P. (2007). *Black families*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- McDermott, R.P. (1983). Achieving school failure: An anthropological approach to illiteracy and social stratification. In G.D. Spindler (Ed.). *Education and Cultural Process: Towards an Anthropology of Education*, pp. 82-118. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- McNeely, C.A., Nonnemaker, J.M., and Blum, R.W. (2002). Promoting school connectedness: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. *Journal of School Health*, 72(4), 138-146.
- McNulty, R.J., & Quaglia, R.J. (2007). Rigor, relevance, and relationships. *School administrator*, 64(8), 18-21, 23-24.
- McPartland, J.M., & Jordan, W.J. (2004). Essential components of high-school dropout-prevention reforms. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Meehan, D. (2007). *Learning like a girl: Educating our daughters in schools of their own*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Mehan, H., Villanueva, I., Hubbard, L., Lintz, A. (1996). *Constructing school success: The consequences of untracking low-achieving students*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller-Cribbs, J.E., Cronen, S., Davis, L., & Johnson, S.D. (2002). An exploratory analysis of factors that foster school engagement and completion among African American students. *Children and Schools*, 24(3), 159-174.
- Nash, M. (2005). *Women's education in the United States, 1780-1840*. New York: Palgrave Press.
- National Association for Single-Sex Public Education. (2010). Legal status of single-sex public education. Retrieved from <http://www.singlesexschools.org/policy-legalstatus.htm>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2002). *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Assessment, 2000*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- National Coalition of Girls' Schools. (2008a). *U.S. Girls' Public Schools*. Retrieved February 6, 2011 from <http://www.ncgs.org/profiles/usgirlspublicschools/>
- National Coalition of Girls' Schools. (2008b). *Home page*. Retrieved January 15, 2009, from <http://www.ncgs.org/>
- National Coalition of Girls' Schools (2008c). The benefits of attending a girls' school-section 2: New interest, deep roots. Retrieved January 15, 2009 from <http://www.ncgs.org/aboutgirlsschools/thereasearch/2-consistentdata/>
- National Student Clearinghouse Report. (2009). *High school to college*. Retrieved on March 15, 2010 from <http://www.thenotebook.org/blog/103187/high-school-college-rates-real-numbers>
- National Women's Law Center. (1997). At the intersection of race and gender: The promise of school-to-work for young women of color. Retrieved March 15, 2009 from <http://nwlc.org/details.cfm?id=68&section=education>
- Neild, R.C., & Balfanz, R. (2006). "Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000-2005." Philadelphia: Philadelphia Youth Network.

- Newmann, F.M. (Ed). (1992). *Student engagement and achievement in American secondary schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Newmann, F. M., Wehlage, G.G., & Lamborn, S.D. (1992). The significance and sources of student engagement. In F.M. Newmann (Ed.), *Student engagement and achievement in American secondary schools*, (pp. 11-39). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Newmann, F.M. (1989, February). Student engagement and high school reform. *Educational Leadership*
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. § 6319.
- Noguera, P.A. (2003). Schools, prisons, and social implications of punishment: Rethinking disciplinary practices. *Theory into Practice*, 42(4), 341-350.
- Oakes, J. (1995). Two cities' tracking and within-school segregation. *Teachers College Record*, 96 (4), 681-690.
- Oakes, J. & Saunders, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Beyond tracking: Multiple pathways to college, career, and civic participation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press
- Orfield, G. (Ed.). (2004a). *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Orfield, G. (2004b). Losing our future: Minority youth left out. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Osterman, K.F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70, 323-367.
- Pollack, W.S. (1998). *Real boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood*. New York: Henry Holt & Company.
- Pollard, D.S. (1998). "The Contexts of Single Sex Classes." In *Separated by Sex: A Critical Look at Single-Sex Education for Girls*. Washington, D.C.: AAUW.
- Powell, C.L., & Jacob-Arriola, K.R. (2003). Relationship between psychosocial factors and academic achievement among African American students. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 96, 175-81.
- Renzulli, J.S. (2008). Engagement is the answer. *Education Week*, 27(43), 30-31.

- Riordan, C. (2002). What do we know about single-sex schools in the private sector?: Implications for public schools. In A. Datnow and L. Hubbard (Eds.), *Gender in policy and practice: Perspectives on single-sex and coeducational schooling* (pp.10-30). New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Riordan, C. (1994). "Single-gender schools: Outcomes for African and Hispanic Americans." *Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization*, 10, 177-205.
- Riordan, C. (1990). *Girls and boys in school: Together or separate?* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rist, R.C. (1970). Student social class and teacher expectations: The self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 40, 72.-73.
- Rosenbloom, S., & Way, N. (2004). Experiences of discrimination among African American, Asian American and Latino adolescents in an urban high school. *Journal of Youth and Society*, 35, 420–451.
- Rouse, C.E. (2005). "The labor market consequences of an inadequate education." Prepared for the Equity Symposium on "The Social Costs of Inadequate Education" at Teachers' Research College, Columbia University.
- Rumberger, R.W. (2004a). Why students drop out of school. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 131-156). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rumberger, R.W. (2004b). What can be done to reduce the dropout rate? In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 243-254). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rumberger, R.W., & Larson, K.A. (1998). Student mobility and the increased risk of high school dropout. *American Journal of Education*, 107, 1-35.
- Sadker, M. & Sadker, D. (1994). *Failing at fairness: How our schools cheat girls*. New York: Touchstone.
- Salomone, R.C. (2008, October). *Language Matters: What the Law Tells Us About Sameness and Difference*, Paper contributed to the National Conference on Single-Sex Public Schools, Philadelphia, PA
- Salomone, R.C. (2006). Single-sex programs: Resolving the research conundrum. *Teachers College Record*, 108 (1), 778.
- Salomone, R.C. (2003). *Same, different, equal: Rethinking single-sex schooling*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Salomone, R.C. (2002). The legality of single-sex education in the United States: Sometimes 'equal' means 'different.' In A. Datnow and L. Hubbard (Eds.), *Gender in policy and practice: Perspectives on single-sex and coeducational schooling* (pp.10-30). New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Sax, L. (2005). *Why gender matters: What parents and teachers need to know about the emerging science of sex differences*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Schmakel, P.O. (2008). Early adolescents' perspectives on motivation and achievement in academics. *Urban Education, 43*(6), 723-749.
- Schon, D.A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books, Inc.
- Schultz, J. & Cook-Sather, A. (Eds.). (2001). *In our own words: Students' perspectives on school*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Shaffer, S.M., and Gordon, L.P. (2004). *Why girls talk- and what they're really saying: A parent's survival guide to connecting with your teen*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Skinner, E.A., and Belmont, M.J. (1993). Motivation in the classroom: Reciprocal effects of teacher behavior and student engagement across the school year. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 85*(4), 571-581.
- Stabiner, K. (2002). *All girls: single-sex education and why it matters*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Stanton-Salazar, R.D. (1991). *Manufacturing hope and despair: The school and kin support networks of U.S.-Mexican Youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Streitmatter, J.L. (1999). *For girls only: Making a case for single-sex schooling*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Swanson, C. (2008). *Cities in crisis: A special analytic report on high school graduation*. Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education Research Center.
- Swanson, C. (2004). *Who graduates? Who doesn't?* In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, R.D., Casten, R., Flickinger, S.M., Roberts, D., & Fulmore, C.D. (1994). Explaining the school performance of African-American adolescents. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 4*, 21-44.

