The relationship between teacher satisfaction and developmentally responsive structures at New York City middle schools

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The Relationship Between Teacher Satisfaction and Developmentally Responsive Structures at New York City Middle Schools

By

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The Relationship Between Teacher Satisfaction and Developmentally Responsive Structures at New York City Middle Schools

By Elianna Rose Lippold-Johnson

Abstract: The purpose of this research was to investigate the experience of teachers at two New York City middle schools to see how developmentally responsive school-wide structures influenced their professional satisfaction and commitment to their schools. The researcher defines developmentally responsive structures as those structures that meet one or more of the four central needs of young adolescents: the needs for relationship, autonomy, competence, and fun (Stevenson, 1992; Crawford & Haggedorn, 2009).

As an interpretive-oriented study, this thesis has an interest in understanding research participants’ subjective experiences as teachers as well as their general perception of their schools. The researcher employed interviews and conducted classroom observations over the course of one school year. In addition, the hallways, walls, and websites of the school sites were examined to gather data about student work and school events and meetings.

The findings of this study suggest that middle school teachers’ experience—specifically, their professional satisfaction and commitment—is influenced by the developmentally responsive structures of the school in which they work. In sum, a school’s configuration of (a) purposeful curriculum and scheduling, (a) school-wide traditions, and (c) activities and student affinity groups are linked to a more positive experience for teachers.
Dedication

To Child Garden Montessori School and to Clara Barton Open School in Minneapolis, Minnesota—both superbly progressive and developmentally responsive schools.
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my mentor, Bernadette Anand, for her limitless patience and wisdom.

I am also grateful for the schools where I conducted my research. Without your contributions, this research would not exist.
“The organization of schools affects the lives of all members—students, teachers, and administrators.” -Lee, Dedrick, & Smith, 1991, p. 33

“A plethora of studies have shown that many factors and circumstances determine whether qualified teachers can teach effectively. Effective teaching is not just about teachers’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions — but also about the conditions under which they work.”-Berry, Daugtrey, & Weider, 2009, p. 30

“Various strands of research have focused on aspects of the teachers’ workplace context in efforts to identify factors that shape teachers’ practice and, by extension, student outcomes.” -McLaughlin, 1993, p. 3
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Introduction

In this study, I sought to find out whether two middle schools in New York City have developmentally responsive structures in place, and if this is related to teachers’ daily experience, satisfaction, and level of commitment. I believe understanding the factors that influence teacher satisfaction is critical to building and maintaining great schools.

The 1983 study *A Nation at Risk* found that the working life of teachers was on the whole intolerable and unsatisfactory (p. 23). Yet drawing attention to this fact did not create a whole lot of change; countless studies since have reported that teacher burnout, dissatisfaction, and attrition remain high (Lee, 1991, citing Boyer 1983; Goodlad 1984; Sizer 1984). Twenty-one percent of teachers at high-poverty schools leave annually, and according to some estimates, 50% of beginning teachers leave the profession within five years (Shann, 1998, citing Colbert & Wolff 1992; Odell & Ferrano 1992). The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) reports that 42% of beginning New York City public school teachers leave within three years (Miller, 2004).

In my three years as a 6th and 7th grade English teacher in the South Bronx, I became one of these statistics. I went from being determined and enthusiastic to exhausted and disheartened, and I resigned the summer before I would have begun my fourth year teaching, which would have been my first as a tenured teacher. My main reason for leaving? I was frustrated by the ways in which I believed my school failed to meet the developmental needs of students.

When I left my school, I felt torn and confused. I was yearning to see what a successful, high-functioning urban middle school might look like. I wondered what it would be like to teach in such a place. I speculated that if my school had been more
attuned to students’ needs, I might have remained committed and energized. These thoughts and musings led me to my research questions for this study. My research questions are:

1. What does a school look like that meets the developmental needs of young adolescents?
2. What specific school-wide structures are in place at such a school?
3. How do teachers experience a school with these structures?

After visiting many schools serving young adolescents, I picked two that I thought fit my research questions well and that were open to having me observe over the course of a school year.

Part I of this thesis is dedicated to explaining the background, context, and rationale for the study. This undertaking is two-fold: first, understanding young adolescents. Second, understanding the teachers of young adolescents. Therefore, Chapter 1 describes the history of the middle school movement and the proliferation of research on young adolescents and their needs. Chapter 2 gives a brief cultural and political contextual overview of teaching in New York City today, and then goes on to review the literature regarding what influences middle school teacher satisfaction and commitment. This chapter also points out a gap in the research and provides a rationale for researching a potential relationship between developmentally responsive school structures and teachers’ overall experience.

Part II of this thesis is a section on the research design and methodology of the study. Chapter 3 describes the methods I used to collect qualitative data from teachers at the two urban middle schools in New York City over the course of one school year.
Chapter 4 outlines my reasoning for using such methods and conducting qualitative, not quantitative, research.

I turn to the analytical portion of my thesis in Part III. After giving an overview of the research participants and their schools in Chapter 5, I present and interpret the qualitative data gathered from the research participants and their schools in Chapter 6. I explain that both schools have developmentally responsive school-wide structures in place—structures that meet four fundamental needs of young adolescents: relationship, autonomy, competence, and fun (Crawford & Haggedorn, 2009). These responsive structures make room for teachers to focus on instruction, and at both schools the teachers I interviewed and observed reported high levels of satisfaction with their jobs and enthusiasm for their schools. I describe the specific structures I observed, including the purposeful curriculum and scheduling, the school-wide traditions, and the myriad activities and options for students. Part IV presents my summary, recommendations, and suggestions for further research.
PART I

Background, Context, and Rationale
Introduction to Part I

This study would not be possible without an understanding of young adolescents’ developmental needs and of how schools for young adolescents are typically set up. In addition, it would not be possible without an understanding of the current climate for teachers. The purpose of Part I is to provide this context on young adolescents, school structure, and teachers.

In Chapter 1.1 I will discuss the history of the Middle School Movement and outline its trajectory over the last fifty years—how the movement changed the structure of young adolescent schooling and also how some reform efforts have been regrettably vague in their recommendations. Chapter 1.2 will highlight some major findings from the large body of research on the developmental needs of young adolescents.

In Chapter 2, I turn to understanding teachers in context. Chapter 2.1 discusses the current cultural and political climate for teachers and the trend of increasing teachers’ accountability for student progress. Chapter 2.2 discusses the high turnover and dissatisfaction rates for teachers, both at large and specifically in New York City. Chapter 2.3 is a review of the literature on the factors that have been shown to influence teacher satisfaction and commitment.

The end of Part I leads to the heart of my argument: that by disregarding the developmental needs of young adolescents, we also decrease teacher satisfaction and commitment. And that by attending to the developmental needs of young adolescents in well-defined structural ways at school, we can increase teacher satisfaction and commitment and create more stable and functional schools with better infrastructure and less teacher turnover.
Chapter 1

Educating Young Adolescents

1.1 History of the Middle School Movement

The seeds of a middle school movement were planted when Dr. William Alexander came to speak at a July 1963 conference at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. His speech was titled: “The Junior High School: A Changing View.” He proposed an overhaul of the traditional junior high school system, which treated young adolescents like miniature high schoolers. He thought we needed a new “middle school” that would be more developmentally appropriate. He proposed a more flexible curriculum, individualized instruction, and a stronger focus on values. Alexander (1965) said:
We must endeavor to stimulate in the child love of learning, an attitude of inquiry, a passion for truth and beauty, a questioning mind...[and allow them to] discover their answers through creative thinking, reasoning, judging, and understanding.

This idea was enthusiastically embraced and quickly grew. Middle schools steadily replaced junior high schools. But it wasn’t until a decade after Dr. Alexander’s speech that a National Middle School Association (NMSA) was founded to explain exactly what a middle school should look like and how it should work (Stevenson, 1992, p. 14). In 1980, the NMSA president appointed a committee to codify the beliefs of teachers and professors about the essence of middle school. And in 1982, the NMSA published This We Believe, the first-ever comprehensive set of guidelines for what a school serving young adolescents should look like. Three new editions have been published since, the latest in 2010. The guidelines stress that young adolescents’ “areas of development—physical, intellectual, moral, psychological, social-emotional—are intertwined, making academic success highly dependent upon other developmental needs also being met” (NMSA, p. 1, 2010).

The NMSA says the purpose of This We Believe is to provide “sound guidance for those responsible for designing programs” for 10- to 15-year olds. But the guidance it provides is in fact more of a general overview of an ideal middle grades school, not a thorough plan for achieving it.

The most recent edition of This We Believe includes a chart with 16 research-based characteristics of successful schools for young adolescents. The NMSA says you
can’t pick and choose from the list of characteristics: “The 16 characteristics...are interdependent and need to be implemented in concert” (p. 13). Here’s the chart:


But even though the guidelines provide a couple of pages of description of each of the 16 characteristics listed above, they don’t get into the nitty-gritty specificities of what each characteristic means in practical terms. For example, what should a typical school day look like for a young adolescent? How should leaders demonstrate courage? What needs to be done to make the school environment supportive of all?

One of the things I’m most interested in on the above chart is the last statement under Leadership & Organization: “Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.” It’s clear that the NMSA sees a relationship between organizational structures and (a) learning and (b) how people relate to one another within the institution. But even in the pages where they explain this statement in more depth, it’s vague about suggesting specific structures. They say, “The ways schools organize teachers and group and schedule students have a significant impact on the learning environment” (p. 31). But the suggestions they give include only the briefest
mention of interdisciplinary teams and planning time, block scheduling, cooperative learning groups, independent study, enrichment programs, and “other practices to respond to the variety of student competencies, interests, and abilities.” What are the other practices they’re talking about that allow schools to respond to students’ various needs? How much time should be spent on these practices and programs? When should they occur?

In sum, *This We Believe* is an excellent starting point for educators and school leaders, but creating a “responsive, challenging, exploratory, and equitable” middle grades school is complicated, and the absence of very concrete and practical steps is problematic. NMSA’s *This We Believe* is more of a tool for reflection and discussion and not a tool for implementation.

To be fair, “This We Believe” is meant to be general in order to be adaptable to various school situations. But other reports and publications that are supposed to take the characteristics and make them practical seem imprecise and hazy, too.

Three years after the original “This We Believe,” a position paper was published by the newly established Council on Middle Level Education. The purpose was to provide a more detailed explanation of how to implement some of the new ideas about educating young adolescents. It was entitled “An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level.” About school structures, it said:

School organization...should encourage the smooth operation of the academic program, clear communication...maximum teacher and student control over the quality of the learning environment...contribute to a sense of belonging...mitigate against anonymity and alienation from the primary mission of the school. (Cited in Stevenson, 1992, p. 15)
While the report did acknowledge that creating a sense of belonging should be central to school organization, it was all too brief on the subject of what specific school-wide structures a school could implement to facilitate a smooth operation and a feeling of community.

After this report, more publications and initiatives followed, refining and adding to the body of knowledge on young adolescent education—but clear specifics continued to be out of reach.

In 1987, the California State Department of Education published, “Caught in the Middle.” In 1988, the Children’s Defense Fund published, “A Survey of State Policies and Programs for the Middle Grades.” In 1989, the Carnegie Corporation Council on Adolescent Development published Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century. All of these documents recommended congruent ideas about what schools for young adolescents should be and offered a variety of observations about young adolescents and strategies for educators, but like any idea in education, the recommendations would take years to find their way into the structural organization of schools, and it didn’t happen as seamlessly as one would hope.

Stevenson (1992) admits, “From all of these reports one might be led to assume that there has been a felicitous transformation of schooling practices and new unanimity of purpose among educators. The fact is, however, that actual change in schools seems to follow very slowly in spite of such compelling proposals” (p. 16). Stevenson says state and local agencies responsible for funding public education may be to blame for the fact that policy recommendations have been implemented unevenly or ambiguously.

In fact, there are many questions surrounding the inconsistent realization of
good schools for young adolescents. Maybe it was too overwhelming to implement everything at once? After all, the NMSA insists that all recommendations have to be applied in harmony, which would be a huge undertaking. Maybe the actual steps for implementation were too vague? It certainly seems like there could be more clarity about some of the broad and general recommendations. Maybe there wasn’t enough of a rationale given to excite school leaders and educators about creating successful schools for young adolescents? Maybe other broad education reform efforts were taking center stage?

When the Carnegie Task Force decided to examine the overall shape of the middle school movement almost four decades after its inception, they acknowledged some progress but found a pressing need for more reform and more clarity on what middle grades school should be (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

1.2 Research on Young Adolescents’ Needs

During young adolescence, students change. They go through puberty, they begin to think more abstractly, and they shift their social allegiance to be more heavily weighted toward peers instead of family. At the same time, they need guidance and support from caring adults (National Middle School Association, 2010). It’s a time when the prefrontal cortex of the brain is still being shaped, influencing one’s ability to control impulses, to plan, and to make good decisions (Weinberger, 2005, p. 16). Young adolescents need experiences that emphasize trust, teach socialization and cooperation, and boost self-esteem. They need intellectual experiences that teach them about justice, equality, and ethics, as well as time to explore their own diverse interests (Manning, 2002).

Dr. James P. Comer, the Yale child psychiatrist and proponent of his own developmentally responsive comprehensive school reform plan, highlights six pathways
that young adolescents must grow along: physical, social/interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, linguistic, and cognitive/intellectual. Comer explains that children need positive relationships with adults and educational institutions in order to achieve growth in these key areas (Comer, 2004).

In his highly-praised book *Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds* (1992), Chris Stevenson draws on over thirty years of experience working with this age group to name four truisms about young adolescents. The four truisms are listed below (p. 6-9):

- Every child wants to believe in himself or herself as a successful person.
- Every youngster wants to be liked and respected.
- Every youngster wants physical exercise and freedom to move.
- Youngsters want life to be just.

Stevenson says each of these needs must be fulfilled in order for young adolescents to learn at the highest levels. In addition, Stevenson says meeting these needs helps kids develop strong character.

