California State University

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# MORE THAN A NUMBER: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HIGH-STAKES EDUCATION AS EXPERIENCED BY STUDENTS.

A DISSERTATION

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By

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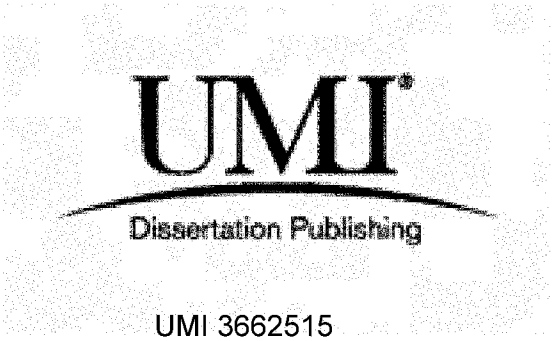





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## ABSTRACT

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explores what students experience and how students experience the phenomenon of high-stakes testing (HST) education. The research aimed to add to current research the missing voices of students and to explore the need to include the social–emotional impact of education in the narrative of HST education. The study's intent was to help educators comprehend the full spectrum of the impact HST education has on students and the role that educators and other stakeholders play in creating that experience.

The study includes a comprehensive understanding of how students of today consider passing a test and learning are one and the same by examining how students position themselves as consumers of education over creators of their education. Moreover, the research examines how values and beliefs of the school affect students' outlook on education. Finally, a critical review of how HST phenomenon denies low-performing students real opportunity. This research validates the idea that standardizing learning and its results are fundamentally flawed if the intent is to create real opportunity for all students. The study concludes with practical recommendations to help reestablish school ideals and real opportunities for all students.

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To my husband, Ramon, who is the most centered man I know. Thank you for your unwavering support and for keeping my personal flowers in full bloom.

To my older children, Sara and Esteban, who both enjoyed teasing me when I was stressed out of my mind with school deadlines. You are both rock stars, and I thank you both for helping me out with the twins more than you should have during these past three years.

Finally, to my twin boys, who have grown up with a mom who had a computer or book attached to her hand for what may seem to them all of their lives. I can't wait to be a more present mom for you.

The journey has not been easy, but it has been a journey worth taking.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All my life, I have felt like I needed to learn how to live in two worlds: my home and family world that spoke Spanish and honored traditional Latino ideals, and my outside world that spoke English and had a myriad of cultural rules and norms that made me feel like an outsider looking in. It was not until I became a teacher that I fully realized the extent of how complex being a Hispanic woman in education really is. When I decided to make my life's work education, this tricky navigation between the two worlds became increasingly challenging and essential for me to understand. I remember needing to learn many little things about what it meant to be a professional in a middle-class environment. Things that may seem silly to some were constant reminders for me that I was weaving and bobbing between two realities.

Over the years, I have developed a deeper appreciation of who I am and a stronger sense of pride, but it has been an arduous journey and it has been a journey that I have not made alone. I would like to acknowledge the people whom I met along the way who have been earnest and truly understanding of my learning curve as a Hispanic women in education. As Antonia Darder and Lisa Delpit, two seminal scholars and advocates for social justice, have taught me, we must understand the dominant culture in order to participate in it.

The following people have helped me learn the dominant culture; and thus, they have helped me to live successfully and happily in two worlds. This

acknowledgment is not a bitter statement of how things work, but a sincere expression of gratitude for those who helped me along the way.

My first principal, Vicki Rusick, and assistant principal Julie Helm, opened the doors of opportunity for me and supported me when I was my greenest. My colleague and friend Karen Beliakoff always made me feel like I belonged both in the classroom and her hometown of Minnesota. My colleague Jim Gillespie shared his gift with words with me by proofreading all my rough drafts for my dissertation while never holding my errors against me. My esteemed colleague Karen Warzybok cultivated my advocacy and passion for equitable education and helped me find my place in education; and my doctorate partner in crime Heidi Chipman accepted me completely from day one.

Last and certainly not least, I would like to acknowledge my chair Dr. Daniel Choi, a man who practices what he preaches. His advocacy for second language learners and true equitable education is what made this Mexican girl a doctor in education. I always felt that Dr. Choi was confusing me with someone else who was smarter and more capable. He stretched me academically and made me believe that what I had to say mattered and needed to be heard. Dr. Choi proves that professors can play a huge role in changing the landscape for minority students engaging and succeeding in higher level education. I pray that everyone who pursues a college degree is fortunate enough to meet their own version of my chair and mentor, Dr. Choi. This dissertation is a reality because of his belief in me.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The implementation of high-stakes testing (HST) has established some common practices throughout California schools. These practices are most recognizable in when they take place: before, leading up to the day HST occurs; and after, following HST. Of course, some practices, such as replacing an elective with an academic support class, can be seen as both a consequence of a previous HST performance as well as a remedial measure for the test that follows. However, other practices, such as motivational assemblies and testing score accolades, are categorized as post-HST practices. Some HST education falls under pretesting categories—for example, culture building activities centered on incentives and routines and rituals promoting a school environment—yet others fall under post-testing categories, such as the wide varieties of intervention services low-achieving students are required to receive. The reality is that, although much attention is given to HST performance outcomes, insufficient attention is given to the impact these practices have on how students experience education under HST.

These practices that place all the attention on HST targets rarely consider how student perception may be impacted by the above experiences. The impact on perception and how individuals experience that impact are not adequately researched. Research examining the impact of HST must go beyond numbers

and performance. Research must include the essence of being educated under high-stakes accountability as perceived and experienced by students who are directly affected by the phenomenon.

Therefore, this study examines such student experiences by giving a voice to students who are educated under HST accountability. Chapter 1 introduces the scope of the dissertation by providing the background of the problem and the problem statement.