- Thomas, J.A. & Montgomery, P. (1998). On becoming a good teacher: Reflective practice with regard to children's voices. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 49, 372-380.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2000). *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2000*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2008). Early Implementation of Public Single Sex Schools: Perceptions and Characteristics. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/other/single-sex/characteristics/index.html#fnref1>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2006). Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex in Education Programs or Activities Receiving Federal Financial Assistance; Final Rule. 34 CFR 106.1
- Wald, J., & Losen, D. J. (2003). Defining and redirecting a school-to-prison pipeline. *Weekly Periodicals, Inc.*, 99, 9-15.
- Wehlage, G. (1989). Dropping out: Can schools be expected to prevent it. In L. Weis, E. Farrar & H. Petrie (Eds.), *Dropouts from school* (pp. 1-19). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Wentzel, K.R. (1997). Student motivation in middle school: The role of perceived pedagogical caring. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89, 411-419.
- White House Executive Order. (March 11, 2009). *Establishing a White House Council on Women and Girls*. Retrieved on March 12, 2009 from [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/President-Obama-Announces-White-House-Council-on-Women-and-Girls/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/President-Obama-Announces-White-House-Council-on-Women-and-Girls/)
- Willis, P. (1977, 1983). *Learning to Labour*. Aldershot: Gower.
- The Young Women's Leadership Network. (2009a). *What we do*. Retrieved February 1, 2009 from [http://www.ywlfoundation.org/about\\_what.htm](http://www.ywlfoundation.org/about_what.htm)
- The Young Women's Leadership Network. (2009b). *Our team*. Retrieved February 1, 2009 from [http://www.ywlfoundation.org/about\\_team.htm](http://www.ywlfoundation.org/about_team.htm)

**Student Survey**

*I'm trying to learn about your experiences while attending an all-girls public neighborhood high school. There are no right or wrong answers and your responses will be kept confidential. Your participation will not affect your grades in any way. If you do not want to answer a question, you can skip it, or if you would like to stop taking the survey at any time, please let me know.*

*Thanks for your help!  
Juliet Curci*

**Answer Selection:** Correct = ● Incorrect = ☒ ☑ ⊖

**PART I. INFORMATION ABOUT YOU**

**Please write your answer for each question below in the blank corresponding to the question.**

1. **Your age:** \_\_\_\_\_
2. **What grade are you in?** \_\_\_\_\_
3. **What grade were you in when you first started attending school at Harper?** \_\_\_\_\_
4. **Where did you attend school before you started attending Harper?**  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. **Why did you decide to attend Harper? (MARK ALL THAT APPLY)**

<input type="radio"/>	I live in the neighborhood and this is my neighborhood school; attending Harper was not a choice.
<input type="radio"/>	I wanted to attend an all-girls school.
<input type="radio"/>	I wanted to attend the school that my friends go to.
<input type="radio"/>	My parents wanted me to attend Harper.
<input type="radio"/>	Harper is a good school.
<input type="radio"/>	The school's sports teams are good.
<input type="radio"/>	The school's clubs and extra-curricular activities interest me.
<input type="radio"/>	Harper is a safe school.
<input type="radio"/>	Harper' students typically graduate and go to college.
<input type="radio"/>	I will have a better opportunity for a good education at Harper than at another school.
<input type="radio"/>	Other: _____

## 6. Did you transfer to Harper from another high school?

<input type="radio"/>	No	-> If NO, skip to QUESTION 7.
<input type="radio"/>	Yes	-> If YES, what was the reason you transferred to Harper? (MARK ALL THAT APPLY BELOW)

<input type="radio"/>	I moved to this neighborhood and this is my neighborhood school; attending Harper was not a choice.
<input type="radio"/>	I wanted to attend an all-girls school.
<input type="radio"/>	I wanted to attend the school that my friends go to.
<input type="radio"/>	My parents wanted me to attend Harper.
<input type="radio"/>	Harper is a good school.
<input type="radio"/>	The school's sports teams are good.
<input type="radio"/>	The school's clubs and extra-curricular activities interest me.
<input type="radio"/>	Harper is a safe school.
<input type="radio"/>	Harper' students typically graduate and go to college.
<input type="radio"/>	I will have a better opportunity for a good education at Harper than at my former school.
<input type="radio"/>	Other: _____

## PART II. SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND ACTIVITIES

7. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your *school*?