Crawford and Haggedorn's book, *Classroom Discipline* (2009), also lists four basic requirements of young adolescents. They boil it down further, into just four words. (They draw on the work of Rudolf Dreikurs, Abraham Maslow, William Glasser, and psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan.) Crawford and Haggedorn say the four needs of young adolescents are:

- Relationship
- Autonomy
- Competence
- Fun
These four needs are congruent with Stevenson’s, they’re just a little pithier. Crawford and Haggedorn (2009) say that the behavior of young adolescents at any moment can be interpreted as an attempt to meet one of these needs. In my experience as a classroom teacher, I have found this to be true. While Classroom Discipline, as its title implies, is about what can occur within the four walls of a classroom, I use their four adolescent needs as a theoretical framework to help me think about and categorize developmentally responsive school-wide structures.
Chapter 2

Teachers in Context

2.1 The Cultural and Political Context of Teaching Today

The current trend in education, both culturally and politically, centers not on comprehensive school reform or child development, but on individual teacher quality. The idea that teacher quality is the sole determinant of student outcomes is a pervasive sentiment both nationwide and specifically in New York City.

This cultural trend can be seen in books, movies, and newspaper articles. The 2010 feature length documentary Waiting for Superman put teacher quality on everyone’s radar. News articles like Atlantic Monthly’s “What Makes a Great Teacher” (January/February 2010), and The New York Times’ “Building a Better Teacher” (March 2, 2010), hone in on the specific teacher actions that make a difference in student
achievement. Books like *Teach Like a Champion*, by Doug Lemov (2010), offer specific, research-based techniques on what teachers can do during their lessons to increase student achievement. Wendy Kopp’s (2011) book *A Chance to Make History* promotes the idea that energetic young Teach for America teachers can quickly and drastically increase student achievement in any context. Everyone seems to be buzzing about teacher quality: how to find high quality teachers, how to train them, and how to measure their success.

The trend is political as well; the Obama administration has emphasized individual teacher quality in several ways. In his 2012 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama said that we should “replace teachers who just aren’t helping kids learn” and give rewards to those who demonstrate quantifiable success. Encouraged by Obama’s Race to the Top initiative, many state legislatures have recently passed laws to assess teachers based on their students’ test scores. New York is one of the states rolling out a new teacher evaluation system that takes into account teachers’ ability to raise student test scores (Phillips, 2012). In several large cities, individualized teacher rankings have been published publicly, based on their students’ standardized test results (Ravitch, 2012).

In January 2012, the Center for Educational Policy in Washington, DC released a report by the Center’s president, Jack Jennings, about the status of education reform. It’s called: “Why have we fallen short and where do we go from here?” While Jennings does not support test-driven reform or measuring teacher quality based on standardized tests, he does believe that teacher quality is of the utmost importance. The bottom line, Jennings says, is that it’s a human resource issue. Teachers are the key to improving student achievement.
The cultural and political focus on teacher quality has in many ways been positive. Good teachers are more likely to be applauded and rewarded for their hard work. One could argue there’s a broader nationwide respect for skilled educators and more value is placed on the profession than ever before. But there are some definite negatives associated with the focus on teacher quality. It sometimes sours into a blame game, with lots of finger pointing at supposedly lazy veteran teachers, or it leads to (often successful) attempts to weaken teachers’ unions. The fact that teacher quality is tied so closely to student outcomes—and our student outcomes as a nation are embarrassedly low compared to other developed nations—may also contribute to a general stigma associated with the teaching profession.

Yet by far the most harmful part of focusing solely on teacher quality is that it creates tunnel vision when considering next steps for education reform. High quality teachers become the panacea for our under-achieving schools, and this means that the structure of the schools themselves are sometimes forgotten. In sum, thinking that we just need to get high-quality teachers into our schools is an oversimplified solution that fails to address contextual factors that may influence teachers’ effectiveness. The conundrum brings to mind the research of Dr. W. Edwards Deming, famous for reinvigorating Japanese industries after WWII. Dr. Deming created the “85-15” rule, which states that 85% of a worker’s effectiveness can be attributed to the system in which they work, and only 15% can be attributed to individual effort. Hence, school context should—and does—matter, even if the frenzied focus on teacher quality sometimes pushes context and structure aside.
2.2 What Teachers are Thinking and Feeling and Why It Matters

Sometimes the voices and opinions of teachers get lost in the debate on education reform—but their thoughts and feelings obviously matter when it comes to thinking about making schools better. A close look at survey data of teachers within the last decade or so is alarming. We can see high rates of dissatisfaction and huge numbers of teachers leaving their schools—or the profession entirely.

In the fall of 2000, a “Teacher Motivation and Job Satisfaction Survey” collected responses from 710 middle and high school teachers. Twenty-three percent of teachers said they were dissatisfied with their jobs. Twenty-six percent of urban teachers were dissatisfied, which was slightly higher than in suburban and rural areas. Thirty-six percent said they would not choose to be a teacher again (Mertler, 2002).

Professional dissatisfaction is not to be taken lightly. As L. Pearson and W. Moomaw noted in an article in *Educational Research Quarterly*, professional dissatisfaction causes stress and eventually burnout and teacher turnover (2005). Due to the focus of this study, it’s important to note that middle school teachers reported lower satisfaction than elementary school teachers (Mertler, 2002, citing Perie & Baker, 1997; King & Peart, as cited in McConaghy, 1993; Ellis & Bernhardt, 1992), and middle school teachers are generally less positive than elementary school teachers about their working conditions (Berry, 2009).

At New York City public schools—the largest school system in the country, with over 80,000 teachers—there are particularly high rates of dissatisfaction and turnover. In New York City, the two-year attrition rate for teachers is 25%, with a whopping 18% of teachers leaving in the first year (Miller, 2004). In a random telephone survey of 2,781 New York City Department of Education teachers, 29% of new teachers reported that it
was unlikely they would be teaching in New York City in three years (Miller, 2004). In
general, turnover is highest in low-income, high-minority schools (Donaldson, 2011;
Ingersoll 2004; Hightower 2011).

Perhaps one might argue that all of the reports of teacher dissatisfaction are just
evidence that teachers are whiney or lazy. Or perhaps one might think that teacher
turnover is for the best if it means letting brand new, energized teachers in to replace
the weary ones who leave. But research shows that teacher dissatisfaction and attrition
are highly worrisome. Retaining teachers is necessary for a school to build instructional
capacity and stability (Donaldson 2011; Ingersoll 2004). In addition, keeping teachers
energized and committed is crucial. As Lee (1991) wrote in his study on teacher
satisfaction: “It is difficult not to link a disillusioned cadre of teachers with impaired
classroom performance by teachers, which ultimately results in the decreased
achievement of students” (p. 203, citing Ashton and Webb 1986; Carnegie Task force on
Teaching 1986; Rosenholtz 1989).

The importance of teacher satisfaction and commitment cannot be overstated.
Teacher job satisfaction “has been shown to be a predictor of teacher retention, a
determinant of teacher commitment, and, in turn, a contributor to school effectiveness”
(Shann, 1998, p. 23). Shin and Reyes (1995) found that teacher job satisfaction is a
determinant of teacher commitment to the organization (Shann, 1998, p. 25). Zigarelli
(1996) found that a single, general measure of teacher satisfaction is a highly significant
predictor of effective schools (Shann, 1998, p. 25).

Getting and keeping good teachers is an insurmountable challenge for many
urban school systems (Shann, 1998). As a result, high-needs communities suffer. “[The]
revolving door effect (Ingersoll, 2004) leaves the very schools that most need stability
and continuity perpetually searching for new teachers to replace those who leave” (Donaldson, 2011, p. 23). When teachers leave their schools after only a couple of years, brand new teachers take their place, and students are taught by a stream of first-year staff “who are, on average, less effective that their more experienced counterparts” (Donaldson, 2011, citing Murnane & Phillips, 1981; Rockoff, 2004). Donaldson (2011) explains:

When...teachers leave, schools also lose their investment in formal and informal professional development (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2003). Routinely high levels of teacher turnover impede a school’s efforts to coordinate curriculum, to track and share important information about students as they move from grade to grade, and to maintain productive relationships with parents and the local community. (p. 47)

Clearly, the high rates of teacher dissatisfaction indicate that something is amiss within the schools, and if we don’t fix the problem we will continue to have ineffective schools that cannot establish any kind of consistency or infrastructure due to the high rates of teacher turnover.

The next section will review the research that has been done to try and figure out what motivates teachers and what keeps them satisfied and committed.

2.3 Review of the Literature: What Drives Teacher Satisfaction and Commitment

It has been noted: “The morale of teachers can have far-reaching implications for student learning, as well as the health of the teacher” (Mertler, 2002, p. 21, citing Lumsden, 1998). But what exactly is driving teacher morale? What are the factors that
influence teacher satisfaction and commitment? If we can pinpoint those factors, perhaps we can execute measures that will increase teacher morale and therefore increase the success of our schools.

All of the literature I have reviewed on teachers’ experiences in their school environment point to two factors that heavily influence their satisfaction and commitment: (a) working conditions and (b) the students. I will provide an overview of the evidence I have collected from the literature describing both of these factors.

First, I will discuss the importance of working conditions. Working conditions is an umbrella term that encompasses several elements. Dinham and Scott (2000; 1997) called this category “school-based factors,” and defined it as school leadership, school climate, and school infrastructure (Mertler, p. 20). Here is some of the evidence I’ve collected on this category:

- A study of 300,000 teachers over five years in seven states found that teachers ranked school leadership as the most important factor in their decision to stay—or leave—their school. “Schools in which principals invite teacher leadership, support effective instruction and the conditions that make it possible, and create an environment of trust and support among staff have higher rates of planned retention” (Berry et al., 2009).

- Firestone, Rosenblum, and Webb (1987) reported that teacher commitment and school climate are closely connected factors that can be affected by programmatic and administrative actions at the school level (Shann, 1998, p. 24).

- Hightower, Delgado, Lloyd, Wittenstein, Sellers, and Swanson (2011) published a paper that systematically reviewed 50 studies (mainly from the US) in order to examine the state of research on teacher quality. They found that leadership and
working conditions have a strong impact on teaching and learning. They wrote, “These contextual forces were found to directly affect both teacher-retention rates within particular schools and likelihood that teachers will remain within the profession” (Hightower et al., 2011, p 37).

In my review of the literature, the students were the other important factor in determining teacher satisfaction and commitment. Some of the most salient studies are described below:

• The Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching’s (CRC) study included three years of fieldwork/surveys in 16 public & private secondary schools in 8 communities in 2 states. Teachers reported that students were the workplace factor of greatest significance (McLaughlin, 1993, p. 38). McLaughlin (1993) explained: “Teachers depend fundamentally on their students for their principal professional reward and sense of identity” (p. 39, citing Lortie, 1975; Rosenholtz, 1985).

• Shann refers to an article by Kim and Loadman (1994) that studied 2,000 teachers and cited seven statistically significant predictors of job satisfaction: Interactions with students was the highest predictor.

• A study by Raudenbush found that a teacher tends to feel most efficacious when teaching high track students—but the effect disappears when the level of student engagement is controlled (1992, p. 41).

• Heller, Rex, and Cline (1992) reported that 28% of variance in teacher satisfaction can be accounted for by satisfaction in meeting students’ achievement needs (Shann, 1998, p. 25).
Interviews and questionnaires from 92 teachers in 4 urban middle schools were used to assess the importance and satisfaction they assigned to various aspects of their jobs. “Teacher pupil relationships ranked highest overall in terms of importance and satisfaction” (Shann, 1998, p. 24).

The teachers interviewed and surveyed in all of these studies seem to be trying to tell us something: that school-based factors and students are the most important determinants of their willingness to commit to their schools. And yet the connection has not been made that perhaps altering school-based factors (like school structures or organization) to be more responsive to young adolescents’ developmental needs may in fact increase the positive interactions between teachers and students (and foster healthy adolescent development), and therefore increase teacher commitment and satisfaction.

Instead, most often when policymakers try to think of ways to increase teacher satisfaction and commitment, they propose changes to the teachers’ professional context, perhaps because it appears to be the most direct route. They say teachers should have more professional development, more evaluations, more planning time, more opportunities for reflection, more mentorship, more incentives to stay, more incentives to increase student achievement, more autonomy. Or they go the punitive and shaming route: teachers should be held accountable for their students’ test scores, teacher rankings based on these scores should be published publicly, “bad” teachers should be weeded out, seniority should be abolished, collective bargaining for teachers should be weakened.

But none of these ideas pay the least bit of attention to the larger context of school. If the system in which the teachers are working is unstable, disorganized, or fails to meet the needs of students in fundamental ways, how are teachers supposed to be
effective, satisfied, or committed, no matter what rewards or threats are dangled in front of them?

Allow me to recap what has been outlined so far. The Middle School Movement was created to educate young adolescents differently. Research was conducted to better understand this age group’s unique needs and requirements. Now most schools for young adolescents have at least some of the features that the Middle School Movement prescribed. Educators may be more aware of the stages of child development. But many of the movement’s biggest advocates have admitted that although strides have been made in educating young adolescents, it has sometimes been slow going and a lot more work is needed to clearly define and implement the necessary structures.

But now education reform is not primarily concerned with changing school structures; it is concerned with individual teacher quality. In our eagerness to champion superhero teachers who can increase student achievement by leaps and bounds, we have dismissed contextual factors that may influence teachers and students. Perhaps due to the increasing attempts to standardize curriculum or hold schools and individual teachers accountable for student test scores, there has been a general unwillingness to focus on structuring schools around the developmental needs of young adolescents.

At the same time, teachers are frustrated, disillusioned, dissatisfied, and washing their hands of the whole mess and leaving the profession at high rates, to the detriment of school stability. These sad facts are mostly pushed under the rug, because it’s not in vogue to consider school infrastructure and overall organizational culture. Teacher quality is all that matters.