## Background of the Problem

The emphasis on HST has resulted in a very specialized education. It is an education guided by specific goals set by federal policies, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). When translating policy into practice, the current priorities of schools in California are fixed on test performance. The climate and culture created in most schools across the state is linked to increasing performance. Along with incentive programs, many other pretesting tactics, strategies, and campaigns are priorities for school leaders. Such is the case at Sand Dollar Middle School (SD; a pseudonym), the site selected for this study. The school is located in an urban city southwest of Los Angeles, California. The demands of accountability through HST have adversely affected what is prioritized or considered when making decisions about learning. For example, in the area of curriculum, year-long interventions aimed at increasing the focus of testing success have become a scheduling priority both before and after testing. Teachers, known as interventionists, rotate among clusters of other teachers to work with small groups on tested concepts leading up to and following testing.

Schools like SD also maintain HST scores as top priority. State mandates require schools like SD to plan a school year centered on meeting state performance goals. For this reason, SD spends most of its time, money, and effort on HST campaigns. For example, each year, folders that include HST performance ranks are distributed to students. These personal testing portfolios show performance by way of color graphs. Teachers are expected to spend class time explaining the difference between a yellow, green, and dark green bar graph. In addition to performance portfolios, assemblies and announcements are part of efforts to increase HST awareness and motivation. The above practices are responses to state and federal policies on how we should educate. Teachers are expected to follow any recommendations regarding HST performance without deviation.

With this much attention (and funding) placed on meeting achievement score targets, very little, if any, attention is directed toward what other impact HST has on students outside of raising test scores. Alfie Kohn (2011) questions why so many schools under HST fail to include any conversations on how we can provide a well-rounded education that extends beyond HST and beyond intellectual growth. Kohn argues that more time and resources need to be dedicated to noncognitive issues (2011, p. 8). For over a decade, since the implementation of NCLB, practices responding to policy have been evaluated only by testing performance. These practices form the phenomenon of HST education. Outcomes of HST education are typically based on academic data provided by the tests. Examining practices to determine other effects it may have

on students by asking students how they experience HST education is rarely, if ever, explored.

Interventions are one of the posttest (but also pretest for those who are identified as at-risk for low achievement) ways that students experience a HST-based practice. At SD, 33% of students are receiving some type of intervention based on HST. This percentage has remained about the same for the past three years (anonymous personal communication, 2013).

The interventions at SD are practices that involve changing student schedules to better address HST performance and that probably have additional impact besides affecting test scores. This cannot be known fully without including student voices regarding HST. According to Hoffman and Nottis (2008), omitting the perspective of students is counterproductive to the goal of helping students succeed in HST and as students in general; "Adolescents can talk about their own school culture and their feeling surrounding it. . . . Students' voices rather than adults' intuitive sense alone should guide the use of strategies during HST." (p. 211). Limited research exists that asks students their perspective of HST education. Moreover, HST education as experienced by students is seldom a factor in deciding the effectiveness of the strategies implemented to increase academic performance. Consideration of student stories can reveal what impact, outside of the cognitive, such policies and practices have on students.

Recent studies (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Mickelson, 1990; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995) posited that when examining the impact HST has on student motivation and effort, minority students, who are the students

often targeted because of "preexisting characteristics," often sustain or learn school apathy within school. A study that explores what students know about what they know regarding their behaviors and their feelings is the first step in including student perspectives in the HST narrative. Such a study is considered phenomenological, and it is the approach used in this study.

At the core of any phenomenological study is examining the "lived experiences of persons who have a common shared experience of a phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2013 p. 58). In developing the essence of the experiences and perspectives culled from the phenomenon, such studies have the potential to dispel or confirm generalizations and suppositions regarding students and education in a HST climate. For example, little is known regarding the impact of academic constructs on the development of the certain behaviors. Studies by Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009); and Teven (2001) confirm the importance of teacher–student relationships and their effect on learning motivation and self-efficacy. A study by Hong, Shull, and Haefner (2011) refers to this teacher–student reciprocity phenomenon as "dynamic interaction" (p. 290). Understanding the shared experience among many different students can add to the understanding of how teachers add or deplete opportunities for self-development as perceived by students.

Insufficient research exists on the impact of HST outside of testing performance. This study aimed to examine the noncognitive impact the phenomenon of HST education has on students.

## Problem Statement

In education, HST has received a lot of attention and money. Schools across the state have reformed school procedures to respond to the HST accountability. As mentioned earlier, these responses are typically either practices that occur before the HST or practices that occur following the results of HST. Over the many years of HST, teachers like myself have been concerned about the impact that these HST practices have had on students beyond what we can measure only by test scores. How students think about their learning, how and what they learn, and their outlook on learning, under this era of HST practices are not well understood. If these HST practices have been damaging to students in nontested ways, the extent of that damage, it seems, is not well understood. The following research, however, seems to suggest there has been some damage.

Intervention is an example of one of those post-HST responses that involve classes before, during, and after school, to address poor test performance. Students often stay in intervention tracks for several years. This response to HST accountability results in over one third of the SD student population experiencing middle school void of electives for their entire middle school experience (anonymous personal communication, 2013). Students across the district and the state are being excluded from class selection. Instead, schedules are formed based on HST performance.

A study by Wentzel (1993) underscores the importance of examining the experiences of students to determine the impact HST may have beyond academics:

> Interventions designed to promote the development of socially responsible behavior at school often result in higher levels of academic performance. However, interventions designed to promote academic achievement do not seem to lead to corresponding increases in socially appropriate forms of classroom behavior. (p. 362)

Studies like Wentzel's posit that focusing on only academics, which translate to how well students perform on HST, results in excluding other important factors that contribute to successful, equitable education for all students. Recent studies continue to support the need to research noncognitive impacts of HST education.

An intriguing body of research has recently emerged regarding the importance of helping students develop an awareness of their mindsets (Dweck, 2006). This research perspective can be useful for understanding the impact of HST practices from a student perspective. For example, students can hold very different perceptions of what exam scores mean. Some students will feel they are being judged based on their performance, yet other students will feel the performance is feedback to measure how they are learning and what they have not yet learned. The research is clear in showing that students can experience the same event as an opportunity to learn and grow or an opportunity to be judged and shamed. Dweck (2006) refers to this distinction as having either a

"fixed mindset" or a "growth mindset" (pp. 6-7). Understanding the internal monologue of most students can help stakeholders improve the experience of the phenomenon by including deliberate dialogue and instruction on viewing intelligence and talent as malleable (Dweck, 2006).