(MARK ONE RESPONSE FOR EACH ROW)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
a. There is real school spirit.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. I feel safe in school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. I feel academically challenged in school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. There are extra-curricular activities that interest me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. I am encouraged by school staff to always do my best in my classes.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. There are staff members I can turn to if I am struggling academically.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. There are staff members I can turn to if I am struggling personally.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. I am encouraged by school staff to stay in school through graduation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
i. I am encouraged by school staff to apply to and attend college after graduation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
j. I feel as though I am being prepared for college in my classes.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**8. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your teachers?**

**(MARK ONE RESPONSE FOR EACH ROW)**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
a. Students get along well with teachers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. The teaching is good.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Teachers are interested in students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. When I work hard on schoolwork, my teachers praise my effort.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. My teachers make learning interesting.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. In class I often feel "put down" by my teachers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. My teachers challenge me in classwork and assignments.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Teachers often focus on the contributions of women during their teaching.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**9. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the students at your school?**

**(MARK ONE RESPONSE FOR EACH ROW)**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
a. Students act friendly towards one another.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Other students often disrupt class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. In class I often feel "put down" by other students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Misbehaving students often get away with it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. There are gangs in school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Fights often occur between students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. Disruptions by other students get in the way of my learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**10. How much do you like school?****(MARK ONE RESPONSE)**

<input type="radio"/>	Not at all
<input type="radio"/>	Somewhat
<input type="radio"/>	A great deal

**11. Since starting school at Harper, did you win any of the following awards or were you recognized at school for doing well or participating in certain activities?****(MARK ONE RESPONSE FOR EACH ROW)**

	Yes	No
a. Won an academic honor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Received special recognition for good attendance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Received special recognition for good grades or honor roll	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Received a community service award	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Participated in a science, math or technology fair	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**12. How many times did the following things happen to you in the first semester or term of this school year?****(MARK ONE RESPONSE FOR EACH ROW)**

	Never	1-2 times	3-6 times	7-9 times	10 or more times
a. I was late for school	<input type="radio"/>				
b. I cut or skipped classes	<input type="radio"/>				
c. I was absent from school	<input type="radio"/>				
d. I got in trouble for not following school rules	<input type="radio"/>				
e. I was put on in-school suspension	<input type="radio"/>				
f. I was suspended or put on probation	<input type="radio"/>				
g. I was transferred to another school for disciplinary reasons	<input type="radio"/>				

**13. How important are good grades to you?**

(MARK ONE RESPONSE)

<input type="radio"/>	Not important
<input type="radio"/>	Somewhat important
<input type="radio"/>	Important
<input type="radio"/>	Very important

**14. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about why you go to school?**

(MARK ONE RESPONSE FOR EACH ROW)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
a. I go to school because I think the subjects I'm taking are interesting and challenging	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. I go to school because I get a feeling of satisfaction from doing what I'm supposed to do in class	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. I go to school because I have nothing better to do	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. I go to school because education is important for getting a job later on	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. I go to school because it's a place to meet my friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. I go to school because I play on a team or belong to a club	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. I go to school because I'm learning skills that I will need for a job	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. I go to school because my teachers expect me to succeed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. I go to school because my parents expect me to succeed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**PLEASE CONTINUE ON TO THE NEXT PAGE.**

**15. Have you participated in the following school-sponsored activities at Harper this year or last year?**

**(MARK ONE RESPONSE FOR EACH ROW)**

	<b>Did not participate</b>	<b>Participated</b>	<b>Participated as an officer, leader, or captain</b>
a. Intramural sports (competition between teams in your school)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Interscholastic sports (competition with teams from other schools)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Band, orchestra, chorus, choir	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. School play or musical	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Student government	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. National Honor Society (NHS) or other academic honor society	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. School yearbook, newspaper, literary magazine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Service club (such as Key Club, Big Brother or Big Sister)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. Academic club (such as Art, Computer, Foreign Language, Debate)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
j. Hobby club (such as photography, chess)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Please answer YES or NO to the following questions:**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>16. Do you plan to graduate from high school?</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>17. Do you plan to graduate from Harper?</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>18. Do you plan to go to college?</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>19. Would you attend Harper if it were not an all-girls school?</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**PLEASE CONTINUE ONTO NEXT PAGE.**

**20a. Which aspects of attending Harper do you LIKE?**

**(MARK ALL THAT APPLY)**

<input type="radio"/>	Your relationships with your teachers
<input type="radio"/>	Your relationships with your classmates
<input type="radio"/>	Your relationships with the school's administrators
<input type="radio"/>	Your relationships with other school staff
<input type="radio"/>	Your classes
<input type="radio"/>	Clubs/ after-school activities
<input type="radio"/>	Sports teams
<input type="radio"/>	School rules
<input type="radio"/>	School uniform
<input type="radio"/>	School lunch
<input type="radio"/>	It is all-girls
<input type="radio"/>	You live near the school
<input type="radio"/>	The focus on graduating high school and attending college
<input type="radio"/>	School spirit
<input type="radio"/>	School's reputation
<input type="radio"/>	School trips
<input type="radio"/>	School activities (pep-rallies, assemblies, dances)
<input type="radio"/>	Other: _____

**20b. Of the aspects you marked above, what 3 aspects of attending Harper do you like the MOST?**

**(Please write them in the blanks below.)**

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_ (favorite aspect)
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_ (2<sup>nd</sup> most favorite aspect)
- 3) \_\_\_\_\_ (3<sup>rd</sup> most favorite aspect)

21a. Which aspects of attending Harper do you **NOT LIKE?**

(MARK ALL THAT APPLY)

<input type="radio"/>	Your relationships with your teachers
<input type="radio"/>	Your relationships with your classmates
<input type="radio"/>	Your relationships with the school's administrators
<input type="radio"/>	Your relationships with other school staff
<input type="radio"/>	Your classes
<input type="radio"/>	Clubs/ after-school activities
<input type="radio"/>	Sports teams
<input type="radio"/>	School rules
<input type="radio"/>	School uniform
<input type="radio"/>	School lunch
<input type="radio"/>	It is a charter school
<input type="radio"/>	You live near the school
<input type="radio"/>	The focus on graduating high school and attending college
<input type="radio"/>	School spirit
<input type="radio"/>	School's reputation
<input type="radio"/>	School trips
<input type="radio"/>	School activities (pep-rallies, assemblies, dances)
<input type="radio"/>	Other: _____

21b. **Of the aspects you marked above, what 3 aspects of attending Harper do you like the LEAST?**

(Please write them in the blanks below.)