Some researchers have looked at what influences teacher satisfaction and commitment. Researchers have found that these are important factors in determining
school effectiveness. But usually the policy recommendations don’t address a school’s structures or organizational culture or bringing the focus back to child development. The policy recommendations generally revolve around teachers’ professional context: giving them more autonomy and decision-making power, providing incentives, providing professional development, et cetera.

The purpose of this study is not to dismiss the importance of teacher quality, or to dismiss the importance of a teacher’s professional development, but to look at how a teacher’s satisfaction and commitment is related to the school in which they work. Specifically, I aim to examine how the developmentally responsive structures of a school may be related to a teacher’s experience.

If there is a relationship, then this study will provide a rationale for the implementation of developmentally responsive school structures at middle grades schools. Of course this will be good for students, and it will also be good for teachers, and therefore it will also be good for strengthening school infrastructure and stability, which will ultimately increase school effectiveness.
PART II

Research Design and Methodology
Introduction to Part II

While there are many ways in which schools may affect teaching and learning, I narrowed my inquiry to developmentally responsive school structures and to teachers’ expressions of satisfaction with their work and commitment to their schools. My study was small. I looked at only two schools for young adolescents.

Part II will explain how (and why) I went about studying school structures and teachers’ experiences using qualitative methods. In Chapter 3, I will describe my data gathering techniques. In Chapter 4, I will discuss my rationale for using qualitative analysis.
Chapter 3

Research Design

The research for this study took place over one academic school year. First, I visited many middle grades schools in New York City. Some were rigid, formal, and strict. Others were completely open and unstructured. I settled on two schools that had reputations for having strong school climates and were progressively oriented. I will call the schools in this study School A and School B. Both schools are well-established (not brand new) and have received various accolades. In fact, they both recently won the same prestigious annual citywide award for excellence at the middle school level in the same year. (The decision was made by an advisory board that surveyed families,
students, and teachers and created a website where over 1,000 opinions were recorded.) While School A and School B were chosen for a number of reasons, the fact that both received this accolade in the very same year is noteworthy.

At both schools, I found teachers who were willing to be observed. In a way, both research sites were convenience samples; they were easily accessible and matched what I was looking for. Still, they were purposefully chosen. It is important to note that both are located in Manhattan and that School A is a public school and School B is an independent school.

I visited each school once a week in the fall, then again about once a week in the winter and spring. These visits varied from an hour to several hours in length. On these visits, one of the primary purposes was observation. I observed classes, sat in on meetings (between one principal and a teacher, between teachers who were planning). I observed students in the hallways. I took pictures of student work and signs on the walls. I toured the facilities. I collected a copy of the daily schedule.

Another goal of these visits was to get to know the students and staff more directly. I interviewed teachers formally and informally, sometimes recording our conversations and sometimes just taking notes. I had conversations with students. I interviewed the principal at School A. I also found that while I got a lot of information from speaking with teachers directly during school hours, I got some of the most complete and thorough data from interviews with teachers in which I presented them with a list of questions and had them respond in writing on their own time via email. The list of written questions I asked is available in Appendix A.

During my research, my presence and purpose was overt. I was transparent about my goal of completing a Master’s project based on the qualitative data I collected.
I explained to the teachers with whom I interacted at each school that I was interested in the structures of good middle schools. I felt as though I built trust easily with both schools. Part of this may have been my unintimidating nature, and part may have been due to the fact that both schools were very familiar and comfortable with Bank Street.

An obvious limitation of a small qualitative sample like mine is that one cannot easily generalize the findings. Still, I believe that the fact that both schools had diverse student populations and were located in the heart of New York City means that the findings are useful and could be replicated at other schools in the area.
Chapter 4

Methodology

Methodology is about more than a straightforward description of data gathering techniques; methodology is about the principles underlying the data collection.

Many researchers have worked hard to explain the benefits of qualitative inquiry, and I would be remiss if I did not mention some of their arguments. While quantitative researchers estimate averages of a particular variable across a large number of cases and seek to isolate variables, qualitative researchers assume that context is meaningful and relevant and look at things more holistically (Talbert et al., 1999). Chisom, Buttery, Chukabar ah, and Henson (1987) wrote in the journal *Education* that quantitative research had failed to pinpoint the “most dynamic variables such as the demands and stresses of working conditions which seriously affect...today’s public
school teachers” (citing Berry, Noblit, and Hane, 1985). They discuss how Bird (1984) calls for more qualitative research on teachers and institutional characteristics.

When McLaughlin (1993) published his study on “What Matters Most in Teachers’ Workplace Context,” he defended his qualitative approach. He proudly described the distinctive feature of his research as the “bottom-up, teacher’s eye perspective on teaching within particular kinds of embedded contexts.” He said that this “yields a strategically different conception of what matters most to teachers,” and I believe my research has this same strength.

In “Assessing the School Environment: Embedded Contexts and Bottom-Up Research Strategies,” Talbert and McLaughlin (1999) discuss the history of effective-schools research. They explain that effective-schools research typically considers internal school organization and culture to be paramount; this is my view as a researcher, too. They describe one of the first influential effective-schools research studies, by Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Outson, and Smith (1979), which looked at the school ethos of inner city English schools. Then they turn to the naissance of effective-schools research in the US in the 1980s, which “sought to identify school policies, norms, and processes that distinguished relatively successful from relatively unsuccessful schools (Talbert and McLaughlin, 1999, citing Purkey and Smith, 1983). My research is very much in line with this.

However, Talbert and McLaughlin point out a major flaw with effective-schools research: “Research in this genre isolated such school-level factors as principal leadership, goal consensus and collegiality, high faculty expectations, and extended teacher roles as correlates of average student achievement,” and often measured school effectiveness in terms of students’ standardized test scores. My research aims to avoid this
pitfall by staying away from calculations of school effectiveness based on standardized test scores. Instead, I focus on teachers’ reports of professional satisfaction and commitment to their schools. It goes without saying at this point that these are factors that have been proven to ultimately impact student outcomes.

Lee, Dedrick, and Smith (1991) conducted a study at the University of Michigan called “The Effect of the Social Organization of Schools on Teachers’ Efficacy and Satisfaction.” It is interesting to compare this study to mine, because both concentrate on the link between school structures and the attitudes of teachers. Theirs was a quantitative study of 8,488 full-time teachers at 354 schools. They found that elements such as principal leadership, communal school organization, an orderly environment, and levels of teacher control influence teacher reports of self-efficacy. The strongest predictor of teacher efficacy they found was community (Lee et al., 1991, p. 204).

Given the similarities, it was helpful to look at Lee’s methodology and rationale in order to plan how I would conduct my research. Although Lee’s was a large-scale quantitative study and mine is a small qualitative study, Lee explains the relationship between schools, teachers, and students in an illuminating way. Lee says that it is hard to link school organization and student achievement: “Researchers have had difficulty demonstrating direct empirical links between school organization or climate and student outcomes. The source of this difficulty is both methodological and substantive” (Lee, p. 33, citing Bidwell & Kasarda, 1980). Lee explains:

Methodological difficulty stems from operationalizing school effects mainly as aggregates. Substantively, it may be more appropriate to conceptualize the link between school and students as indirect, mediated by teachers. In this view, school organization would influence how teachers view their work and how
they teach. Teachers’ perceptions and practices would in turn affect students’ learning. The second link—between the practices and attitudes of teachers and student outcomes—was empirically validated by Ashton and Webb (1986) and Rosenholtz (1989). (p. 190)

Since the second link, between teacher attitudes and student outcomes, has been proven, Lee focuses on school organization and how it influences teachers’ experience and mindset. I focus on this link, too. But where Lee looks at the impact of general school organization, I’m looking specifically at schools’ developmentally responsive structures. And although we both look at how these factors influence teacher satisfaction, Lee examines teacher reports of self-efficacy, whereas I look at teacher reports of commitment and satisfaction.
PART III

Presentation & Discussion of Findings
Introduction to Part III

The purpose of Part III is to get to the heart of the matter and describe the findings of this research study. Chapter 5 will give an overview of the two schools that participated in this study, called School A and School B for the purposes of anonymity. Chapter 6 offers an in-depth look at each school and a comparison of their structures.
Chapter 5

Overview of Research Participants

5.1 An Overview of School A

School A was founded a decade ago by community members and educators in a neighborhood in lower Manhattan. It serves approximately 400 students in grades 6-8. About 60% of students receive free or reduced-priced lunch, and the school receives Title I funding. The student body is 15% White, 12% Black, 45% Latino, and 26% Asian. As the only progressive public middle school in its district, sometimes demand is high and it can be a little bit crowded. Class sizes average out at around 30 students (although the teacher to student ratio is only about 1:13). The school mission emphasizes high learning standards, ethical development, caring, and critical thinking.
Mira, one of the teachers I observed, says the school is great for individualized attention and has a strong community feel. InsideSchools.org (2011) describes School A’s specialty as it’s “nurturing social environment for adolescents.” The school has received several honors. It was recognized by New York City’s Parent’s Guide as one of the best public middle schools. The NY Daily News called the school “a gem.” Several years ago a city councilwoman helped them raise over six figures for a new science lab. In 2009-2010 (the last year for which data was available), the teacher turnover rate was under 10%. Thirty-four percent of teachers have a Master’s degree.

Mira has taught at School A for six years. She first co-taught English, then became a reading specialist, and this year has been asked by her principal to co-teach science in order to infuse the curriculum with more literacy. Mira says she loves working with young adolescents. She explains:

“Working with kids who are right in the middle of developing their identity as adults is a huge privilege. Sure, it can be challenging because moods vary from day to day and 8th graders often suffer from extreme coolness, and academics can seem to take a major backseat to social concerns. But...I think as long as I remember that my students are becoming who they will be, and they want to become who they will be, and it’s my job to always think, talk, read, and write with them about who they want to be, then things go well.”

Jose, another teacher at School A who I observed and interviewed, is in his first year of teaching here, and his fifth teaching with the New York City Department of Education. He previously worked at a middle school in the South Bronx. Prior to being a fulltime
teacher, he worked at a private school as a tutor for three years. He teaches Spanish. Like Mira, Jose likes teaching young adolescents. He says:

“Middle school has always been my favorite age range because as 6th graders they still consider themselves babies, 7th graders are just plain awkward, and 8th graders envision themselves as mini adults. Middle school is where you can “get ‘em.” By the time students get to high school, especially in NYC, they are set in their ways and it’s harder to loosen their grip on academic and personal behaviors that are harmful or unproductive.”

Both Mira and Jose expressed enthusiasm for working with me and had positive things to say about School A and their experiences there. I will delve deeper into this in the following chapter.

5.2 An Overview of School B

School B was founded many decades ago by a progressive educator and neighborhood parents. The annual tuition is over $30,000 per year, with a quarter of the student body receiving financial aid (totaling over $3 million in awards). After-school programming comes at an additional cost. The school serves grades K-12, although the high school is located in a separate building. Average class size in the middle school is around 20, and classes are often broken up into half groups for various activities. The teacher to student ratio is about 1:8. The school is a little more than 30% students of color. School B’s mission is very similar to School A’s. It emphasizes academic excellence, service to community, respect for others, and independent thinking. School B recently received an award from the neighborhood historical preservation society. It also received a
prestigious award from an organization that works with students of color at private schools. A teacher turnover rate is not officially documented at an independent school, but teachers say the openings are slim and turnover is very low. Eighty percent of the teachers have a Master’s degree.

Earnest has been teaching at School B since 2005. He was recruited to teach at School B after winning an award for the amount of progress he helped his public school students make on their state exams. This year at School B he “wears many hats,” as he plays the role of dean of the middle school, sixth grade core Humanities teacher, and advisor. I mostly observed him teaching his Humanities class. I also observed two eighth grade teachers and a kindergarten teacher. All of the teachers I spoke with reported high or very high levels of professional satisfaction as well as commitment to the school.

At both schools, all of the teachers I spoke with rated their professional satisfaction and commitment on a scale of 1-5 as a 4 or 5, 5 being the highest.
Chapter 6

Presentation of Data

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings derived from the qualitative data generated during the interviews and school visits at the two urban middle schools that participated in this study. (As I assured research participants of anonymity, the schools are consistently referred to as School A and School B, and the names of students and staff have been changed.) It’s important to briefly revisit the three research questions central to this study that were first stated in the introduction:

1. What does a school look like that meets the developmental needs of young adolescents?
2. What specific school-wide structures are in place at such a school?

3. How do teachers experience a school with these structures?

Over the course of my research, I observed structures at both schools that met the various developmental needs of young adolescents: the needs for relationship, autonomy, competence, and fun (Haggedorn, 2009). I considered organizing the data by these developmental themes, or by the specific structures I noticed. However, I ultimately chose to present the data by thoroughly describing each school individually. This allows me to present a more holistic understanding of each school. After presenting both schools, I compare them and look at their organizational and structural similarities and teachers’ experiences there.

School A

School A is located on the second floor of a large brick school building abutting a small park. The first time I visit, it’s a cool fall morning. I sign in with the school security officer on the first floor, put on a nametag, and head up to the second floor. The school has the same institutional feel as many New York City public schools—old gray floors, shiny tile walls, long hallways with fluorescent lighting. But School A is cheerful, too. The walls are brightly colored, and student projects and artwork adorn every bulletin board. With fewer than 400 students in grades 6-8, the school only takes up the two corridors of the second floor, forming a long L shape. Close to the middle, where the two lines of the L converge, is the principal’s brightly colored office, the door typically ajar.