Equally intriguing and related to importance of studying the internal monologue of students is the work of Angela Lee Duckworth (2013), who has linked Dweck's research on mindsets to her research on the importance of developing "grit" for increasing student achievement. Duckworth, a practitioner turned researcher, stresses the importance of continuing to research how to develop grit in students because, she states, "grit is usually unrelated or even inversely related to measures of talent" (Duckworth, 2003, trans. 3:26). In her research, which included thousands of high school juniors from Chicago public schools, Duckworth concluded "one characteristic emerged as a significant predictor of success . . . it was grit" (Duckworth, 2013, trans. 1:47). Grit is defined in the study as the stamina to keep learning even while experiencing setbacks (Duckworth, 2013). What both Dweck and Duckworth expound is the importance of examining and developing nonacademic traits within students. Research must inquire if students perceive that failure is not a permanent condition. All stakeholders in education need to consider the nonacademic student-shared experience of HST accountability. The impact of such limiting curriculum aimed only at improving performance on high-stakes tests, must impact student perceptions of academics as well as impact students' nonacademic perceptions.

The extent of the impact, or if the impact is perceived as negative, is currently not sufficiently researched.

Exploring how students interpret practices surrounding HST has the potential to help educators experience education through the eyes of students. Are practices and strategies aimed at increasing test performance impacting students in negative ways? If they are, can we shift, or change some of the practices to eliminate the negative impact? Currently, no research has been done to help answer these questions: The answers are found within student perceptions. Until we ask students in what ways they have experienced and been impacted by HST education, we cannot claim to know the full impact of HST.

A recent report describes the importance of examining student perceptions under the recent nomenclature in education of educating 21st century learners: "Mindsets can have a powerful impact on academic performance, in general, and in particular on how students behave and perform in the face of challenge" (Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall, 2013, p. viii). Understanding, how students experience HST education phenomenon is considered in the report as a "critical factor for the success in 21st century education" (p. 1). The relevance of this recent report to this phenomenological study cannot be overstated; however, discussing all the salient points exceeds the scope of this dissertation. It is important to note that this report strongly supports that research should not only explore content knowledge but must also include noncognitive research to identify universal experiences of our current practices in education. According to Conrad (1992), "the central dynamic of

education is not institutional or structural, but is interpersonal" (as cited in Hong et al., 2012, p. 302). Few studies examine the interpersonal communication between students and teachers. Even fewer studies explore students' perceptions about how they experience communication with teachers in a HST environment. Phenomenology centers on communication and seeks a better understanding of what participants perceive and experience (Van Manen, 1990). In education it is common practice to ignore the perspectives of the participants most affected by school policies: the students. Phenomenology allows researchers to study what Van Manen (1990) refers to as "children's realities or lifeworlds" (p. 2).

The impact of HST intervention beyond academics is a critical and logical next step in this area of research. Without this research, effects that extend beyond cognitive are not being considered when we evaluate the impact of HST education. As HST continues to define success, students who are not performing as expected on the test can expect some form of HST intervention and a carrot-and-stick approach to motivation. More attention in the form of research must be placed on what effects HST practices are having on students and what shared experience is relevant to understanding the impact beyond academic. With all the money and training that has gone into intervention, one would expect significant results; however, gaps continue to widen and low-performing students are assigned to days of drudgery with no hope of change. In addition to dismal outcomes of HST interventions, little has been investigated on noncognitive experiences HST intervention has generated.

## Purpose Statement

This research aims to add to current research the missing voices of students. The purpose of this study is to identify the essence of students' shared experience of HST education. Patton (1990) defines essence as "commonalities in the human experience"(p. 107). Stated another way, the essence refers to unity or similarities within the shared experiences. The shared experience is the phenomenon of HST education.

The HST performance-based reform demands that great attention be given to students who are not showing adequate achievement. For many schools across the state, greater attention has resulted in intervention classes. A general perception held by intervention teachers and the faculty at large is that students in intervention come in with negative behaviors that prohibit or delay the academic process. However, no thought is given to how teachers and intervention placement may be affecting students' perceptions and overall school success. A substantial body of research exists correlating teacher perceptions of students and their effects on student achievement (Bandura,1997; Noddings, 1984; Wentzel, 1993, 1997). Further research should include studying how participants determine the effect the phenomenon had on their "lived experience" (Moustakas,1995) .

More specifically, the purpose of this study is to examine HST education beyond the academic and into the lived experience. This study attempts to reduce speculative thought regarding what students know about themselves or their consciousness and why they may feel the way they feel about HST

education. Van Manen writes, "we should listen to the language spoken by the things in their lifeworlds and to what things mean to [their] world"(p.112).

The findings in this study could be the basis for reforming current practices under HST. It will bring in the missing voices of the participants and help all practitioners gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of education under HST.

## Research Questions

Although the questions center on common practices under HST, the answers sought are those that address the impact beyond higher test scores. These questions examine the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of students who have been directly affected by high stakes performance accountability.

1. What is the essence of HST education, as experienced and perceived by seven middle school students?
2. How do students position themselves in the phenomenon?

## Definitions of Key Terms

*High-stakes testing (HST)* refers to any assessment tool where advantages and disadvantages are attached to the performance of the test. For example, when test results affect placement, program participation, promotion, graduation, or opportunity it is high stakes (Sutton & Seifert, 2009)

*HST intervention* refers to any remedial class designed for students who did not meet performance goals on a standardized test (Sutton & Seifer, 2009). Intervention often takes the place of arts, recess for young children, electives, or other activities that promote social and moral learning (Kohn, 2011).

*Noncognitive outcomes* refers to perceptions of self that, for the purposes of this study, are the students' perceptions and how they experience the phenomenon of HST education.

## Scope of the Study

This study will include the voices of students whose only experience and interaction with education has been under High Stakes Testing policy. All participants were in the same school site and in the same grade level. Students were expected to be honest throughout the process and were promised complete anonymity.