1) \_\_\_\_\_ (least favorite aspect)

2) \_\_\_\_\_ (2<sup>nd</sup> least favorite aspect)

3) \_\_\_\_\_ (3<sup>rd</sup> least favorite aspect)

**22. What do you think might be more/ higher/better or less/lower/worse in your education if you attended a co- educational school (boys and girls) rather than Harper (all-girls)? (MARK ALL THAT APPLY)**

	<b>More/ higher/ better in a co- ed school</b>	<b>Less /lower/ worse in a co-ed school</b>	<b>No difference between Harper and co-ed school</b>
a. Your participation in class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Your participation in sports.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Your participation in clubs/ after-school activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Your relationships with teachers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Your relationships with school administrators.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Your relationships with classmates.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. Your interest in classwork.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Your focus / attention in class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. Your focus/ attention on homework.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
j. Your self-confidence.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
k. Your intention to graduate high school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
l. Your intention to attend college.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**PLEASE CONTINUE ONTO NEXT PAGE.**

**23. Which of the following words or phrases best describe how you feel about or what you think about your school? (MARK ALL THAT APPLY)**

<input type="radio"/>	Too difficult
<input type="radio"/>	Just right in terms of academic challenge
<input type="radio"/>	Too easy
<input type="radio"/>	Supportive
<input type="radio"/>	Empowering to women
<input type="radio"/>	Demanding
<input type="radio"/>	Strict
<input type="radio"/>	Lame
<input type="radio"/>	Safe
<input type="radio"/>	Fun
<input type="radio"/>	Boring
<input type="radio"/>	A friendly place
<input type="radio"/>	A good school
<input type="radio"/>	Other:

**PLEASE CONTINUE ONTO NEXT PAGE.**

24. Which of the following words or phrases best describe how you feel about or what you think about attending an all-girls school? (MARK ALL THAT APPLY)

To you, attending an all-girls school is...

<input type="radio"/>	Boring
<input type="radio"/>	Cool
<input type="radio"/>	Supportive
<input type="radio"/>	Empowering to women
<input type="radio"/>	Unusual
<input type="radio"/>	Good for your schoolwork
<input type="radio"/>	Okay for your schoolwork
<input type="radio"/>	Bad for your schoolwork
<input type="radio"/>	Good for your friendships
<input type="radio"/>	Okay for your friendships
<input type="radio"/>	Bad for your friendships
<input type="radio"/>	Good for your future plans to graduate high school and attend college
<input type="radio"/>	Okay for your future plans to graduate high school and attend college
<input type="radio"/>	Bad for your future plans to graduate high school and attend college
<input type="radio"/>	Other: _____

25. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about how you feel about or what you think about going to school at Harper? If so, please write a few sentences below.

26. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about how you feel about or what you think about attending an all-girls school? If so, please write a few sentences below.

**27. Would you be willing to speak with me about your experiences in school?**

**[If you respond “Yes,” I will contact you with information about participating in a small group discussion with other students or an interview.]**

<b>YES</b>	<b>O</b>
<b>NO</b>	<b>O</b>

*You have completed the survey.*

*Thank you for your participation!*

### *Student Focus Group Protocol*

**Objectives:** The focus groups will elicit discussion of student engagement (*behavioral, cognitive, and emotional*) in an all-girls neighborhood public high school.

**Description of the participants:** Each of the 4 focus groups will be conducted with 4-7 students who have already consented to participate in the study. Their teachers and classmates will not be present. Aside from the participants, the sub-investigator, Juliet D. Curci, will be present.

**Informed consent:** Informed consent forms from students and consent forms from their guardians will have already been signed and collected by the sub-investigator from the survey portion of the research study.

**Permission to audiotape:** Permission to audiotape forms will be distributed and collected by the sub-investigator prior to the start of the focus group sessions.

**Description of the focus group:** The participants and the facilitator will sit in a circle or around a table for the discussion. The facilitator will begin the meeting by introducing herself and explaining that the purpose of the focus group session will be to learn about student engagement at the participants' school. The focus group meeting will last between 30 and 60 minutes. It will be tape-recorded.

**Scheduling the focus group:** The focus group will be held either during the students' lunch period or during the after-school hours. Thus, participating students will not miss any instructional time. We will work with the student participants to schedule a time that is convenient for them. Their guardians will be notified by phone of the focus group's scheduled day and time if it is held after school. The focus group will be held in a private space on the school grounds, which will be determined in coordination with the school staff.

**Focus Group Discussion Guide:** The following questions will provide the framework for the focus group discussion. While questions that are not listed here may be asked in order to follow up on participant responses, the focus group discussion will center on these main questions. The introduction and debriefing statements will be read to participants.

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this study is to understand student engagement at your school. I would like you to share your honest feelings about any experiences, positive or negative, that you have had while attending school here. Everything that you say here will be kept confidential, and your names, the names of your teachers and friends, and any other identifying information will not be used in any report coming from this research. Please be aware that I cannot prevent any of you from sharing what others say about our session.

We have a limited amount of time, so I might have to interrupt from time-to-time to keep things moving.

*Opening question*

Could each of you tell me your name and for what grades you've attended Harper?

*Introductory question*

How would your life be different if you went to school in Philadelphia somewhere other than Harper?