In between the principal’s office and one of the classrooms is a large TV screen mounted to the wall. On the TV screen, it says, “Welcome to School A!” and there’s the school’s logo, the date, and the time, in little letters near the top. Announcements scroll
by on the bottom of the screen: “Wear School A: See Betsy for School A shirts and sweats,” and “Find us online at schoolA.org” are some of the alerts that float by. In the center of the screen is rolling footage of School A teachers and students holding up their favorite books and talking about why they recommend them. If you stand close enough to the screen, the sound is audible. The students and teachers smile and talk animatedly about the novels of Sharon Draper, Suzanne Collins, and more. Meanwhile, on the left-hand side of the TV screen images of the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade web pages fade in and out. The 7th grade page has a picture of a pumpkin carved with the symbol for Pi. The caption underneath says, “Ms. K’s tasty Pi Pumpkin!” There’s also an alert that says: “Coming Soon. Wanna go to the National Book Awards Teen Press Conference? Talk to your Humanities teacher!” All of the information presented on the TV feels cohesive, presenting a picture of the school as bustling, active, and cheerful.

The teachers are meeting in a big classroom down the hall, as they do every morning for ten minutes before the start of the school day. One staff member explained the morning meeting to me: “The whole staff gets together in the morning to go over important info for the day. Staff absences are announced so that you don’t go running around looking for someone whose not there; we have announcements about committees that are meeting, sporting events that are happening; teachers invite each other to visit classrooms for publication celebrations...Also any announcements that admin or teachers would like to be communicated to kids in homeroom are shared there.” The teachers like this time; it means they don’t rely on memos sporadically circulated to teachers, the info already out of date by the time everyone gets the message. Instead, the ten-minute morning meeting ensures that the whole staff is on the same page. There’s also time at the meeting for something called “community
highlights.” That means anyone can raise her hand and shout someone out for doing good work, tell a funny story, or talk about a positive thing that’s happening at school. Like the exclamation point-filled announcements on the centrally located TV screen, the staff morning meetings offer quick and exciting snippets of information—a glimpse into the bustling culture of the school.

At 9am I walk into the large, long, high-ceilinged classroom where Mira teaches Advisory. She co-teaches Advisory with her colleague Rachel. Mira has been teaching for eight years. After graduating from the University of North Carolina, Mira began her teaching career through Teach for America, and taught English for two years at a different New York City public school. Then, at the end of her second year, she found out that the professional support she was receiving from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project was being discontinued at her school. “I considered the project’s support a lifeline at the time,” Mira says, “So I decided I needed to leave.” That’s when she came to School A, where she’s been teaching for six years now. Was it the right decision? “Absolutely,” Mira says; “I found School A, and I really became a teacher here. The best thing about working here [is] the culture of collaboration and a commitment to the idea that relationships with kids matter.”

It’s seven minutes after 9:00am now, and Advisory is going to begin in one minute. In the hallway, students have arrived at school and are smiling, chatting at a low decibel, and finally lining up to enter their first period class. The fact that school starts around 9am is nice for them. Many public schools start at 8am. (The schedule is something the staff put a lot of time into creating, and the late start was important to them.) The students come into the classroom and sit at tables in groups of 3 and 4. In total, there are 30 students in the room. Students sit and chat quietly at their tables at
first. “Give us a minute to pass out notebooks,” Mira says, taking a pile of them from a back shelf and plopping one down in front of each student. Rachel, Mira’s co-teacher, starts talking first: “Remember, there’s a high school fair coming up...” Mira interjects: “Can you raise your hand if you plan on going to that?” Several students raise their hands. Mira looks around, nods, and finishes passing out the notebooks.

“Ten seconds to get to the meeting area,” Mira says. The students sitting at the back and middle tables promptly get up and move toward the front of the classroom, sitting on benches and chairs that form a semi-circle around the teachers. There’s an easel and projector at the front of the room, too. On the easel is written: “High School Essay Introduction.” Mira says to the gathered students, “Our goal is that you have your introduction drafted by the end of this period.”

On the projector is a sample essay. A fake student name is written at the top of the sample essay: “Jane Malorky.” A student comments on the funniness of that last name, and Mira looks amused. “What? It’s a common last name in Kansas,” she says with a straight face. “Really?” says a student. Mira shakes her head and half-smiles and a small sea of laughter erupts from the students. They quickly quiet down and Mira reads the sample essay’s first paragraph. It’s all about how to deal with challenges; their own essays will also be about their philosophy on how to face challenges. After some discussion with the class about what the first paragraph should include, Rachel writes down the students’ ideas in a bullet pointed list on the easel. Then Mira calls on a student who hasn’t contributed: “Antoine. What’s one thing that’s going to go into your introduction?” He pauses.

“There’s a lot of places you could look right now,” Mira says in a serious tone, gesturing to the collectively brainstormed list and the sample essay still projected up
front. The rest of the class looks at the boy quietly, expectantly. Antoine manages to read something from the chart and Mira nods, satisfied. “Now, I don’t want anybody going back to their seat without an idea of what to write about,” she says. She instructs students to turn and talk to their neighbor to generate some more ideas. After a few minutes, she directs students to head back to their original tables to start drafting their introductions in their notebooks.

Seven students stay in the meeting area up front with Rachel for a conference—these students chose to stay because they were having trouble coming up with ideas. As Rachel prods them with questions to try and get them to think of ideas, the rest of the students write quietly at their tables until 9:43am. Then Rachel says, “Thumbs up if you’re done with your introduction!” Most students give a thumbs up. Mira nods, “Please close your notebooks and make a pile of them in the center of your table.”

Advisory is an important program at School A. In addition to a ten-minute homeroom/Advisory check-in every day, there are two 46-minute advisory periods per week for first period. Topics include adjustment to middle school, healthy decision making, identify formation, body image, bullying, how to be organized, and how to apply to high school. Halfway through the school year, Advisory turns into a “Boys and Girls Project,” which deals with sex education. Many Advisories are like Mira and Rachel’s; they are two groups of about 15 students, each with an assigned advisor, that are combined together with both teachers co-teaching the larger group.

Mira will next co-teach a 7th grade CTT science class and then an 8th grade CTT science class, followed by a meeting with the principal to talk about her professional goals (they have this meeting once a week), one more CTT class, a break for lunch, another class, and then a meeting at 2:38pm with her coworker to plan and grade (they
meet at this time twice a week). Mira loves the planning time: “The well-developed structures around dedicated planning time with co-teachers...[that’s one of the things] that makes School A a great place to work and it has allowed me to focus on teaching.”

Down the hallway, Jose teaches Spanish. It’s his first year teaching at this school. He previously taught at a public school in the South Bronx, but got fed up with what he saw as the unreasonable demands of the administration. (For example, Jose was led by an administrator to believe that he did not need to be paid for designing and running an after-school program. It’s now the most successful bilingual program in the Bronx.) Jose got into teaching in the first place after coming here from Peru and going to NYU for his Bachelor’s (philosophy) and Master’s (education).

Jose’s classroom here at School A is yellow and a bit smaller than Mira’s, although he has the same number of students. Above the whiteboard at the front of the room is a large, colorful and cartoony “Bienvenidos!” poster. The desks are lined up in rows facing forward, with the desks pushed together in pairs in the outer columns and a group of three in the center. The 30 students each have a laptop on their desk and large headphones on their ears. Part of their Spanish class is taught using an online educational program, which is what they’re working on now. Jose’s desk is near the front and he greets me as I enter. Gesturing to his plugged in students, he says, “I’m training them to be telemarketers!” He laughs. A very small student walks up to Jose and says shyly, “Can I go to the bathroom?” Jose says, “I don’t know, can you?” The girl smiles. “May I go to the bathroom?” she asks. Jose says, “Yes, you may!” He smiles and the girl nods and leaves the room.

After fifteen minutes, Jose walks from his desk in the corner to the front of the classroom. It’s time to review for the upcoming test. “Headphones, Pacman. Don’t make
me say it twice,” he says loudly, looking at the students. They promptly look up, take off their headphones, and bend the screens of their laptops down, partially closed. Jose writes “Hablar” on the whiteboard in blue marker. He calls on student volunteers to conjugate it in various ways. “This will be on your test tomorrow!” Jose says. “No...Friday!” The students respond. “I’m sorry,” Jose says, “Thank you for correcting me. You’re right, the test is Friday, not tomorrow. Translate this sentence. Yo fui a la escuela el lunes.” A student raises his hand and translates it. “Good. Did we go over porque?” Jose asks. He says the word several times and the students repeat it as one. Then he calls on students individually to repeat the word after him. He calls on one girl in the third row, Amanda. When she pronounces it, it sounds like “Porky.” Jose laughs. “Porky? Porky es un snort snort oink oink.” He makes a snorting noise, like a pig. Students laugh, clearly amused. The girl shrugs abashedly. “I didn’t say porky!” she says, turning red. Three other students raise their hands, eager to answer correctly. “Porque,” Jose coaxes, saying it several times before Amanda is able to repeat it correctly.

At the end of class, Jose says, “Ladies and gentlemen, wonderful job today. Please log out. My headset people please collect the headsets!”

Jose will teach another period, have a prep, lunch, teach another period, and when school ends at 3:25pm, he’ll teach Regents prep for the 8th graders for about an hour and a half. He does the Regents prep twice a week. He’s feeling a little under the weather today, but he smiles as he watches the class leave and he stands near the classroom door, watching his next class line up outside along the wall, waiting to enter.

I walk through the hallways for a little while, observing the posters, class work, projects, and student artwork on the walls. Not only are the bulletin boards full, but the
posters overflow onto the gray tile walls as well. Many posters are about extracurricular activities. Two days a week there is a “Period A,” which is offered before the start of the regular school day, from 8:10-9:00am. This period is offered for students who need extra help or extra services.

Of course Period A isn’t the only program offered. Jose says, “there are tons of clubs and activities and there’s something for everyone. Students here are really engaged in physical activities and the athletic teams are very popular. The staff (I include myself) go out in support at home games. It helps form bonds between teachers, students, and families.” Some of the activities include soccer, dance, and basketball. There’s also band, a literary magazine, and theater. However, the after school program is not as vibrant as it once was. It used to be operated in partnership with a non-profit group, but when School A lost a large federal grant at the end of the 2007-2008 school year, the non-profit pulled out and School A has been running a modified version on its own ever since. There are still plenty of activities, though. One bright orange sign I see is a poster for a Gay Straight Alliance, brimming with hearts and the slogan: “Have no FEAR if you’re QUEER/Everyone is EQUAL here!”
In addition to the posters about clubs and activities, there’s tons of artwork posted on the school walls. Beautiful, richly colored, detailed student artwork: paintings, self-portraits, abstract designs, and line drawings are just some of the masterpieces on display. Students all get art class at some point during the year, as well as technology, dance, and Spanish. Students usually receive one of these enrichment subjects every day for 18 weeks (two marking periods), before moving on to the next enrichment class. This is in addition to core classes in humanities (a 97 minute double block), science, and math every day. And of course there’s a full period of Advisory twice a week and gym twice a week.

And it’s not just during these enrichment periods that students’ creativity is celebrated. It’s clear from the assignments on the walls that even core classes like science, humanities, and math incorporate creativity. For example, a 7th grade math bulletin board has the title, “What Does It Mean to Be A Mathematician?” Students have (individually or in groups) written paragraphs or phrases or words about what it means to be a mathematician and drawn illustrations to go with it. One student’s paper shows a cartoony drawing of a girl with a long brown ponytail and a blue shirt. She has a fierce and determined expression on her face; her eyebrows furrowed, her lips pursed. Different parts of her are labeled. An arrow is drawn pointed toward her head. It leads to the description: “Calculator.” She is carrying a “pencil WITH eraser” and a composition notebook. One arrow points to her right hand, which has been drawn a
little small and misshapen, with the text “Strangely small hands!” This is the paragraph written to go along with the drawing:

“A good mathematician is neat, and organized. She (or he) is always curious, and will not easily give up if she/he makes a mistake. A mathematician is not always right. If she/he gets a question wrong, she/he merely takes it in stride and goes on to correct her/his error.”

Another group’s paper has a picture of a boy at the front of a chalkboard, a math problem with powers and square roots solved on the board, step-by-step. The boy has black hair and wears round glasses. He is smiling. The text says:

“This picture shows a good mathematician making sure that his work is correct and showing step by step how to solve the problem, in other words showing his work.”
Another group’s paper has a picture of a girl closing her eyes, numbers and symbols blooming out of her head. Descriptive words are scrawled around her face: “Open-mindedness, Focus, Persistence, Determination.”

It’s clear from the projects and assignments on display that School A values students’ unique ideas. Different approaches to the same assignments are encouraged, and on every bulletin board of student work there are no two assignments that look exactly the same. School A is pleased about this. According to their website:

“School A is very proud of its curriculum. Faculty and outside experts are always refining the structures in place to reflect what truly works for young adolescents. All classes are student-oriented, with a focus on kids working together to grapple with the concepts being taught. The classes are project-based and wherever possible students take on the roles of what they are studying.”
I see one bulletin board with a social studies theme. Several steps of a project are on display. There are guiding questions, a planning phase, and then the final assignment: writing an Ode to the Nile River. Here's one example:

This is a good example of the way that social studies and English are integrated. Other classes are integrated, too. In 7th grade science, one of the projects is assigned in conjunction with technology class; students create a computer game about body systems and internal organs.

I also find out that the basic structure for the 6-8 curriculum is planned out in advance and that the projects, traditions, and field trips for each class are pretty consistent year to year. A lot of refining and reflecting goes on, but the essential questions and themes remain the same. Looking specifically at how Humanities spirals over time is particularly interesting. In beginning of the year for Humanities, the 6th
grade essential questions are: “What makes me a great reader? What makes me a great writer? How are we different from and similar to ancient peoples?” The students become acclimated to Reading and Writing Workshops and also study timelines, geography, and Ancient Greece. In 7th grade, the essential questions are “What are my rights? What are my responsibilities?” Students continue Reading Workshop but go into more depth with character analysis. They also work on persuasive essay writing. They study the US Constitution and have a few mock trials, culminating in a major First Amendment trial at Manhattan’s US Courthouse. Lastly, in 8th grade the focus is on short stories and becoming very independent and self-aware readers. Students also write memoirs. For the social studies portion, they study the 20th century and do a major project where they write an immigrant journal, assuming the role of an immigrant in the early 1900s. The students end the year with a big trip to Washington DC for several days.