### Assumptions of the Study

Within the study certain suppositions needed to be accepted. The first assumption of the study is that students would be transparent and genuine throughout the interview process. Although trust between the interviewer and interviewee was considered vital to the outcome of the conversations, trust could not be measured nor evaluated. Therefore, certain assumptions needed to be taken in regards to the interactions between the researcher and the participant.

### Study Delimitations

This study is delimited to students involved in high-stakes interventions or other setting as a result of HST. Because the research was restricted to certain stakeholders, the results may only be generalized to stakeholders within that group. The study is also delimited by scope and size of the study. An exemplar approach was taken in this study to maintain realistic and manageable research

groups. Fewer interviews were collected than possible in an effort to maintain time-bound parameters.

### Study Limitations

Limitations of the study include a natural occurrence of inconsistent interpretations of what intervention means. Every school within Sand Dollar District must respond to HST results in the form of intervention; however, much autonomy exists within the district regarding curriculum choices for intervention. What all intervention programs do have in common is that they all narrow the curriculum in response to high-stakes performance. Though the approach to HST intervention is impossible to control, the research is not focused on how the intervention affects students academically but rather on how it affects students nonacademically. Regardless of differences of approach, most schools view intervention in the same student-deficit approach. This research seeks to determine the essence of HST education as experienced by students.

## Organization of the Dissertation

This chapter provided the background to and purpose of the study as well as the research questions, definitions of terms, and limitations of the study. Chapter 2 presents the literature and conceptual framework. Chapter 3 provides the methodology, including the specifics of the transcendental phenomenological approach taken in this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, while Chapter 5 contains a summary and discussion of the findings, followed by recommendations.

# CHAPTER 2

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter provides both a theoretical foundation and a conceptual framework of this review of the literature. The theoretical foundation includes leading exemplars of critical theory with an emphasis on critical pedagogy. The conceptual framework includes relevant components of social cognitive theory (SCT). The scholars presented in this chapter and the theories they represent are to be viewed as a comprehensive framework on which the study's interpretations will be based.

Following the theoretical review, the conceptual framework will discuss the literature as three separate literary structures that are clusters of key ideas within the research. The three primary literary structures are based on motivational and behavioral research, cultural and environmental research, and interventional research. The conceptual framework ends with literature that supports and expounds an argument for immediate urgency and attention to the implications of this research.

The figure below illustrates how the theoretical foundation works toward a comprehensive, critical analysis of nonacademic outcomes of HST. The chapter will end with a summary and a look at the implications of the study.

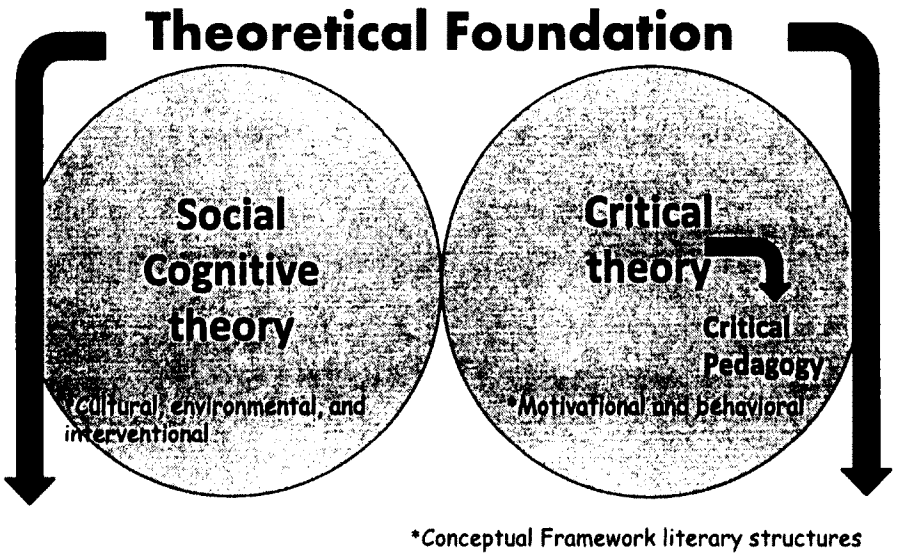


*Figure 1.* Relationship between theories in this study.

Sections of the conceptual framework are written below the theoretical framework and listed within the theory that best supports the content. Critical pedagogy emerged from critical theory but is distinct and, therefore, is addressed specifically in this framework.

## Theoretical Foundation

Sir Ken Robinson, an international advisor on education, speaks directly to the principle that students are naturally different and diverse and that both NCLB and HST promotes conformity over diversity: "What schools are encouraged to do is to find out what kids can do across a very narrow spectrum of achievement" (Robinson, 2013, trans. 4:20). These ideas reflect the critical perspective portion of this study's theoretical foundation.

This study, therefore, is constructed with a critical theory worldview with focus on the strands of critical pedagogy and social justice. Moreover, the theoretical foundation for this research also includes the foundations of SCT. Separately, each theory holds specific ideals regarding students' best interest; however, collectively the theories create a comprehensive framework that serves as a litmus test in determining the impact of educational decisions. Before the research synthesizes both theories, it is important to discuss each one individually.

Bronner defines critical theory as a "theory [that is] always concerned not merely with how things were but how they might be and should be" (2011, Kindle ed., location 423). Morrow and Brown add to this definition by emphasizing that a critical theory lens is one through which one investigates social assumptions and their implications for human beings that are affected differently because of race, class, or gender (as cited in Creswell, 2013). In education, these social assumptions are so deeply entrenched in how we educate that they often go unchallenged. Bourdieu (1977) states that we live out everyday activities without noticing the way we interact are deliberate, meaningful, and even expected behaviors from our social groups. Some of the assumptions speak directly to HST and include how we view achievement under an increasingly narrowing curriculum. Such HST education does not acknowledge what students are experiencing and perceiving alongside the intended curriculum. Equally important to include are the assumptions behind the identification of those who need intervention to help remedy the academic deficits based on HST ranks.