*Transition question*

Could you name one important difference between your school and other public high schools in Philadelphia and describe why that difference is important? (if responses are not forthcoming, explore specific areas – student composition, teachers, administration/staff, classes, and clubs)

*Key questions*

- Are there things that you do here as a student at Harper that you don't think you'd do if you went to a different school?
- Do you think that attending Harper has benefited your schoolwork in any way? If so, how?
- Do you think that attending Harper has impacted the level of importance that education has in your life in any way? If so, how?
- Do you think that attending Harper has altered your personal goals for your future in any way? If so, how?
- Do you think that attending Harper has improved your connection to others, as in how you get along with classmates, teachers, or other adults in the building, in any way? If so, how?

*Ending question*

What are the most important changes that you have observed in yourself and/or your schoolwork since you began to attend Harper?

*Follow-up questions* will be asked, when appropriate, to gather further information on perceived changes. If participants assert that changes have taken place, the investigator will ask them how they think the school has contributed to those changes.

*Debriefing*

I would like to thank you for your participation. I also want to restate that what you have shared with me is confidential. No part of our discussion that includes names or other identifying information will be used in any reports, displays, or other publicly accessible media coming from this research. Finally, I want to provide you with a chance to ask any questions that you might have about this research. Do you have any questions for me?

### ***Student Interview Protocol***

*I'm trying to learn about what you think and feel about attending an all-girls neighborhood public high school. I'm especially interested in how much you do or do not feel connected to your school, classes, teachers, and classmates. There are no right or wrong answers, and your responses will be kept confidential. If you don't want to answer a question, or if you'd like to stop at any time, please let me know. Do you have any questions?*

#### Identity

1. What's your name? How old are you?
2. Do you identify yourself as a member of a race or ethnic group, and if so, how do you self-identify?

#### Behavioral Engagement

1. How long have you attended school at Harper?
2. Where did you attend school before you started at Harper?
3. Did you transfer here from another high school?
4. Are you ever absent or late?
5. What do you think about your school?
6. What do you like best about attending school at Harper?
7. What do you like least about attending school at Harper?
8. What is your favorite class this year? Why?
9. What is your least favorite class this year? Why?
10. Are you participating in any extra-curricular activities? If so, what are they? How long have you been involved? Why do you do it?
11. How do you get along with your teachers?
12. How do you get along with the other adults at school- the administrators? Staff?
13. How do you get along with your classmates?
14. Do your friends go to school here, too?  
If so, are your friends in your classes?  
If not, where do your friends go to school?
15. Are the school rules fair? What do students get in trouble for here? Have you gotten in trouble here? How often? How did you feel about it? How did your family feel about it?
16. Do you think everyone feels welcome at this school? Why or why not?
17. Do you think that attending an all-girls school affects how you act in school in any way? How?

#### Cognitive Engagement

-Let's talk about the favorite class that you mentioned...

1. What's your teacher's routine in this class? What do you usually do?
2. How does your teacher challenge you / get you to work harder?

3. Would you say this teacher really cares about you and the class? How do you know?
  4. How are you doing in this class? Could/should you be doing better?
  5. How do you feel in this class? Excited... when? Bored... when? Frustrated.... When? How often? (What do you do when... ?)
  6. What do you share about this class when you're outside of school?
  7. What are you going to remember about this class?
- Let's talk about the least favorite class that you mentioned...
8. What's your teacher's routine in this class? What do you usually do?
  9. How does your teacher challenge you / get you to work harder?
  10. Would you say this teacher really cares about you and the class? How do you know?
  11. How are you doing in this class? Could/should you be doing better?
  12. How do you feel in this class? Excited... when? Bored... when? Frustrated.... When? How often? (What do you do when... ?)
  13. What do you share about this class when you're outside of school?
  14. What are you going to remember about this class?
15. Do you think that attending an all-girls school affects your learning in any way? How?

#### Emotional Engagement

1. Do you feel like this is your school? What do you do to show how you feel about Harper?
2. If you don't feel like it's your school, then who does it belong to?
3. Are there people here to talk to if you have a problem or if you're happy about something? Who, when, where, why?
4. If you could change one thing here, what would it be and why?
5. If someone you feel close to asked you how you feel about your school, what would you say?
6. If a stranger asked you how you feel about your school, what would you say?
7. If you have/had any younger sisters or cousins, would you want them to come to Harper? Why or why not?
8. Do you think that attending an all-girls school affects how you feel about school or your education in general in any way? How?

Is there anything else you'd like to share about the school and how you feel about attending school here?

Do you have any questions for me?

*Thank you for participating!*

***Parent/ Guardian Interview Protocol***

*I'm trying to understand student engagement at Harper, which is, as you know, an all-girls neighborhood public high school. I'm especially interested in how students do or do not feel connected to their school, classwork, teachers, and classmates. There are no right or wrong answers, and your responses will be kept confidential. If you don't want to answer a question, or if you'd like to stop at any time, please let me know. Do you have any questions?*

**Identity**

1. What is your name and relationship to \_\_\_\_\_ ?
2. Is \_\_\_\_\_ the only child you have who attends or has attended Harper?
3. Do you have other h.s. aged children? If so, where do they attend school?
4. Do you have younger girls in your family? Will they attend Harper? Why or why not?

**Behavioral Engagement**

1. How long has your child attended Harper? How often is she absent? Late? Missing classes?
2. Do you think the school rules are fair? What do students get in trouble for?

**Cognitive Engagement**

3. How has your child done academically at Harper?
4. Could/ should she be doing better?
5. Is she is challenged in her classes?
6. Is she engaged in her schoolwork?
7. How much homework does she have? How much time does she spend on it nightly?
8. How does she feel about her education?
9. How do you think her schoolwork / achievements would compare if she attended a different public high school in Philadelphia?
10. Do you think that \_\_\_\_\_'s plans for her future have been impacted by her education at Harper? In what way(s)?