All of the posted work in the hallways looks challenging and complex. The students have worked hard on it. It looks like there’s a good balance between challenging the students and also supporting them to be able to succeed. One student said: “I am very impressed with School A; it is pretty much the best I could ask for. This school is full of supportive teachers, and the work is hard enough for us to actually learn from it, but it’s not so hard that we can’t do it, or always have to struggle.”

Later in the school year I visit School A on a chilly day in winter at around 11:25am. My purpose on this visit is to go to the office to sit in on a meeting between Mira and the principal, Sanjay. When I arrive, Mira and Sanjay are sitting across from each other at a small round table in the front of his office, ready to begin. Sanjay wears a muted pastel button down shirt and a tie. They’re talking about creating a professional
development goal for Mira. Mira either wants to focus on student engagement or assessment, but she’s not sure which. After explaining her predicament to Sanjay, she waits for him to respond. Sanjay says, “Good good good. I’m not going to tell you which one to pick. I would counsel you not to take on something totally new. I don’t want to overwhelm you.” Mira nods. Sanjay has a way of speaking that’s relaxed and easy going, but also specific and direct. He smiles a lot.

Sanjay and Mira talk a little more, settling on student engagement as the area for Mira to work on, since Mira’s already thinks about that quite a bit. Sanjay suggests thinking about student engagement in a way that’s specifically related to discussion techniques, and Mira likes that idea. She says she’s going to get her co-teacher, Rachel, to observe her teaching once or twice and do some kind of tracking on the types of questions Mira asks. Mira and Sanjay move on to talking about how well the small group work is going in 7th grade, and how maybe to engage the 8th graders more they should have more small group work as well. Soon their discussion moves toward Mira’s co-teaching relationships. (She co-teaches with Rachel half the time and with the 7th and 8th grade science teacher, Brian, the other half of the time.)

Sanjay asks, “Is Brian making weekly plans?” Mira says, “Well, a lot of times I write the lessons, or make modifications as I go. Or afterward I’ll type up what happened and paste it in with modifications for next year.” Sanjay shakes his head. “That’s not good news. I’ll make it my goal to put a little more pressure on Brian.” Mira nods; “My thinking on the Brian situation. I don’t want to impose my value of backwards planning, but personally I think it’s really valuable. Lesson planning becomes way less overwhelming. With that in mind, if Brian and I had a large chunk of time, I know that would help me. I’ll just give you that information.” She smiles. Sanjay says,
“Okay. Well, you’re preaching to the choir, I just gotta figure out how to make it happen.” “I need a chunk,” Mira says. “I will be looking for chunks,” Sanjay replies.

Although it’s not perfect, a lot of effort has gone into the school schedule: the start time, the flow of the day, the length of classes, the room for enrichment courses, and of course the time for teacher collaboration. Unfortunately, there aren’t a lot of extra chunks where Mira and Brian might be able to extend their planning time. While Mira doesn’t have a huge chunk of time to co-plan with Brian, she does get a little more than 2 hours a week fixed into her schedule for this, divided into three time slots. Mira has 1-2 meetings built into each school day. Mira’s schedule looks like this (with all of her co-planning sessions/collaborative meetings bolded):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period minutes</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Period A 50 minutes</td>
<td>Period A 50 minutes</td>
<td>Period A 50 minutes</td>
<td>Period A 50 minutes</td>
<td>Period A 50 minutes</td>
<td>Period A 50 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advisory 46 minutes</td>
<td>Meet with Brian</td>
<td>Advisory 46 minutes</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period 1 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 1 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 1 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 1 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 1 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 1 41 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Meet with Brian</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Observe other teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period 2 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 2 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 2 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 2 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 2 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 2 41 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Free Prep</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Free prep</td>
<td>Free prep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period 3 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 3 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 3 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 3 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 3 41 minutes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet with Cay</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Meet with Principal Sanjay</td>
<td>Meet with Principal Sanjay</td>
<td>Meet with Principal Sanjay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period 4 41 minutes</td>
<td>Period 4 41 minutes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Free Prep</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Meet with Principal Sanjay</td>
<td>Meet with Principal Sanjay</td>
<td>Meet with Principal Sanjay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch 50 minutes</td>
<td>Lunch 50 minutes</td>
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<td>Lunch 50 minutes</td>
<td>Lunch 50 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Meet with Lee over lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period 5 50 minutes</td>
<td>Period 5 50 minutes</td>
<td>Period 5 50 minutes</td>
<td>Period 5 50 minutes</td>
<td>Period 5 50 minutes</td>
<td>Period 5 50 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Meet with Lena</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period 6 47 minutes</td>
<td>Period 6 47 minutes</td>
<td>Period 6 47 minutes</td>
<td>Period 6 47 minutes</td>
<td>Period 6 47 minutes</td>
<td>Period 6 47 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Prep</td>
<td>Meet with Rachel</td>
<td>Free prep</td>
<td>Meet with Rachel</td>
<td>Teach</td>
<td>Teach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Multiple teachers tell me that an enormous amount of reflection goes into the school’s schedule. Of course, it’s difficult to squeeze in enough time for instruction, enrichment, and teacher planning time, but every effort is made to make the schedule work for everyone. Decisions about scheduling are decided prior to the start of the school year by a committee of teachers who voluntarily join to figure out what each
school day should look like. (Principal Sanjay loves the committee system: “The more power you’re given, the more invested you are. We have a lot of committees here, and I invite the whole staff, and I’m always shocked at how many people want to sign up for these stupid committees!” he says jokingly.) Committees are in charge of creating proposals, and then the whole entire staff votes on every major issue—including the schedule—which Sanjay says is “really exciting. ‘Cause you never know...it’s kind of like congress.” Sanjay says this method ensures that the best decisions get made. He explains: “I have the ultimate trust in the teachers, that they’d want to do something that’s good for the kids. If they’re like, ‘I want to do readers and writers projects,’ then I’m like, ‘Yeah. Cool.’ Who else would I trust more than the people who are working with the kids in the school?”

So far, this year’s schedule is working for the most part. Adjustments may be made next year. To make the schedule run smoothly, Principal Sanjay relies on two staff members in particular: Jacob and Anthony. These two staff members are great at “the day-to-day stuff.” Jacob is an Assistant Principal, and he’s in charge of overseeing the grading system, co-managing the Dean’s office, coaching the math teachers, and dealing with coverages. Anthony is the Dean, and he’s in charge of coordinating testing, figuring out the special schedules for unusual school days, and coordinating the Advisory curriculum. He knows a lot about social-emotional learning, which helps him plan a solid Advisory curriculum and also put a special focus on restorative justice and peer mediation in the Dean’s office. One teacher spoke admiringly of Anthony’s work: “There is a well-developed structure around the dean’s office. It prioritizes facilitating conversations between students and teachers when relationships need work.”
I sit in on one of Mira’s meetings with her co-teacher Brian later in the school year. They’re sitting in Brian’s classroom, discussing plans for the upcoming week, how to get kids ready for the end-of-unit quiz, and the field trip to the New York Hall of Science in Queens (a trip they take every year). They’re trying to figure out how structured to make the trip. Brian wants to make sure it’s fun and the kids really get to delve in and experience the interactive museum. Mira wants to make sure some real learning takes place as they’re enjoying the museum. Mira explains to Brian, “The Hall of Science is really an opportunity to see if kids can apply what they learn...or recognize what they’ve learned. I’m going to be really blunt about this. If we do loosey goosey, then the kids are going to not take it seriously. But if we tell them this trip is going to be another assessment in addition to the quiz—” Brian interrupts. “But last year the trip sheet ended up interfering with the goal of the trip as opposed to enhancing it.” They discuss this for a while; eventually they agree on a modified trip sheet that will be simpler but still provide some guidance for when the students should be getting out of the trip experience.

It’s clear from their conversation that Mira and Brian want the trip to be fun but they want kids to get something meaningful out of it, too. Their discussion focuses on what would be best for the kids. In fact, all of the talk from teachers at School A is centered on what’s best for the kids. The staff truly loves the students, and they mention it a lot to me. At one point in late spring Mira told me: “I am pretty sure the student body here is the best bunch of kids in the United States. Possibly the world.” At the end of the school year, Jose divulged: “At my old school, the teachers MADE the school. Here, the students MAKE the school. They are diverse, high-level, and engaging.” Every staff member I informally speak to in the halls has something nice to say about middle
school kids: “it’s a privilege to work with them”; “it’s an honor to see them become who they will be”; “it’s the perfect age to ‘get them’”; “these are the kids I’ve been waiting to teach my entire career” are some of the comments from staff.

Maybe the reason the staff is so dedicated to young adolescents is because School A is careful about who they hire. Six to seven teachers form the hiring committee and they volunteer for that. The principal is also a member of the hiring committee but he’s “just a small voice,” he says. According to School A’s website, “The school’s rigorous hiring process combined with exceptionally low staff turnover has resulted in an extremely dedicated, committed, and intelligent community of educators who share a common vision.”

Another reason for the abundance of devotion to students could be that the leadership in the school is just as caring about the teachers, building a culture of compassion. Principal Sanjay trusts and believes in the teachers; the teachers trust and believe in the students. Sanjay says: “I enjoy the teachers, they’re funny smart people and I feel really honored to work with them every day, so it’s just like, I try to say that as much as I can, remind people of that as much as I can.”

This is not to say that School A feels overly sentimental or schmaltzy. Teachers reject the notion that they’re doing something noble and selfless by teaching middle school kids. There’s no sap to speak of. Instead, there’s humor. There’s teasing. There’s a lot of talk about how funny everyone is at School A. The principal teases teachers, the teachers tease the students. The school values humor. A sample of the instances of this is listed here:

- The principal joking about how involved the staff is: “I’m always shocked at how many people want to sign up for these stupid committees!”
• Mira telling her students that Malorky is a common last name in Kansas.
• Jose teasing the girl who asked if she could go to the bathroom: “I don’t know, can you?”
• Jose making fun of a student who mispronounced *porque*.
• The student’s math project on the wall where the student made fun of her own drawing, pointing out the “freakishly small hands” of the person she drew.

You also get a sense of School A’s emphasis on humor when you speak with students. They mention how *funny* the school is again and again. Here are some quotes from some students:

• “Being in this school is the best, because it’s very diverse. People get along very well. The teachers are great; they help you understand things perfectly. The school is small but very comfortable. The staff is great too. They are very *funny* and if you have a problem with something they will help you.”
• “School A is a *fun* school to be in. It’s a mix of different kinds of cultures. Everyone here is friendly. The teachers here are *funny*—even the mean teachers—but most of them are super kind.
• You meet plenty of new people and friends. The work is never too hard. It’s perfect for your level. It’s a *fun* school to be in. I don’t think you could ever find a better school than this school—end of story, period.”

In these descriptions of School A from students, it’s interesting to see how often they talk about *fun* in the same breath that they talk about how much teachers *help* them, like the two go together. And at School A, they do. There’s a nice rhythm. Teachers joke and tease and simultaneously pay close attention to helping all students succeed. There’s a real camaraderie between staff and students. The joking and teasing feels
good-hearted because it’s built on a foundation of trust between staff and students. The students appreciate the humor as well as trust that teachers will teach them well. Mira explained this phenomenon to me: “What works at this school is the culture around the relationships that teachers have with kids around here—communication, and from that comes trust. There’s an assumption of good will going both ways. That means safety. It means that kids can learn.”

On the last day of school at the end of June, a school-wide tradition cements the bond between all the adults and children at School A. It’s a Ribbon Ceremony. Students and staff congregate in the yard outside. (If it’s rainy, they do it in the auditorium.) Close to 400 students and all the teachers and administrators stand in one humongous circle. Each person is given a different color ribbon. Everyone ties their ribbon to the ribbon of the person on either side of them. Then, all at once, everyone screams: “SCHOOL A, WE ARE ONE SCHOOL.” It’s a simple but powerful tradition, confirming the unity of all the members of School A.

School B

School B is located in a six-story brick building in the middle of a bustling downtown neighborhood. The school is K-8, and there’s a high school that’s located in a separate building in a different part of the city. There’s under 400 students in the K-8 building, and about 40-45 students per grade.

Right in front of the school is an open, paved area with small trees and a few benches. From outside the entrance, the first floor library is visible on one side, with a wall of front-facing windows providing a glimpse into the space; rows of colorful books and small, student-sized tables and chairs are arranged neatly around the room. The
school entrance is a wall of glass, with a set of double doors leading into a bright and cozy little hallway. When you enter off the street, the front desk is off to the left, tucked in a corner. A maternal and smiling woman sits at the desk, welcoming students and visitors. Around the front desk are some cushioned benches. It looks homey; there’s a clock, a plant, a calendar of after school activities on the wall.

After signing in on the clipboard and filling out a nametag with School B’s logo on it, I take a small elevator up several stories, where it opens right into Earnest’s classroom. After teaching at a public school for a year, he received a prestigious citywide award for best new teacher. Shortly after, he began teaching at School B, and he’s been here now for seven years. Earnest has one Master’s in English education and one Master’s in literature and creative writing.

His classroom is only about 20’ x 20’, and it’s carpeted which makes it feel very small and cozy. It’s also bright and colorful; several walls have large pieces of beautiful gem-colored batik fabric tightly pinned up. There are five rectangular tables in a U formation opening at the front of the room. Four students sit at each table, all of them turned slightly to face the board. On each student’s chair is a ‘Seat Sack’; a cloth organizer that slips on the seatback and provides a little storage pouch for each student’s notebook and textbook. A back wall has a row of larger tables pushed against it and two teacher computers are placed there. Rows of half-sized lockers (in use, but with no locks on them) are set up around two walls of the room’s perimeter. At the front of the room there are three computers and two bookshelves and a Smartboard. With the lockers and the tables, there’s barely any room to walk around the outer edge of the classroom.
Students are looking at the Smartboard and copying three typed paragraphs about the Japanese poetry form called Senryu. The paragraphs begin: “Senryu tend to be about human foibles (quirks), while Haiku tend to be about nature. The primary difference between Senryu and Haiku is the tone.” It’s quiet as the students are copying. Some write with clean, type-like handwriting; others write in loopy cursive; some write sloppily, struggling to make it legible. Earnest is pacing near the back of the classroom. “Thanks for doing this during homeroom,” he says. He waits a few minutes. “Thumbs up if you’re done,” he says, scanning the room. Almost no one signals they’re done. “Wow, okay,” Earnest says. He waits a few more minutes. “Ohgoshdarn how we doin’?” he asks. Some students continue writing, but a few call out, “I’m done! I’m done already!” Earnest gives an exasperated half smile. He mimics the students in a high voice: “Oh me, oh me, I’m done, I’m done, I’m in first grade!” He shakes his head and lowers his tone. “If you’re done, you can go back and make sure you’ve copied the homework as well.”