These assumptions are a result of education accepting a "one-size-fits-all" curriculum: It is a curriculum that is continually challenged by scholars, such as Berliner and Biddle (1995), Kohn (2011), and Robinson (2013) to list a few.

In concert with critical theory, critical pedagogy theory further examines the impact explicit and implicit decisions have on students, especially the most vulnerable. The absence of developing thinkers over test takers is what critical pedagogy advocate Freire (2000) termed *dehumanizing* the curriculum. Freire challenged current practices and demanded a more humanizing pedagogy for students, regardless of race, class, or gender.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire describes humanizing pedagogy as a revolutionary approach to instruction. He defines humanizing pedagogy as a process whereby education "ceases to be an instrument by which teachers can manipulate students, but rather expresses the consciousness of the students themselves" (2000, p. 51).

Critical pedagogy provides the necessary framework to bring to the surface clandestine social practices in education, while also providing a critical lens to help in discussing seemingly transparent goals under education reform.

Ultimately, a critical worldview is a powerful lens of analysis. It allows the researcher to unveil, critique, and transform social inequalities and oppressive institutional structure through the process of political engagement and social action (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, as cited in Lightle, 2011). A critical worldview provides the perspective necessary to challenge the accepted practice of HST campaigns that, arguably, neglect the impact it has on students when it

categorizes their achievement exclusively on test performance. The theoretical framework that centers on critical theory and critical pedagogy must include as part of its theoretical framework a discussion on the idea of social justice.

John Rawls argues that inequality is acceptable only if it is to the advantage of those who are worst-off (1971, as cited in Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011). Social justice as defined by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1999, as cited in Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011), proposes a society in which justice means fairness. Fairness, according to Rawls is a society where equity means an "[un]equal distribution of 'primary goods,' which includes liberty, opportunity, income and wealth . . . if the unequal distribution advantages those who are least favored" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 10). Rawls's ideal of justice as fairness, and fairness as not to mean equal distribution of goods, is one of two guiding principles that speaks to the purpose of this research. The second is the idea that no citizen should be favored or disfavored because of traits that were afforded to them before birth. Rawls precepts to seek fairness as a means of establishing justice among all people regardless of gender, social class, ethnicity, and perceived abilities, describes critical tenants of critical pedagogy.

Critical theory and critical pedagogy are part of a set of paradigms that help create what Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) names "the ethic of profession." This ethic of profession allows people in education to "access a more advanced set of tools for decision making in school" (p. 8), which keeps students' best interests at the center of decision making. This study, then, also has practical applications for the practitioner. In particular, it speaks to the challenge of

scrutinizing education under HST and asking which set of supports for those who are underperforming has resulted from HST practices and to what end are they impacting all students? Finally, critical theory and its tenants of social justice and critical pedagogy help us reveal practices veiled as opportunities and question if they are in the best interest of students.

Whereas critical theory and critical pedagogy examine and challenge the dehumanizing of pedagogy, SCT addresses the affective and behavioral outcomes in students, which stem from people in education and educational praxis. Including SCT in the research allows for an analysis of actions and behaviors surrounding HST practices and links to Freire's work on humanizing pedagogy.

Bandura's seminal work on SCT completes the this theoretical foundation. According to Bandura, "SCT emphasizes that learning occurs in a social context and that much of what is learned is gained through observation" (as cited in Denler, Wolters, & Benzon, 2014). SCT includes important concepts to be used in this research, such as observation learning modeling and self-efficacy, which will be explained in the conceptual framework discussion. The connection between students' sense of self-efficacy and academic achievement are well supported and researched. A recent research draft sponsored and prepared for the U.S. Department of Education states "Compelling evidence from a variety of sources suggests that mindsets can have a powerful impact on academic performance in general, and in particular for how students behave and perform in the face of challenge" (Shechtman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall, 2013,

p. 23). Social cognitive theory provides the framework to explore the unexamined effects of what students are observing or experiencing in their own words. Students are rarely given the opportunity to sit and discuss their lifeworlds. Social cognitive theory establishes why asking students what is observed and how they have interpreted what is observed is a critical inquiry when studying human experiences.

## Review of the Scholarly Literature

This study begins to explore the gap in research that exists in correlating the noncognitive outcomes with HST procedures. Moreover the study investigates the importance of acknowledging the impact social cognitive theory tenets can have on what Horkheimer, a seminal critical theorist, defines as "'human emancipation' in circumstances of domination and oppression" (as cited in Bohman, 2013). These two theories in community provide the appropriate lens through which education under HST phenomenon may be better understood and challenged.

### Conceptual Framework

The three literary structures represented in this research are literature on motivation and behavior, culture and environment, and HST and intervention. Because HST and intervention are central to this dissertation, the section is further divided and presented in two subsections: Equity and access and Agency. The two structures help distinguish distinct realms that are potentially influenced by the phenomenon.

**Motivation and Behavior**

Though studies discussing the connection between behavior and motivation are well documented" (see Bandura,1997; Deci & Ryan,1985; Stipek, 1993; Weiner, 2000; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). What is not as well researched is to what extent educators and other leaders in HST education motivate and shape the lived experience in students, thus affecting academic achievement. In a qualitative study of 308 college students, Gorham and Christophel (1992) reported teacher behaviors were viewed by students as "more central" to motivation if the teachers' behavior was perceived as negative or "demotivating" (p. 249). The finding suggested that teachers' impacts on students' motivation is greater if they are perceived as negative. Exploring the perception of motivation within younger students can potentially show the trajectory of the impact teachers have on student motivation. According to Jordan, Brown, and Gutiérrez (2010), studies that focus on the impact teachers, administrators, and others in education have in developing students' non-cognitive traits are often left unquestioned or unexamined. Some of the practices left unexamined include pep rallies celebrating all students who scored a specific targeted number, students assigned to after-school intervention courses in addition to their existing school-day intervention course, and CST boot camps intended to be rigorous test preparation days before the exams. All of the above experiences are meant to impact not only scores but also perceptions; however, only scores seem to be included in determining the effect they have on students.