**Emotional Engagement**

11. What is your overall impression of Harper?
12. What do you like best about Harper?
13. What do you like least about Harper?
14. What does sending your child to an all-girls neighborhood public high school mean to you?
15. How does \_\_\_\_\_ get along with the adults at the school?
16. How does \_\_\_\_\_ get along with the other students at the school?
17. Do you think she feels connected to the school? The adults? The students? How do you know?
18. Have you had any contact with \_\_\_\_\_'s teacher(s)? Who? How often? What was the general topic of discussion- academics, discipline (positive? negative?)?

19. When \_\_\_\_\_ talks about school with you, what does she say?
20. Are there people at the school that you can talk to if your child has a problem or to give your feedback about something? Who, when, where, why?

If you could change one thing about the school, what would it be and why?

Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your child's experience at Harper and what you think about or how you feel about her education there?

Do you have any questions for me?

*Thank you for participating!*

### ***Teacher Interview Protocol***

*I'm trying to understand student engagement here at Harper, which is, as you know, an all-girls neighborhood public high school. I'm especially interested in how students do or do not feel connected to their school, classwork, teachers, and classmates. There are no right or wrong answers, and your responses will be kept confidential. If you don't want to answer a question, or if you'd like to stop at any time, please let me know. Do you have any questions?*

#### **Identity**

1. What's your name and how long have you been teaching?
2. Do you identify yourself as a member of a race or ethnic group, and if so, how do you self-identify? (Notice gender).
3. Why did you become a teacher?
4. How long have you taught at Harper and how did you begin teaching here?
5. Was there anything in particular that drew you to Harper?
6. Did you teach anywhere before Harper? Where? For how long?
7. Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
8. Do you have any responsibilities at Harper beyond teaching? (admin. role/ club moderator)

#### **The School**

1. What do you think about Harper?
2. What do you think about the student body at Harper?
3. What do you like best about Harper? (for students? for teachers?)
4. What do you like least about Harper? (for students? for teachers?)
5. What does working at an all-girls neighborhood public high school mean to you?
6. What do you think attending an all-girls neighborhood public h.s. means to the students? Why?
7. Do you think that the school rules are fair? What do students get in trouble for?

#### **Your Classes**

1. What do you like best about the classes you teach?
2. What do you like least about the classes you teach?
3. Is there anything that you do differently or think you do differently when teaching your classes at Harper than if you were teaching in a co-ed school?
4. Do the students seem engaged in their school work when they're in your class?  
How do you know?
5. When are students most engaged in your classes?
6. When are students least engaged in your classes?
7. What do you do to encourage student participation in your classes?
8. What do you do to encourage students to get along in your classes?

9. How do you challenge your students to work harder? Push themselves?
10. Do you think the students in your classes feel connected to you? How do you know?
11. Do you think the students in your classes feel connected to each other? How do you know?
12. Do the students in your classes take their education seriously? How do you know?
13. Do you ever discuss students' futures after high school with them- either as a class or individually?

### The Student(s)

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about \_\_ (student participant) \_\_.

1. How long have you known her? and in what capacity?
2. How would you describe her achievement in your class? Measures?
3. How would you describe her engagement in your class? Measures?
4. How well do you and \_\_\_\_\_ get along?
5. Have you had to discipline \_\_\_\_\_ for any reason in your class?
6. Have you had any contact with \_\_\_\_\_'s guardian? How often? What was the general topic of discussion- academics, discipline (positive? negative)?
7. What have your one-on-one conversations with \_\_\_\_\_ been like? Topic? Tone?
8. Do you know anything about her life outside of school? Her interests?
9. Have you ever discussed her future after high school with her? What has that been like?
10. What will you remember most about her?

Is there anything else that you'd like to share with me, either about your experience teaching at Harper or your experience teaching \_\_\_\_\_ ?

Do you have any questions for me?

*Thank you for your participation!*

*Student Participant Assent Form*

**Title: “Understanding Student Engagement: Insights From an All-Girls Urban Neighborhood Public High School”**

**Principal Investigator: Dr. Erin M. Horvat, Temple University, 215-204-----**

**Sub-Investigator: Juliet D. Curci, Temple University, 267-243-----**

The purpose of this research study is to understand student engagement in an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. Study participants will be asked on a survey, in a focus group, and possibly in a follow-up interview, to answer a series of questions about their experiences in school with their classwork, teachers, and peers. A select number of students will also be shadowed through a day of their classes. All survey, focus group, and interview responses and observation data will be kept entirely confidential and will have no direct impact on any student’s experience at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls.

All students at the school are welcome to participate. We hope the surveys, focus groups, interviews, and observations will benefit the participants by fostering their own reflective understanding about the value of student engagement and participation in the classroom.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Students are free to participate, or not, or may leave the study at any time without penalty. Participants may refuse to answer any question that is asked.

Questions about your rights as a research subject may be directed to Mr. Richard Throm, Office of the Vice President for Research, Institutional Review Board, Temple University, 3400 N. Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA, 19140, (215) 707-----.

Signing your name below indicates that you have read and understand the contents of this Consent Form and that you agree to take part in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*Parent/ Guardian Consent Form*

**Title: “Understanding Student Engagement: Insights From an All-Girls Urban Neighborhood Public High School”**

**Principal Investigator: Dr. Erin M. Horvat, Temple University, 215-204-----**

**Sub-Investigator: Juliet D. Curci, Temple University, 267-243-----**

The purpose of this research study is to understand student engagement in an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. Study participants will be asked on a survey, in a focus group, and possibly in a follow-up interview, to answer a series of questions about their experiences in school with their classwork, teachers, and peers. A select number of students will also be shadowed through a day of their classes. All survey, focus group, and interview responses and observation data will be kept entirely confidential and will have no direct impact on any student’s experience at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls.

All students at the school are welcome to participate. We hope the surveys, focus groups, interviews, and observations will benefit the participants by fostering their own reflective understanding about the value of student engagement and participation in the classroom.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Students are free to participate, or not, or may leave the study at any time without penalty. Participants may refuse to answer any question that is asked.

Questions about your rights as a research subject may be directed to Mr. Richard Throm, Office of the Vice President for Research, Institutional Review Board, Temple University, 3400 N. Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA, 19140, (215) 707-----.