A few students ask why I’m visiting the class today. Earnest explains that I’m here to observe for graduate school. Lest the students feel flattered by this, Earnest jokes, “I told her you guys are unremarkable, but she insisted!” Earnest stands behind a boy sitting at one of the far tables and pats his shoulder. The boy looks up at him, grinning. Students joke back with Earnest: “Oh, you’re so sweet,” and “You’re so nice, Earnest” they tell him, smiling broadly, oozing with sarcasm.

Then it’s back to business. “Put your pens down,” Earnest commands; “volunteers to read the board.” Earnest calls on a girl at one of the front tables, who reads the first paragraph about Senryu poetry in a clear and fluent voice. When she’s finished, Earnest says, “Hmm, help me out, I’m not that smart. What does that mean?”
He calls on a boy to explain it in more kid-friendly terms. The boy is small with brown hair and glasses. The boy says, “What it’s trying to say is that Senryu is more satirical than Haiku.” Earnest nods and squints his eyes. “And what IS satire, again? Can someone define that?” No one raises a hand. “What does ‘satirical’ mean?” Earnest prods. Many students look like they have it on the tip of their tongue but can’t define it.

Earnest claps his hands. “Let’s watch that video again!” he says. Using the teacher computer in the back of the room, he clicks on a file from his desktop and puts a short video clip up on the Smartboard. The class watches the video for several minutes. In it, a young man with a shaky handheld camera pulls a prank on his friend, narrating as he records the footage. He secretly tapes his friend walking across a parking lot. The filmmaker then remotely turns on a huge set of speakers he’s set up to emit extremely loud, jarring noises that sound like a very realistic car crash. When the sounds of the crash go off, his friend jerks his whole body and jumps high in the air, then scrambles around looking for the phantom crash. Meanwhile, his friend the prankster/videographer is laughing hysterically into the camera mic. The video ends.

“Why is this satire?” Earnest says. A student answers: “Because it’s making fun of something that’s actually pretty serious.”

“Good,” says Earnest. “A lot of America’s Funniest Home Videos are satire. Can anyone think of another example of that?” A student suggests a scenario where a woman falls into her wedding cake. A few more examples are volleyed around. When Earnest is convinced they all understand, he says, “May you always remember satire.” Earnest begins futzing with the computer to get a different slide projected on the Smartboard.
The focus of the students is momentarily broken when a student at one side of the classroom sees another teacher, an older African American woman, standing in the doorway. “Did you get a haircut?” the student blurts out. Other students turn to look. A few students echo the question and then there’s an outbreak of murmurs.

“Hey hey hey. I need to be able to look the other direction and have faith that you’re not going to take advantage of me. People, quiet down…” Earnest says.

Immediately the class is quiet again, looking at Earnest expectantly. There’s now a Senryu poem projected on the Smartboard:

Fly,

Be afraid!

No Buddhists in this house!

The class reads it. Earnest asks, “What does this mean?” Students turn and talk to each other about it, but the consensus is that they simply aren’t sure. “What does Buddhist mean?” Earnest asks the class. They’ve been learning about Eastern religions this year. A student volunteers: “It means someone who cares about peace and kindness.” Earnest nods; “Okay. Let me re-read the poem, and I’m going to replace the word Buddhist with the word peace.” He reads it. Then he says, “Turn to your table and figure this out.”

Immediately the students are loudly and animatedly talking about this for several minutes. Then Earnest brings the class back together and asks someone to explain. One student tries, but gets a little confused in the middle of explaining. “Oh, you lost me,” Earnest says, “remember, I’m not very bright. Someone else?” The original volunteer calls on another student. The student explains, “Buddhists think they should be peaceful with every living thing. So this person is saying, ‘fly away, little fly, there are NOT peaceful people here.’” The other students nod; they’ve cracked the meaning of
Men O Pause

The men suck in their guts

As a blonde walks by

Earnest says, “Lexi, what is this about?” Lexi answers: “I guess it’s about how men freeze and get nervous when a girl walks by.” Earnest asks, “and what’s men-o-pause?” A larger girl in the back answers, smiling: “Menopause is when you—” Earnest interjects: “Me?!” he says in mock horror, “When I what?” The girl rolls her eyes and chuckles. She tries again, more slowly: “It’s when a person, a woman, stops getting her period.” Another girl supports her answer: “It’s basically saying…it’s a play on words!”

The class seems to get a lot of satisfaction from this. There’s a playful aura in the room; there’s a clear appreciation for all things clever, witty, or sarcastic. It’s apparent in the way the class nods in approval over a complex play on words, and it’s also apparent in the interactions Earnest has with the students. It comes across when Earnest mocks them by imitating their eagerness and squeaking, “Ooh, I’m in first grade!” and when he jokes that they’re “unremarkable” students. Perhaps these comments could come off as mean or angry in a different context, but here they’re said with total love; they’re comments made with a pat on the shoulder, in a way that allows students to joke right back (“Oh, you’re sooo nice, Earnest!). In Earnest’s class, students are almost always smiling, and they’re almost always on the edge of their seats striving to understand the punch line or the double meaning. It’s an environment of intense and rigorous learning as well as humor and joy.
The lesson on the form of Senryu poetry is important because it typifies the way that social studies and English are integrated at School B. According to Earnest, every grade approaches these subjects with in same intertwined, thematic way, meshing literature and textual analysis with cultural studies. In every grade, the same teacher instructs social studies and language arts. This isn’t accidental, either. The curricular themes are set and repeated annually. Every year, the 6th graders learn about Medieval times; the 7th graders learn about Colonial times; and the 8th graders learn about the Civil War through the Civil Rights movement. There are certain texts (novels, biographies, nonfiction books) that are read every year in each grade, too, that match up with these time periods while simultaneously exposing students to various genres.

In addition to the humanities class, students also receive math, science, technology, gym, art, and a foreign language. They choose which foreign language they want to take at the beginning of middle school and will stick with it through 8th grade. Their choices are Spanish, Mandarin, or French. There’s also music class three times a week for 7th and 8th graders. Students can choose to put an emphasis on instrumental or vocal, with two of the three music periods in their favored area. There’s a middle school fall play and a spring musical for students in grades 6-8 to showcase their talents.

When I visit Earnest’s class on another day, I enter the classroom just as they’re transitioning between periods. Students are standing up, putting books away, and straightening their papers. Earnest is saying loudly: “You should be on line in 5, 4, 3, 2...” and the students are quickly shuffling to line up against two perpendicular walls of the classroom, everyone facing the exit at the corner. (The classroom is too small for them to make one long line or two side-by-side lines.) Earnest leads the way as one of the lines and then the other follows him out the door and down the stairs. On the first
floor, in the wide and long hallway, the students form one single file line. They’re standing outside the kindergarten classroom. They’re about to visit their kindergarten buddies. At the front of the line, Earnest looks back at the students and motions for the first half of the line to enter the kindergarten room. “One through ten, you can go. Stay in order,” he says, pausing before adding, “eleven through fifteen, you can go. Fifteen through twenty.”

The kindergarten room is big with high ceilings. There’s a lot of separate areas sectioned off: a block area, small tables and chairs, a big rug with an easel in front, a turtle tank, a sink, an art area, and a corner with low shelves brimming with pictures books. As soon as the twenty 6th graders enter, they find their little buddies and everyone sits down in the meeting area on the big square rug, facing forward. The little buddies mostly sit in the older kids’ laps, squirming and talking, happy to see their 6th grade friends.

The kindergarten teacher, a young woman with jeans, thick-framed glasses and long straight hair, perches on a stool at the front of the meeting area. “What are we going to do today?” she asks, adding, “Raise your hands.” She calls on a kindergartener and then nods and repeats what he says: “That’s right. We’re going to interview our buddies. Think about what you’re going to ask. Then go get your clipboards.” The kindergarteners scramble to their feet and trot over to the two white bins in the front of the room, where clipboards are stacked. Each clipboard already has a few sheets of plain paper fastened to it.

As soon as the kindergarteners have their clipboards, they go back to their buddy and take their hand, leading them to a place to sit. Some of the pairs spread out on the carpet, and some move over to the small tables. The kindergarteners start asking
their buddies questions and then do their best to either draw or write the responses they get. When one youngster becomes confused, his 6th grade buddy apologizes: “Oh, I’m just kidding, I’m sorry, I’m using too advanced words!” There’s lots of laughter and smiles; the older kids are amused, giggly, and patient all at once. One kindergartner boasts to his buddy: “My favorite food is cauliflower!” and his buddy high fives him. Another kindergartner asks her buddy who her favorite teacher is. The 6th grade girl replies without hesitation: “Definitely Earnest! He’s so funny. You’ll like him when you’re in sixth grade.” The atmosphere is convivial and affectionate.

The kindergarteners are interviewing their buddies with a purpose. They’ve been working on a unit called “School Study,” their teacher tells me. They’ve interviewed most of the staff within the building: maintenance workers, cafeteria workers, the receptionists, and the school nurse. There are photos of all of these staff members along with their interview answers taped on colorful posters around the class. Their middle school buddies are the last group of people they’ll interview for this unit. The goal is to become aware and appreciative of what all these people do.

When the kindergarteners are done interviewing their buddies, it will be snack time. The kindergarten teacher has laid out the snack on a little round table near the door. On a tray there is an arrangement of raw broccoli, carrots, string beans, cucumber, homemade fresh mozzarella, and pita chips. There’s also a very small pitcher of fresh orange juice and a stack of little cups.

The buddy system is a tradition at School B. Every year the 6th graders are paired up with the kindergarteners. They’ll keep their same buddy for many years, until the older buddies graduate from high school. Then the cycle repeats, with 6th graders always paired up with kindergarteners. Buddies meet about nine times a year. They do
fun activities together, like making gingerbread, decorating Valentine’s, and reading picture books. They sometimes meet to say hello before all-school assemblies as well. It’s a great system, especially because once it’s set up and in place, it almost runs itself. The kindergarten teacher and Earnest can stand back and let their students interact. They trust the kids to behave appropriately and learn from each other. They trust that it will be a meaningful experience for them and basically stay out of the way and let it happen organically. And it does, because big kids and little kids are unquestionably excited and amused by one another.

On another visit to School B, I sit in on an 8th grade Humanities class on the first floor, which is taught by Mandy, the English department chair. The class is comprised of 9 girls and 8 boys. The room is bigger than the 6th grade room upstairs. There’s a huge wall of windows on one side, which lets in plenty of mid-morning light. Clean white lockers (in use but with no locks) line two of the classroom walls. Student-decorated nameplates taped to each locker identify each one’s owner. The desks are arranged in a big circle, with students sitting facing in toward each other.

At the front of the room is a large whiteboard. On the right-hand side is a handwritten chart with two columns; one column is labeled ‘Late,’ the other ‘Absent’. Under ‘Absent are two student names: “Graham (coming at 1). Ophelia (on a trip).” On the left-hand side of the whiteboard is the agenda for the day. At the top is the date. Then it says, “Teach-ins are 7 school days away! You need: Recon test review sheet, HW, pencil. We will: Do HW check, file completed PSAs on server, be 100% sure proposal and script are on server. Materials check-in. Test prep continued.” The students have a big test coming up that will cover topics like Little Rock 9, the Civil War, Lincoln, slavery, and Reconstruction. (The teacher reminds them at one point: “On
your review sheet, you’ve got these terms. Is everybody clear it’s not enough to identify them? You also have to explain why it’s a big deal?

Mandy’s desk is up against the whiteboard in one corner, and her desk holds two computers and a class printer. Over her desk is a display of postcards and pretty photographs and flower magnets. A clock and a monthly calendar are posted at one side of the teacher’s desk. The classroom is carpeted, and there’s bright batik fabric pinned to several of the walls. Other than that, the walls are uncluttered and mostly bare.

Mandy, standing near the front of the room, says to the class: “I’m going to come around and check your homework. I need to make sure you have your materials. You can be on your laptop, checking your script, your proposal, and your PSA.” Every student has a laptop in front of them and they’re putting the finishing touches on a big project they’ve been working on for a long time.

The 8th graders theme for the year is ‘Choosing to Participate’. They’ve been talking a lot about choice, standing up for what’s right, and what makes a worthy cause. Right now they’re working on their social justice project, something the 8th graders do every year. Every student had to select a social justice topic from a list of 18 options the teacher provided, and then based on their interests they were placed in groups of 3, 4, or 5. (One student tells me: “One good thing about this project is that you get to work with people you might not always get to work with.”) Topics range from the death penalty, to human trafficking, to the Haitian education system, to eating disorders.

In their groups the students have to research their topic and plan an interactive “teach-in,” where they’ll educate the 5th-7th graders about their topic. They have to be prepared to teach two 55 minute sessions with ten 5th-7th graders in each session. It’s a huge undertaking and all the students have been working very hard on it. They can
remember coming to the teach-ins when they were younger to learn from the 8th graders, and now it’s their turn to teach. In their groups, each 8th grader has a role: technology coordinator, researcher, photo/video compiler, or editor. Assigning roles like this is one way to ensure that all of the necessary parts of the project get done. Mandy also has regular check-ins to monitor progress and has structured the assignment so that there’s no question about what is expected. She’s kept the countdown going on the board for a long time so that students are keenly aware of when they’ll be presenting at the big Teach-In.