With all these practices in place directly related to HST, it is surprising the limited research that exists in examining the reproduction of certain unintended behaviors like student apathy and the link it may have with existing educational practices under HST. A study conducted by Roderick and Engel (2001) discusses the important connection between student success and the interactions teachers have with students in response to HST. Roderick and Engel write:

> Thus, the social context of learning—how teachers, parents, and peers Interact with students in relation to the policy [HST]—may be the most important factor in determining how students respond to the incentive (p. 201).

Many interpretations exist when looking at how to evaluate behaviors like motivation. For the scope of this research, motivation will be defined as a state not as a trait as delineated by Brophy, who "distinguishes between motivation as a trait, or general predisposition to strive for content knowledge and skill mastery, and motivation as a situation specific, or state, element" (as cited in Gorham & Christophel, 1992, pp. 239-240). This idea of motivation as a state is also supported within the well-known literature comparing extrinsic motivation (Skinner, 1953) and intrinsic motivation (Hunt, 1965). For this study, the focus is not on the types of motivation that may exist in education but, rather, the relevancy that motivation has on student engagement that leads to learning. Finally, the literature supports the exploration of the essence of HST as experienced by students. Questions that must be considered include (a) Is

student "lived experience" a consideration in HST practices? (b) Is the absence of considering students' "lived experience" impacting student learning and thus student testing performance? and, (c) What considerations to what students experience and how students experience HST education is evident in pedagogy, school rituals, and class scheduling?

Within all the literature, a variety of approaches on how to motivate exist. Kohn (1999) discusses how incentives and rewards are counterproductive to motivation. Paul Tough (2013) discusses the importance of developing character traits to help students feel successful. Countless other articles, books, and dissertations can be retrieved on the subject of behavior and motivation; however, the research becomes much more scant when we explore motivation and behavior from a young person's perspective. The research that is available helps us understand that motivation and behavior can be altered and molded. This knowledge allows the researcher to see behavior and motivation as a spectrum of possibilities. When conducting the study, understanding what the state of behaviors and the state of motivation are can help analyze the degree to which the participants share certain elements and the degree to which certain elements are missing. Along with research on behavior and motivation, school culture and environment is examined closely as part of the discussion on noncognitive experiences and outcomes. The literature supports this study's inquiry on the effects of HST practices on nonacademic behaviors, such as student motivation and self-perception.

**School Culture and Environment**

To begin, the literature provides necessary definitions and boundaries for the terms *environment* and *culture* because they are so widely used yet often not understood. For many, environment and culture are superficial concerns that address how the school looks or what activities are included to promote school spirit. Although such concerns have some merit, they fall short in including the critical role these two conditions play on student experiences. A study by Guo (2012) focused on the school culture and the impact teachers have on how students' perceive the schools' culture. Within the study, Guo discusses the importance of understanding the impact of school culture: "Educational researchers have realized the importance of understanding school culture and its relationships with not only student outcomes but also teacher's characteristics (2012, p. 1). Guo' study emphasizes the importance of focusing on teacher–student relationships when discussing school culture, an important distinction for this study as well. Guo explains this distinction as follows: There is the real danger of confusing the use of the term *school culture* to describe the social environment centered on students in a school and the organizational culture of teachers' work environment. Knowing the components that make up culture at school is important for this study.

David Wren (1999) provides a working definition for culture and environment that will be used for this research: "Culture refers to the values and symbols that affect organizational climate" (p. 1). Robert Owens further expounds on culture by defining it as "symbolic aspects of school activities [such

as] traditions, rites and rituals, [that] must be considered, for these are the values that are transmitted from one generation of the organization to another" (as cited in Wren, 1999, p. 1).

Experts in educational reform agree that the emphasis placed on HST scores impact the entire landscape of education (Kohn, 1997, 2000; Triplett & Barksdale, 2005. The impact of HST affects district policy across the state, which affects procedures within schools and classrooms. The narrowing of curriculum under HST is well documented. "Teachers often align curricula in ways that lead to a narrowing of content coverage and an overemphasis on test preparation" (Linn, 1994, as cited in Roderick & Engel, 2001, p. 198). However, in addition to curriculum restrictions, the landscape of education must include an understanding of how culture and environment are affected by HST. A study by McGee (2006) concluded that culture and environment varied depending on the type of activities teachers were involved with. For example, when teachers were engaged in noninstructional tasks, such as student social activities or fundraisers, the school culture was cooperative and collaborative. Conversely, when teachers where involved in tasks associated with academics, school culture was divided and compartmentalized (McGee, 2006). This study suggests that culture and environment are directly related to specific experiences within education. An equally essential study by Triplett and Barksdale (2005) asked 225 students in Grades 3 through 6 to illustrate their experience of a high-stakes test immediately after completing the test. This study confirmed that students experience anxiety, stress, nervousness, and self-doubt during HST. Among

Triplett and Barksdale's recommendations was that schools and classrooms should consider and change the culture and environment surrounding HST procedures. The research falls short in exploring the experiences of students after the HST. Exploring how students respond to nonacademic and academic tasks may reveal how culture and environment could be looked at as a mosaic of cultural possibilities. Furthermore, McGee's study suggests that the experiences we offer under HST have the potential to do much more than impact test scores. How is school culture impacted when opportunities like band, art, and other electives, which aimed to enrich and expand, are replaced with intervention programs focused on increasing and improving test performance?

Further developing the importance of considering culture and environment and its impact on students is Antonia Darder, a seminal Freirian scholar. Darder's work in critical pedagogy and ongoing discussion of the culture of oppression (2012) speaks to the need to probe the question, are we really seeking a more equitable and just school culture?