Signing your name below indicates that you have read and understand the contents of this Consent Form and that you agree to allow your child,  
\_\_\_\_\_, to take part in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/ Guardian's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*Parent/ Guardian as Participant Consent Form*

**Title: “Understanding Student Engagement: Insights From an All-Girls Urban Neighborhood Public High School”**

**Principal Investigator: Dr. Erin M. Horvat, Temple University, 215-204-----**

**Sub-Investigator: Juliet D. Curci, Temple University, 267-243-----**

The purpose of this study is to understand student engagement in an all-girls neighborhood public high school. Parent/guardian participants will be interviewed and asked to answer a series of questions about their child’s experiences while attending Harper Leadership Academy for Girls. There will be one interview scheduled, at a time and location convenient to the participant, with the potential that one follow-up interview will be scheduled if deemed necessary and the participant is available. Your interview responses and the observation data will be kept entirely confidential and will have no direct impact on any student’s, teacher’s, or guardian’s experience at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls.

Parent/ guardian participants have been selected based on their associations with students who have volunteered to participate in this study and who have been purposively selected by the researchers for this portion of the study. We hope that the interviews and observations will benefit the parent/guardian participants by fostering their own reflective understanding about the value of student engagement and participation in the classroom.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Parents /guardians are free to participate, or not, or may leave the study at any time without penalty. Participants may refuse to answer any question that is asked.

Questions about your rights as a research subject may be directed to Mr. Richard Thom, Office of the Vice President for Research, Institutional Review Board, Temple University, 3400 N. Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA, 19140, (215) 707-----.

Signing your name below indicates that you have read and understand the contents of this Consent Form and that you agree to take part in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*Teacher Consent Form*

**Title: “Understanding Student Engagement: Insights From an All-Girls Urban Neighborhood Public High School”**

**Principal Investigator: Dr. Erin M. Horvat, Temple University, 215-204-----**

**Sub-Investigator: Juliet D. Curci, Temple University, 267-243-----**

The purpose of this study is to understand student engagement at an all-girls urban neighborhood public high school. Teacher participants will be interviewed and asked to answer a series of questions about their experiences working with particular students (who have agreed also agreed to participate in the study). These students will be observed in your classroom. Your interview responses and the observation data will be kept entirely confidential and will have no direct impact on any student’s or teacher’s experience at Harper Leadership Academy for Girls.

Teachers have been selected based on their associations with students in their classes who have volunteered to participate in this study. We hope that the interviews and observations will benefit the teacher participants by fostering their own reflective understanding about the value of student engagement and participation in the classroom.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Teachers are free to participate, or not, or may leave the study at any time without penalty. Participants may refuse to answer any question that is asked.

Questions about your rights as a research subject may be directed to Mr. Richard Throm, Office of the Vice President for Research, Institutional Review Board, Temple University, 3400 N. Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA, 19140, (215) 707-----.

Signing your name below indicates that you have read and understand the contents of this Consent Form and that you agree to take part in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Permission to Audiotape**

**Title: “Understanding Student Engagement: Insights From an All-Girls Urban Neighborhood Public High School”**

**Principal Investigator: Dr. Erin M. Horvat, Temple University, 215-204-----**

**Sub-Investigator: Juliet D. Curci, Temple University, 267-243-----**

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I give Juliet Curci permission to audiotape me. This audiotape will be used only for the following purpose:

X  RESEARCH

This audiotape will be used as a part of a research project at Temple University. I have already given written consent for my participation in this research project. At no time will my name be used.

WHEN WILL I BE AUDIOTAPED?

I agree to be audiotaped during the time period: \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_.

HOW LONG WILL THE TAPES BE USED?

I give my permission for these tapes to be used from: June 1, 2010 to December 31, 2011.

All audiotapes related to this study will be destroyed within 3 years of the completion of this study and no later than December 31, 2012.

WHAT IF I CHANGE MY MIND?

I understand that I can withdraw my permission at any time. Upon my request, the audiotape(s) will no longer be used. This will not affect my care or relationship with Harper Leadership Academy for Girls in any way.

OTHER

I understand that I will not be paid for being audiotaped or for the use of the audiotapes.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

If I want more information about the audiotape(s), or if I have questions or concerns at any time, I can contact:

Principal Investigator's Name: Dr. Erin Horvat

Department: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department, Urban Education Program

Institution: Temple University

Address: 1301 Cecil B. Moore Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19128

Phone: Office 215-204-----

This form will be placed in my records and a copy will be kept by the person(s) named above. A copy will be given to me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Harper Codes & Definitions

### Demographic Codes

1. **Student**
2. **Teacher**
3. **Parent**
4. **Administrator:** *someone in a position of authority at the school or district. May include: Principal, Assistant Principal, Asst. Superintendent of High Schools, Superintendent of Alt. Schools*
5. **neighborhood:** *a student who lives in the catchment area of Harper and attends it because it's her "neighborhood school"*
6. **'Transfer':** *student who transferred to the school; either did not start high school at Harper and/ or moved into the neighborhood*

### Conceptual Codes

7a. **Involvement:** *"the quality of the interpersonal relationship with teachers and peers; its opposite is rejection or neglect. Teachers are involved with their students to the extent that they take time for, express affection toward, enjoy interactions with, are attuned to, and dedicate resources to their students" (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p. 573). May include aspects of: relationships with teachers, peers, school staff; fights witnessed or experienced; messages of caring or high expectations from adults; rigor and relevance of school assignments; student decisions about attending school/class and attending school/class on time*

#### 7b. **Lack of Involvement**

8a. **Structure:** *"the amount of information in the context about how to effectively achieve desired outcomes; its opposite is chaos. Teachers can provide structure by clearly communicating their expectations, by responding consistently, predictably, and contingently, by offering instructional help and support, and by adjusting teaching strategies to the level of the child" (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p. 572). May include aspects of: school schedule, school uniform, school policies and procedures, school discipline, school culture, rigor and relevance of school assignments*