I speak with one group whose topic is healthy food choices and how nutrition relates to socioeconomic level. For the simulation part of their teach-in, they’re going to put students into family groups and pass out different amounts of Monopoly money. Then they’ll pass out a menu with a mix of healthy and unhealthy food options with realistic pricing. Then they’ll have each family group make choices about what to buy based on the amount of Monopoly money they were allotted. One student in the group, Monroe, says the point is to get kids thinking about the cost of getting adequate nutrition. “A lot of families resort to unhealthy food because it’s cheaper,” he explains to me. His group wants to prove that it shouldn’t be that way and that healthy food options should be affordable for everyone. Everyone in this group is eager to present their findings at the Teach-In.

The Teach-Ins are only one way School B supports the development of problem solving skills and collaboration in all students. Every year, in every grade, there are exciting events built into the curriculum to do this. In 5th grade, students convert a classroom into an Egyptian tomb and gives tours. They also put on a Grecian festival with skits, music, and the re-telling of Greek myths. In 6th grade, the students put on a
Medieval Pageant after studying medieval Europe and the Middle East. The 6th graders also have a big poetry potluck every year where they can read their work and share their published poetry journals. In 7th grade, students convert their room to a Colonial Museum with interactive exhibits. Seventh graders also conduct a mock trial at the Federal Courthouse in downtown Manhattan. In addition, 7th graders have a Science Night and invite parents to view their science projects. All of these curricular traditions are events that are eagerly anticipated by students and faculty alike. “There’s always something to count down to or look forward to,” Mandy tells me.

Another important event at School B is the Mock High School Experience that’s put on every year. During this time, the middle school students visit the high school campus off site and pretend to be high schoolers for several days. First, they register for classes. There’s a fascinating array of mini-courses to choose from: aerodynamics, Japanese ghost stories, chemistry labs, and photojournalism, to name a few. Students are then placed in sections attend these classes in high school rooms. A mixture of middle and high school teachers instruct them. The teachers get to choose which course they’ll teach and they plan how it will go completely autonomously. Earnest leads the Japanese ghost story course, which I sit in on for several days. He invites his friend, who is an English PhD candidate, to come co-teach with him for the duration of the course. These courses are generally run like high school classes, with short lecture portions and lots of independent work mixed in with video clips, quick writing assignments, and robust class discussion.

It’s not just during the major projects or the Mock High School Experience that students at School B are expected to think deeply and express themselves intellectually. I sit in on a different 8th grade class in the early spring where this is evident. In this
class, the students are having an informal but complex discussion on politics and money. Specifically, they’re talking about what kind of person can become president, and if his or her economic status is a factor. There are only ten students, and they sit facing each other with the desks in a large U. There are many more desks than students, so everyone is fairly spread out. The teacher sits in the same manner as the students, at one spot in the U of desks.

One student says, “I feel like money is associated with power.” Another student points out, “If a politician is rich, it means they have more money for a campaign.” A third student adds, “I don’t think we would vote for a poor candidate.” The teacher asks, “Why wouldn’t we vote for a poor candidate? Is that fair? If you don’t have the money, you can’t afford to campaign?” A student counters: “We wouldn’t want a poor president. That’s not the American dream. We want to think if you work hard, you can do anything.” The teacher says, “People who have money typically run, people who don’t have money don’t run.” “True,” a student responds, adding: “This goes back to Occupy Wall Street and the purpose of that.” The conversation continues. It’s an in-depth and analytical discussion; students grappling with a complex issue and constantly refining their ideas about it.

It seems to me that at School B, students’ intellectual development is valued, and so they’re given many opportunities to learn complex material and express their opinions about what they learn. It’s nurturing and rigorous at the same time. The Middle School Principal says the school is driven by the question: “How is our work with each student relevant to his or her lived experience?” Indeed, a lot of attention and care is put into making the lived experience of each student rich and varied at School B.

With an integrated curriculum, annual projects and events embedded within it, and a
plethora of other activities and ways to get involved, School B ensures that it is relevant to students’ lives.

After school activities are also a big part of School B, and there’s a wide variety of offerings. It’s the fulltime job of two staff members to run the complex and multifaceted after school program. The purpose of after school is “a celebration of play,” which is highly valued at School B. There are three categories of after school; basic, enrichment, and one-on-one music lessons (for piano, guitar, or flute). Basic after school runs from 3-6pm, and includes an hour for homework, thirty minutes for snack, and the remainder of the time for “wacky games”. The younger kids are split up from the 3rd-6th graders. Enrichment after school is more specialized and encompasses athletic, creative, and academic subjects. Some examples include gymnastics, karate, yoga, filmmaking, and soccer. Guest teachers and specialists come in to teach these courses. After school programming takes place across many classrooms throughout the school building, and the offerings vary by day. Here’s a look at one semester’s after school calendar:
The vast after school offerings are a big draw for many students, but it’s not the only reason to love School B. In the late spring, I spoke with one 8th grader who transferred to School B this school year. Monroe used to attend a private school for students with learning disabilities (he has dyslexia). He’s very satisfied with his decision to transfer to School B. He says he feels more supported by the teachers here than he could ever have imagined. He explains: “Everybody’s really nice…it’s a good community. Teachers have a lot of time where they can meet with you, and everybody knows everybody. I feel like I’m at an appropriate level for me. It’s partly class size. But they’re also very dedicated to the children here. There are three teachers for every homeroom. Teachers are willing to give up lunch to meet with children. They’re very helpful.”

An 8th grader named Jordan thinks School B is great, too. She’s even quoted as saying so on the school’s website. Her reasons? She lists: great teachers, the community, positive interactions with peers, and the way the school gives her the confidence to be herself. Her friend and classmate Kristin concurs. Kristin points out the following benefits of being a student at School B: the high standards for all students (academic and personal), lots of goal setting, the opportunity to be your best self, lots of independence, and the “chance to dig deep” into every material and source.

The teachers love School B, too. Every staff member I speak with—in the hallways, classrooms, lunchroom, and library—describe how lucky they feel to teach at School B. One teacher describes it like this: “It’s a great place to teach. Your colleagues are smart and interesting, your students are, too—and it’s just a vibrant, dynamic community.” Teacher turnover is very low and commitment is very strong. Perhaps the best example of the professional commitment is the school director. She first started
teaching here almost 3 decades ago. Originally a young, part-time teacher trying to
decide what to do with her life, she stayed on at School B for a variety of reasons and
worked her way up to director. One of the biggest reasons she chose to make School B
her home for so many years is that she appreciates the caliber of the students and
faculty. She admires the way everyone approaches challenges at School B: “with energy,
wisdom, and humor.”

School A and School B: A Comparison

At School A and School B, teachers report strong or very strong professional
satisfaction (4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5). All of the teachers are perpetually busy and have
lots of responsibilities, but instead of feeling overextended, they demonstrate lasting
commitment to their schools. Both schools have a teacher turnover rate far below
average (around 10% for School A and a bit less for School B).

The main thing I found in my research is that in addition to their teachers’
robust professional satisfaction and retention, both schools are alike in terms of their
mission and their school structures. The mission-driven values lived out at each school
through curriculum, scheduling, school-wide traditions, and co- and extra-curricular
opportunities make space for two things: (1) humorous and joyful interactions between
staff and students, and (2) teachers’ dedication to their students and attention to
rigorous instruction. I will explain the connection between each part of this
interpretation now.

In their mission statements, both schools prioritize child development and
promote an understanding of kids as complex and unique individuals. Their mission
statements highlight four values that are remarkably parallel:
School A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High learning standards</th>
<th>Parallel to...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical behavior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
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</tbody>
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School B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic excellence</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service to community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent thinking</td>
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The mission statements are worded confidently, and the values they celebrate are experienced daily at each school due to the developmentally responsive structures in place. These structures lay the foundation for positive staff-student interactions and a strong academic program.

First of all, the purposeful curriculum and scheduling at School A and School B create an atmosphere of high standards and academic excellence. The structured, clear, and age-appropriate curriculum builds students’ sense of competence—and competence-building is one of the central needs of adolescence. Students at both schools describe the academic work as *just right*. (At School A, a student described the work as “perfect for your level,” and at School B, a student said contentedly: “I’m at the appropriate level for me.”) Students know what to expect and teachers know what to teach.

At both schools, the curricular themes and projects are planned out in advance and remain the same from year to year. The school websites provide a curriculum overview and parents are invited to a Fall Curriculum Night at both schools, where teachers explain what their students will be studying in greater detail. Both schools combine English and Social Studies into one core Humanities block, taught by the same teacher. At School A, the Humanities themes—by grade level—are: Ancient Greece & Egypt; the US Constitution: Rights & Responsibilities; and the 20th Century. At school B,
the themes are: Ancient Greece; Medieval Times; Colonial Times; and the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement. There are certain texts (novels, biographies, nonfiction books) that are read every year in each grade that match up with these time periods while simultaneously exposing students to a variety of genres and writing styles.

Specific art projects, festivities, and assignments are woven into these core Humanities classes every year. Both schools implement writing workshop and independent reading, but they also encourage imaginative thinking with broad, multi-step, thematic projects based on the year’s Humanities focus. For example, every year at School A students do a major project where they write an immigrant journal, assuming the role of an immigrant in the early 1900s. They also write and illustrate an Ode to the Nile River during their study of Ancient Egypt. At School B, students convert a classroom into an Egyptian tomb and gives tours. They also put on a Grecian festival, a Medieval Pageant, and a Colonial Museum with interactive exhibits. These are highly anticipated projects that the schools implement year after year. Both schools have found creative ways to make learning vivid and tangible. And these curricular traditions mean “there’s always something to count down to or look forward to,” as one teacher at School B told me.

School A and School B also emphasize civic responsibility and approach their studies from an ethical or community service-oriented perspective. School B has the annual 8th grade “Teach Ins” on social justice topics; School A devotes time to peer mediation and conflict resolution. Both schools have students carry out a mock trial at the US Courthouse in Manhattan, and both schools end the 8th grade year with a big educational trip to Washington DC to see the Capitol and the monuments.
Having such clarity about what content will be covered in each grade creates an environment where teachers have room to tweak, refine, and add to an already well-established curriculum. Teachers have a solid frame of reference for what to expect from their students every year. They also have a rich trove of material to draw from as they lesson plan, and a repertoire of higher-order thinking questions they can use to engage students. This makes room for students to exercise critical thinking. For example: Students at School A don’t just learn to write a five-paragraph essay; they learn to explain their philosophical approach to facing challenges in a five paragraph essay. Students at School B don’t just get an overview of Haiku; they compare this poetry form to the lesser-known and more satirical Japanese poetic form of Senryu. Both Mira and Earnest expressed great enthusiasm about pushing students to think independently. Having the general teaching topics structured and prearranged allowed them to dig deeper into the subject matter with their students.

With the curriculum in place, time is used resourcefully at both schools and the schedule is precise; the amount of total daily instructional time is actually lower at both schools than the New York City average of 6 hours. The instructional time at School A is around 5.25 hours and at School B it’s around 5.75 hours (not including lunch/recess time). This isn’t to say the students at Schools A and B are shortchanged; they have a lot built into their schedule, including Humanities, math, science, physical education, visual arts, language, and technology. School B also has drama and music. Advisory and homeroom are combined at both schools, so students have homeroom/advisory check-in for 10-15 minutes every morning and regular periods of extended advisory. Mindful of the added workload of middle school, there’s homework help built into the daily schedule. School A has optional “Period A” before school for homework help, from 8am-
9am. School B allows kids to stay up at lunch for homework help. Both offer daily after-school homework help, too.

Teachers at both schools want to prepare their students for life after middle school, and this involves giving them increasing autonomy—and talking a lot about high school. At School A, a lot of advisory time is devoted to preparation for high school; they have high school fairs, high school essay writing instruction, and conversations about independence and staying academically motivated. The advisory curriculum is planned and distributed by one of the school leaders. At School B, they take advantage of the fact that the school includes a high school located in a separate building. Middle schoolers visit the high school building to have a Mock High School Experience for a few days every winter. The focus on high school preparation is one way both schools promote high standards and academic excellence.

School-wide traditions and rituals are important at both schools, fostering a sense of excitement and community. Both schools post a monthly calendar of events online and at school. Every month there are many programs. For example, at School A the monthly calendar for October included an 8th grade Humanities trip to the tenement museum, a curriculum night for families, a comedy night, and a 6th grade trip to NASA. At School B, the monthly calendar for October included separate evening potlucks for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders and their families, a middle school curriculum night, a welcome breakfast for families of color, and a Saturday community service day at the park. Every month is this packed with annual family events and student trips.

Both schools have traditions in place that promote caring and respect for others—traditions that speak to the adolescent needs for relationship and fun. School A has the biannual Ribbon Ceremony ritual, where all students and staff stand in a huge
circle, tie their ribbons together, and shout “WE ARE ONE SCHOOL,” bonding everyone together into a cohesive group. School B creates a tight-knit school community with the buddy system, where upon entrance to middle school, students are assigned a kindergarten buddy, who they stay paired up with year after year until they graduate from high school. The classes get together buddies celebrate holidays, read books, and get to know each other. Once buddies have been matched, teachers essentially take a backseat and simply observe the students interact and learn from each other.

The co- and extra-curricular activities at each school also build relationship and fun. At both schools there are sports teams (soccer, volleyball, cross country) and affinity groups and clubs (like Gay Straight Alliance). Both schools make sure students have time to sit and do their homework before the after-school activities begin. Staff members, parents, and students at both schools go out to support athletic teams.

It’s evident that curriculum, scheduling, trips, and activities are firmly in place at each school. It’s also clear that teachers are effective within this organized system, and that the structure gives them room to focus on instruction and energy to nurture their students. The administration at each school applauds teachers for this focus.