For this research, *educational landscape* is interpreted as the schools' environment and culture. Culture is said to include the rituals, customs, and common practices that become so ingrained in day-to-day decisions that they almost become imperceptible. The invisible mores of the day demand equal attention when discussing the culture of a school. Glatthorn (2012) defines it as "those aspects of schooling, other than the intentional curriculum, that seem to produce changes in student values, perceptions, and behaviors." Scholars often refer to this as the hidden curriculum (Giroux and Purpel, 1983; Glatthorn, 2012:

Horn, 2003). The hidden curriculum is aptly known as the side effect of education. For this study, when examining culture the hidden curriculum will be included in the discussions on culture and environment. The potential influence of the unseen or unplanned cannot be overstated: As documented by Bandura's (1977) observation of learning modeling research, which states that "most behaviors that people display are learned either deliberately or inadvertently through the influence of example" (p. 5), teachers hold powerful positions that carry ample opportunities to influence student behaviors. The concealed influence teachers have on students' behavior is further studied by Hellstrom (2004, as cited in Ljusberg, 2009), who discusses the construct known as "self-fulfilling prophecy." Hellstrom defines the term *self-fulfilling prophecy* as "the teachers' expectations and confidence in pupils' learning abilities that have been shown to affect pupils' performance in school" (as cited in Ljusberg, 2009, p. 20). The hidden curriculum is a challenging concept for many in education, but given the examples above, its impact has lasting effects on students that may be manifesting themselves in classrooms across the nation. Although, arguably, hidden curriculum can be "both desirable and undesirable" (Glatthorn, 2012, its unintended effects have proven long lasting.

Notwithstanding the claims of inadvertent impact among some educators, critics, such as Darder (2012), Delpit (1995), and Bourdieu (1977) to list a few, challenge the assertion that the hidden curriculum is unintentional and without purpose. To this end, the hidden curriculum must come out of the shadows and become part of the critical components when considering culture and

environment. In a recently published book, Carter (2013) argues that we must think about culture and its effects on students, saying:

> Generally, school reform focuses on changes to the technical aspects of education— what students achieve in learning the proverbial three Rs of schooling. I move beyond the technical, offering evidence-based arguments about conditions that get less attention in policy circles, although their existence powerfully influences educational outcomes: how cultural behaviors and practices matter to student engagement and achievement. (p.143)

School culture and environment has many layers. On the surface, we may describe it as the overall look of the campus. We may be able to make generalizations about the school's culture and environment based on visible character-building promotions geared toward students' emotional health. However, culture and environment, according to Cubukcu (2012), comprises both the school's physical condition and its psychological environment. It is this psychological environment that deserves more attention. A report written by the Teaching Tolerance project of The Southern Poverty Law Center states, "The climate of a school has a direct impact on both how well students learn and how well they interact with their peers" (Teaching Tolerance, 2013, p. 1).

Changes in environment throughout schools are plentiful under HST. Many schools have invested thousands of dollars in promoting API scores through elaborate murals, laminated posters, and community brochures.

Marquees boldly display numbers in flashing lights showcasing the recent HST scores.

Equally prominent are what low-performing schools are expected to change within their environment in response to HST. For example, letters must be circulated to parents explaining the plan that will take precedence in increasing test scores; parent workshops are replaced with informative meetings that explain the programs and tutors who will be available free of charge to help students increase test performance; fewer activities that promote social interaction, emotional development, and enjoyment are available, and those programs that exist beyond the scope of the standardized tests are offered to only those who have earned the desired test performance score. Enrichment has become a place for the privileged, and HST has become the gatekeeper.

Literature is sparse in the discussion of the unwritten or hidden curriculum and the inculcation of values, and perceptions that may affect students lived experience. In no other time in history is this more relevant than now when so much is at stake for students. The question is simple yet seldom investigated from a students' perspective: How do students perceive and experience the school environment and school culture? To understand the question, it is necessary to explore the current HST practices prescribed by law and the critical commentary that currently exist about them.

The final body of literature then centers on the nebulous concepts of what is "educated" and how we know we have "successfully educated" students, according to current law. The section is important to the study because it

discusses how adult stakeholders are positioned within the study. What do the practices and strategies adult stakeholders implement say about how they view education? Standardized education has set very rigid pathways for schools and students to follow in the name of educating. This rigidity includes the overprescribing of interventions in the name of test performance. The research that follows addresses HST and intervention. More space than is available here is needed to discuss in detail how HST and intervention often contradict the goal of educating all students. Only the most relevant ideas on what it means to be educated, and how HST and intervention often undermine those ideas, are included. To end the conceptual framework, research and literature on the urgency of this study is discussed through the ideas of equity and access, advocacy, and agency.

**HST and Intervention**

Whereas the two sections above focus on educational practices that occur in preparation for the high stakes tests, this section discusses the implications of the test results. The following subsection is further divided into two separate areas: The first subsection focuses on equity and access and what it means to be educated from a conceptual perspective. The second subsection examines the importance of agency and how closely current education policy surrounding HST supports those concepts. These subsections are critical components to examining nonacademic outcomes within an academic phenomenon. The precepts of equity and access and agency are as intangible as the nonacademic outcomes the study examines. It makes these axioms of education important

concepts for this phenomenological study. Like nonacademic outcomes, these precepts are best examined through a study that centers on participants' experience and interpretation. However, before discussing these more abstract concepts the study must first begin with the synergy between HST and intervention.

Nichols and Berliner (2007) define HSTs as "those assessments that have serious consequences attached to them" (p. xv). While this study is not the first to challenge the claim that high stakes is the panacea for a more just and equitable education (see Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Kohn 2000: Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Nodding, 1984 ; Ravitch, 2010; Skerrett & Hargreaves, 2008; Triplett & Barksdale, 2005), it is one of the few studies that examined the lived experience of HST education from the perspective of students. Kohn compares HST to a vicious monster straight from an old horror movie (2000). A study by McGee (2006) discusses research on "inappropriate methods of improving test scores." Among the strategies McGee (2006) discusses are the withholding of educational opportunities like music and physical education (see also Amrein & Berliner, 2002). When discussing intervention resulting from HST, this study aims to reveal how prolonged participation in intervention programs geared toward test performance affects factors beyond those intended. The study considers the existing research on the academic impact of HST education but focuses on exploring the noncognitive impact of students.