#### 8b. **Lack of Structure**

9a. **Autonomy Support:** *"the amount of freedom a child is given to determine his or her own behavior; the opposite of being supported is being coerced. Teachers can support autonomy by allowing children latitude in their learning activities and by providing connections between school activities and children's interests. Especially important in fostering autonomy is the absence of external reward, controls, and pressures (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p.573)." May include aspects of: school schedule, school uniform, school policies and procedures, school discipline, school culture; classroom structure- daily expectations for behavior and student work; class assignments; homework; classroom discipline; messages of expectations related to post-secondary options- college and career; rigor and relevance of school assignments; student decisions about attending school/class and attending school/class on time*

#### 9b. **Lack of Autonomy Support**

10a. **Relatedness:** *includes student-reported feelings of social connectedness and belonging to teachers, peers, school staff; may include student decisions about attending*

school/class and attending school/class on time; may include student decisions about enrollment or transfer

**10b. Lack of Relatedness**

11a. **Competence:** includes student-reported feelings of academic adequacy; may include student decisions about attending school/class and attending school/class on time; may include student decisions about enrollment or transfer

**11b. Lack of Competence**

12a. **Autonomy:** includes student-reported feelings of ability for self-direction within the learning environment (academically, behaviorally, and emotionally); may include student decisions about attending school/class and attending school/class on time; may include student decisions about enrollment or transfer

**12b. Lack of Autonomy**

**Engagement:** *“includes both behavioral and emotional components. Children who are engaged show sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by positive emotive tone” (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p. 572)*

13. **-Behavioral:** *“[Students] select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of the learning task” (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p. 572).*

14. **- Emotional:** *“[Students] show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest” (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p. 572).*

15. **Disaffection** – *“the opposite of engagement; children are passive, do not try hard, and give up easily in the face of challenges. Disaffected children can be bored, depressed, anxious, or even angry about their presence in the classroom; they can be withdrawn from learning opportunities or even rebellious toward teachers and classmates” (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p. 572).*

16. **Leadership:** *organizing a group of people towards a common goal, with or without formal authority; demonstrating the qualities of a leader: intelligence, critical thinking, reflective, collaborator, initiator.* May include participant mention of: leadership, what it means to be a leader, or characteristics of leaders.

17. **Critical social theory:** *an examination and critique of society and culture; a form of self-reflective knowledge involving both understanding and theoretical explanation to reduce entrapment in systems of domination or dependence, obeying the emancipatory interest in expanding the scope of autonomy and reducing the scope of domination (Habermas, 1968).* (includes: **critical pedagogy:** *a philosophy of education described by Henry Giroux as an "educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (Giroux, 2010, chronicle.com)* and **Black feminism:** *“sexism, class oppression, and racism are inextricably bound together” (Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 1990) and “the liberation of Black women entails freedom for all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism, and class oppression” (Combahee River Collective, A Black Feminist Statement, 1974).*

**18. Empowerment:**

The process which enables individuals/groups to fully access personal/collective power, authority and influence, and to employ that strength when engaging with other people,

institutions or society. In other words, “Empowerment is not giving people power, people already have plenty of power, in the wealth of their knowledge and motivation, to do their jobs magnificently. We define empowerment as letting this power out.” (Blachard, K., et al., 1996). It encourages people to gain the skills and knowledge that will allow them to overcome obstacles in life or work environment and ultimately, help them develop within themselves or in the society.

Empowerment includes the following, or similar, capabilities:

- The ability to make decisions about personal/collective circumstances
- The ability to access information and resources for decision-making
- Ability to consider a range of options from which to choose (not just yes/no, either/or.)
- Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making
- Having positive-thinking about the ability to make change
- Ability to learn and access skills for improving personal/collective circumstance.
- Ability to inform others’ perceptions though exchange, education and engagement.
- Involving in the growth process and changes that is never ending and self-initiated
- Increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma
- Increasing one's ability in discreet thinking to sort out right and wrong

19. **Self-definition:** how a student sees herself as a woman of color from a low-income community; how she identifies her potential and describes her current situation as well as her aspirations

19. **Single-sex education:** schooling that is separated by gender

### Simple Codes

20. **Other schools:** includes...

- *neighborhood schools:* public schools in the school district that students attend if they live in the school’s “catchment” area and have not been accepted to magnet schools in the district; these schools are non-selective (i.e. students attend regardless of their academic and behavior records)

- *charter schools:* public schools outside of the management of the school district

- *magnet schools:* public schools within the district that have a selective admissions process

- *former schools:* previous school or schools that student attended

- *Abbott:* the all-boys’ neighborhood public school that the male students in Harper’s and Abbott’s catchment areas attend

21. **Student sexuality:** *issues related to sexuality.* May include: *sexual orientation, sexual activity, pregnancy, etc.*

22. **Money:** *issues related to money.* May be related to: *peer relationships, the school uniform, or school-related expenses such as the senior pictures, prom tickets, graduation cap and gown, etc.*

### Student Academic Experience Codes

23. **Academic interests:** *includes how a student/parent/ teacher describes the content and style of academic work that interests the student*

24. **Academic progress:** *includes how a student/parent/teacher describes the student's current attainment of the learning material, and may include her grades, benchmark scores, etc.*
25. **Aspirations:** *includes how a student/parent/teacher describes the student's aspirations for academic success, college or post-secondary education, career, etc.*

### **Harper Codes**

26. **School Identity:** includes...

- School's Name: *Harper Leadership Academy for Girls*
- School's Mottos: *"Learn Today. Lead Tomorrow."* and *"Smart Girls Go to Harper."*
- School's History
- School's Leaders
- During-school programs and activities: *retreats, parties, college trips, assemblies*
- After-school programs and activities: *sports teams, clubs*
- College Pathways

27. **Neighborhood** (Riverbend)

28. **All-girls:** includes how a student/parent/teacher describes the student's reaction to schooling in a learning environment with all girl students