At both School A and B, the administration puts a huge amount of faith in the teachers and gives them eager, public praise, which creates a culture of kindness and warmth. The Principal of School A, Sanjay, says: “I have the ultimate trust in the teachers, that they’d want to do something that’s good for the kids. Who else would I trust more than the people who are working with the kids in the school?” He adds: “I enjoy the teachers, they’re funny smart people and I feel really honored to work with them every day, so I try to say that as much as I can, remind people of that as much as I can.”
The Director of School B, Anna, also likes to remind people of how talented and excellent the staff is at School B. She praises the teachers’ “energy, wisdom, and humor” and calls them “impressive.” In her back-to-school letter to families, it’s traditional for Anna to acknowledge the professional development and independent projects that the staff worked on over summer break. She talks about each middle school teacher individually and highlights their accomplishments in curriculum development, research projects, graduate school coursework, and grant writing. She lists the educational workshops they attended and the trips they took.

Perhaps because teachers are publicly valued for their pedagogical expertise—and because they work within an effective organizational system that gives them the space to do their jobs well—they show a deep, authentic appreciation for their students. Each school has a congenial atmosphere and students and staff have a playful rapport. Teachers at both schools are passionate about working with middle school students. At School A, Mira told me: “Working with kids who are right in the middle of developing their identity as adults is a huge privilege.” And another teacher remarked: “these are the kids I’ve been waiting to teach my entire career.” At School B, Earnest was sarcastic at first, joking that his students are “unremarkable”—but then he excitedly shared details about his students’ medieval projects and proudly explained his students’ many accomplishments.

The teachers at both schools are funny, too, and definitely capitalize on students’ expanding understanding of humor (which is a natural part of cognitive development during adolescence). I think part of the reason there’s room for so much playfulness is that student behavior is respectful and considerate, and there’s very little tension between students and teachers. This seems to be because students feel confident that
their needs will be met in a variety of ways throughout the school day, and that there will be adequate time for fun, physical activity, and interaction. So teachers can pepper their lessons with good-natured, mischievous quips and sarcastic (but friendly) remarks, and students appreciate this without losing focus.

The main difference between School A and School B is the public/private dichotomy. This impacts the amount of resources at each school and the way that teachers are assessed. School B (the private school) brings fifth and sixth graders to an outdoor education center every year, and seventh graders to Williamsburg, Virginia. School A (the public school) used to have trips for every grade, but due to budget cuts they got rid of every overnight trip except the eighth grade one to DC. School B charges extra for some after-school programs like private music lessons and specialty classes. School A’s after-school programming is free, but they recently lost a large federal grant and had the partnering non-profit organization pull out, forcing them to run a modified schedule with fewer offerings than before. Another difference is class size: School B’s average class size is 20, and School A’s is 30. School B teachers are not bound by state exams and can take creative license with their lesson planning. Meanwhile School A teachers are inclined to worry about students’ state test scores, which may be used to evaluate their performance as teachers. However, they don’t let this stop them from teaching the rich and varied curriculum.

In conclusion, it is said that how time is spent determines what is truly valued. At School A and B, time is spent on enriching the lives and minds of the students—through the curriculum, scheduling, traditions, and co- and extracurricular activities that are well established and carefully orchestrated. Each school is busy and eventful, but in a meaningful and purposeful way—never haphazard, chaotic, or hectic. The
developmentally responsive structures make room for a playful mood and complex, high-level instruction. Able to focus on their craft and enjoy their cohesive school community, teachers are professionally satisfied and committed to their schools.
PART IV

Conclusions and Recommendations
Chapter 7

Summary of Main Findings

All of the school-wide structures at School A and School B add up to a strong and interconnected system that creates a deep sense of community. A comparison could be made between each school’s atmosphere of familiarity, camaraderie, pride, and tradition, and the similar atmosphere of a small town, church, synagogue, or summer camp. Akin to how those environments function, each school has a thoughtful order, a routine, and an array of annual events and programs that all work together to make the institution whole.

I believe teachers’ positive reports of professional satisfaction and commitment at School A and B are due to each school’s sense of community. Lee, Dedrick, and Smith (1991) conducted a study at the University of Michigan called “The Effect of the Social
Organization of Schools on Teachers’ Efficacy and Satisfaction.” They found that the strongest predictor of teacher efficacy was a sense of community within the school (Lee et al., 1991, p. 204). I think school structures build a sense of community, which in turn allows students to feel a sense of safety and primes them to be active and engaged learners. This creates a responsive environment for teachers to hone their craft and teach well.

Yale Child Psychiatrist James P. Comer put it perfectly in his article, “Child and Adolescent Development: The Critical Missing Focus in School Reform” (2005). Comer describes the importance of community and relationship-building at the school level:

Children grow along...developmental pathways, and they learn, in large part, through interacting with caretakers in reasonably good environments. In the process, they form emotional attachments, and they identify with, imitate, and internalize the attitudes, values, and ways of the adults and institutions around them. Through these relationships, students’ own unfocused and potentially harmful energies and biological potentials are channeled into the development of constructive attitudes and capacities that can prepare them for academic learning. We often forget that, for many children, academic learning is not a primary, natural, or valued task. It is the positive relationships and sense of belonging that a good school culture provides that give these children the comfort, confidence, competence, and motivation to learn. (p. 758)

In sum, when students are well-cared for by the systems and structures of a school, it creates a place where teachers can bond with students and do their jobs well. The bottom line is that it’s more enjoyable to teach in a community where students are
content and where their needs are guaranteed to be met by the structures and systems in place.

School A and School B are both places where students are having fun, being independent, acting as part of a community, and building their competence in academic, creative, and social arenas. The palpable sense of community at each school is present in the schoolwide traditions that build relationships and in the cohesive curriculum that energizes students and teachers alike. At both School A and School B, relationships with students are genuine and close. At School A, the staff go out to support the kids at athletic events and games. They have the biannual community-affirming Ribbon Ceremony. Staff members meet every single morning for 10 minutes to share information about their students. And at School B, 8th graders lead social justice-themed “Teach-Ins” for the younger middle schoolers. Middle schoolers have younger buddies that they meet with 9 times a year. At both schools, students project confidence in their school, describing it as fun, and the work as challenging but just right. This is no accident. At both schools, the curriculum is established and purposeful. Both schools have core humanities teachers who combine social studies and English instruction into integrated, thematic units. Both schools offer enrichment including art, technology, language, advisory, after school clubs and built-in field trips and overnighters. Students are proud of their accomplishments and teachers are proud of their students. Both kids and adults are motivated to work hard. Each school is an institution where a group of people with a common vision are constantly interacting in a mutually supportive way. The structure of each school is purposefully set up for this kind of positive interaction.

A frequent misconception is that progressive schools are laid back, relaxed, and unstructured. But this study found that these two effective progressive middle schools
have many, many systems and organizational structures in place. The structures are precisely what supports the students, fostering their healthy development towards responsible independence. Both School A and School B really function as a community—a community centered on the students. In this setting, teachers derive a great amount of professional satisfaction.
Middle schools must meet students’ developmental needs in order to create an environment where teachers can do their job well. It’s imperative for schools to focus on the four needs of young adolescence (perhaps needs that all of us have, no matter our age): relationship, competence, autonomy, and fun (Crawford and Haggedorn, 2009). In every school day, where and how are students getting those needs met? That’s a crucial question for school leaders to consider as they set up or redesign the systems within their schools.

When schools provide structures that give students a strong feeling of community, a growing sense of proficiency, independence, and happiness, those students are better able to learn and be motivated within each classroom. Responsive schoolwide curricula, scheduling, activities, and traditions are especially important in middle schools, where students are exposed to many teachers and classrooms within a larger school context, as opposed to the experience in elementary school, which is more
insular in nature and may to a greater extent be determined by an individual classroom teacher.

There are hundreds of middle schools in New York City, and ensuring that they all run smoothly and effectively is no easy feat. People offer various suggestions, and some ideas stick more than others. Recently, local and national policy makers have sought to hold individual teachers accountable for student achievement by putting punitive measures in place based on students’ state test scores. But policymakers should recognize that high levels of teacher dissatisfaction and rampant teacher turnover are hugely problematic right now, and adding public shaming to teachers’ woes is not a solution. Schools have to be allowed to build capacity and infrastructure, and that means retaining teachers. Teacher quality does matter, but context is important, too.

Middle school teachers will be most effective when they feel a strong sense of professional satisfaction and commitment to their school, and they will have that experience in an environment that is set up to meet students’ needs. Policymakers should shift the focus from changing teachers to changing schools. We will never staff every school with an above average teacher; some teachers will always be less effective, and for that matter teacher effectiveness may change from day to day or year to year. But what we can do is structure schools to support students’ cognitive and social development, so that the responsibility for each child is shared by the whole school community.
Chapter 9

Suggestions for Further Research

One idea for further research would be to conduct a similar study to this one but on a much larger scale. One could conduct a large-scale quantitative study with data collected from hundreds or thousands of schools to see if a statistically valid link between developmentally responsive school structures and teacher satisfaction could be found. Or one could conduct a large-scale qualitative study, perhaps imitating The Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching’s multiyear research project, which included three years of fieldwork and surveys at over a dozen public and private schools. With a comprehensive study like that, a team of researchers could go further in-depth to understand the impact of certain school structures on teachers’ experiences. In a large study—quantitative or qualitative—patterns would be more meaningful because they would be drawn from a broader data set. And in a large-scale study, controls could be put in place to decrease the likelihood that collected data would point to flawed correlations or results based on randomness or chance.
While conducting my research, I often found myself privately comparing the middle school where I used to teach in the Bronx to the ones I was researching. While my anecdotal comparisons did not make it into my final project, they got me thinking. Both of the schools I used in this study had developmentally responsive structures in place. They were both good schools, with low teacher turnover and lots of citywide recognition for being effective. The data and analysis might be richer if a school was included in the study that lacked effective structures or had been singled out as low-performing. That way, the different school environments could be compared. One could ask questions like: are schools without developmentally responsive structures less effective? In what ways? What are teachers’ experiences like at these schools? How do they compare to teachers’ experiences at School A and B?

It would also be interesting to compare students’ perspectives at middle schools with and without developmentally responsive school structures. One might look intensely into how school structures impact young adolescents’ conceptions of themselves as learners.

Lastly, over the course of my research I noticed that School A faced obstacles not experienced at School B by virtue of the fact that School A is public. At School A, budget cuts hindered some important structures like the annual grade-wide overnight trips and the after-school programming. And the importance of students’ state exam scores made teachers nervous about their interdisciplinary, project-based curriculum that was not all test prep focused like at some public schools. School B, an independent school costing over $30,000 a year, did not face these issues. So the question is: Is it always harder for a public middle school to carry out a progressive, developmentally responsive mission? If so, does it have to be that way? What would have to change for
public middle schools to be able to readily implement developmentally responsive structures with ease?
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

For Teachers

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. Why did you become a teacher? (Or: what’s your educational philosophy?)

3. Describe what it’s like to work with young adolescents/middle schoolers.

4. Why did you leave your last school to come to your current school? What are the best things about working at your current school?

5. Does your current school match your idea of what education should be and the roles students and teachers should play? Why or why not?

6. How committed are you to your current school on a scale of 1-5? 1 being not at all committed, 5 being extremely committed. Why?

6a. Can you envision staying at your school for a long time (3 more years? 5 years? 10 years?) Why or why not?

7. How would you rate your general professional satisfaction in your current position on a scale of 1-5? 1 being not at all satisfied and 5 being the highest rating of professional satisfaction. Why?

8. What is the overall culture like at your school?

9. Do most teachers at your current school seem committed to the school? Why or why not?

10. Are there school-wide structures or systems that make your job more enjoyable/easier?

11. Are students at your school typically engaged in learning or disengaged? Why?

12. Are there school-wide clubs and extracurricular activities for students? How does this influence student behavior/motivation/general outlook?

13. Are there any school-wide traditions, events or happenings that take place on an annual basis that students/teachers look forward to?

14. Does your school have any systems in place to acknowledge or praise students? If so, how does it work? Is it effective?

15. Do students have any choice about what classes they take? Electives, etc.

16. What is a typical day like for a student at your school? What classes do they have, when do they have lunch, when are they dismissed, etc. Does this schedule work well?

17. How does your school do parent teacher conferences/report cards? Do you like this system?
APPENDIX B
COPY OF PARTICIPATION FORM

Dear Educator,

My name is Elianna Lippold-Johnson and I am a graduate student at Bank Street College of Education. I am currently conducting research for my Master’s thesis and I will be acting as the principal investigator for this study. The goal of my Master’s thesis is to investigate the experiences of middle school teachers in different school settings.

I am interested in learning about how your strategies and perspective have evolved and developed. In addition, I am interested in examining how different teaching environments affect your experience and the experiences of your students. As a participant in this study you will be asked to allow us to observe one of your classes once a week for the duration of the 2011-2012 school year. I also hope to interview you to gain a stronger understanding of your experience. The information that I gather from observing your classroom will provide me with insights that will be used to help understand how different schools are supporting students.

Please note that if the data that I collect about your classroom is included in the thesis, then your name will be changed to protect your privacy. Please also note that the Master’s thesis will be placed in the stacks of the Bank Street Library and will be available to all Bank Street students and faculty; the document may also be circulated to others outside of the institution.

Please sign on the lines below to indicate that you have given permission for us to visit your classroom and for the information that we gather during the visits to be used for the purpose of this study. Please also indicate whether you agree to be interviewed for the purpose of this study.

Thank you for taking the time to consider helping us with our study. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at eliannalj@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

Elianna

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I understand that Elianna, Master’s Degree Candidate at Bank Street College of Education, is studying teachers in different school environments for her Master’s Thesis.

Teacher’s name: _____________________________________________

I give my permission for my classroom to be observed for the purpose of this study.

Signed: ____________________________________________________ Date:_________________

I consent the use of my voice to be recorded and transcribed for the purpose of this study.

Signed: ____________________________________________________ Date:_________________