Lack of equity and access resulting from prolonged HST intervention is supported within existing research (McGee, 2006; Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

Students often feel stigmatized instead of empowered by the help they receive in the form of academic interventions. In a case study on intervention led by Donalson and Halsey (2007) students reported feelings of powerlessness when it came to school. "Most students interviewed found out the first day of school they were in intervention and felt they could do nothing about their circumstances" (p. 24). When education does not consider the negative feelings students struggle with as a result of intervention, a critical conversation is left out when determining best practices for low-performing students. Understanding to what extent it may contribute to a negative emotional perspective, which may result in sustaining, rather than remedying, low academic performance is still not researched enough. Strong evidence that supports that assertion comes from advocates who speak on behalf of students regarding current HST education. One such advocate is educational rights activist Darder.

Darder (2012) talks about the injustices HST has brought upon the minorities and. she condemns the use of scripted programs. Kohn (2000) supports Darder's criticism of current educational practices by stating, "High-stakes testing has radically altered the kind of instruction that is offered in American schools, to the point that 'teaching to the test' has become a prominent part of the nation's educational landscape" (Kohn, 2000, p. 2). Where the literature falls short is the examination of how phenomena like HST education affects noncognitive perceptions within students. Tienken and Zhao (2013) allude to the importance of including such research: "Standardization programs like those carried out under NCLB and the CCSS undermine the

socially just and life-enriching opportunities that a comprehensive curriculum can bring" ( p. 116). It is not enough to discuss the impact of prolonged intervention under HST in a scholarly forum. To underscore the significance of this research and the need for acting upon its findings, three separate bodies of literature will be examined.

This collection of literature that follows holds many opportunities for individual research studies on why we should examine what it means to educate and what it means to be educated. Taken as a collection, the literature serves as the means to one study's end. The remaining sections will discuss equity and access and agency to establish why attention and urgency should be given to the study of students lived experience of HST education phenomenon. The literature will discuss the merits of education claiming to offer equity and access to all students, the importance of agency within students and practitioners, and the value of anchoring the study's interpretation on advocacy for the vulnerable. The two principles complete this multilayer literature review and will be explained independently.

**Equity and access.** Equity and access are best understood when applying existing notions of both terms under the existing academic hegemony. Critical theorists understand that current ideas of how to help underrepresented groups are seldom favored by the group themselves. As Carl Mark observed, the ideas that govern are rarely those of the governed (as cited in Bates,1975). This paradigm of cultural hegemony or what Steele refers to as "Cultural Chauvinism" leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure (1992, as cited in Frey, 1993, p. 35).

Levitian adds to this discussion and offers a working and more viable definition for equity and access: "superior expectations [lead] to superior performance" (1990, as cited in Frey, 1993, p. 35). When students are made to feel that they have within reach the necessary intellectual abilities to succeed, they do in fact succeed. Known as social reproductive theory, it supports how noncognitive factors contribute to the ideals of equity and access. Social reproductive theory illustrates the importance of not only having equity and access to high standards but also input into how teachers and schools contribute to the experience of HST education. Currently, equity and access remain an ideal, not an idea, of existing education. As explained by Briscoe and Ross, "Schools function as the states' apparatus protecting the hegemony of the dominant class" (1989, as cited in Frey, 1993, p. 38). It is not until we act to change education policy and practices to better reflect what Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzales (1992) call diverse "funds of knowledge" that education will reform its internal biases toward the dominant class.

**Agency.** Agency completes the concepts within research that examine HST education with judicious scrutiny. Creswell (2013) explains that a study using a critical theory perspective is one where "The end goal may be social theorizing" (p. 31). Social theorizing can be defined as working toward understanding current education praxis and envisioning new possibilities that are equitable and nonauthoritative (Creswell, 2013). The ideal of agency hinges on this idea of new possibilities. It is not until change begins that this study will meet its full capacity and goal.

Hand in hand with agency and advocacy, student self-efficacy emerges as the next critical ideal in this research. According to Roderick and Engel (2001), "Students must believe that they can influence their progress toward that goal through their own motivation and effort, often called self-efficacy" (p.199). A seminal author who helped coin the term self-efficacy is Bandura (1997). His research has been an important consideration for scholars and is paramount to this study because it introduces the interrelationship between the academic results and the noncognitive behaviors. However, this research is based on another focus of Bandura's seminal work: the contribution teachers make to the self-development of students.

Self-efficacy addresses students' self-perception; observational learning theory posits that behavior is learned either by direct experiences or through observation of others (Bandura,1971). Observational learning theory argues that behavior, although managed by the student, has many entry points: family, peers, and other important figures. It is inarguable that teachers are important figures for much of our childhood, and how teachers perceive us can have a significant impact in how we perceive ourselves.

A dissertation focusing on the "the caring teacher" and the low test performing student (labeled as *at risk*) declares, "Teachers' low academic expectations also influence their [student] engagement and motivation"(Murdock, 1999). Thompson (2010) continues to emphasize the importance of teacher behavior and states "Whereas high teacher expectations have been shown to increase school completion, research has demonstrated that teacher

expectations are impacted by the characteristics of the students" (Murdock, 1999; as cited in Thompson, 2010). The research examining how characteristics of students may burgeon as a result of school rather than in spite of school is scant. Therefore, knowing what we know about self-efficacy and learning observation theory, the research explores whether the latter influences the former.

All of the above constructs illustrate what needs to be considered when evaluating education as a phenomenon. The above research on adults examining how they affect the experiencing of the HST phenomenon is a critical part of the study.

Literature in equity and access, agency, all establish the urgency of this study, or what Creswell (2013) describes as a "call for change" (p. 44). The change this study is aiming for is the inclusion of students' experiences in the narrative of education.

Little importance has been placed on student perceptions and lived experiences of HST education. Many students have lived through years of a specific type of education under this phenomenon. The aim of this study is to explore those stories and determine if any themes emerge within the experiences.

## Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study is to illuminate the noncognitive perceptions and experiences in the narrative of HST education. The study issues a call to action by including student voices when making decisions about the students in the name of achievement as prescribed by current HST policies. In addition I hope to

gain from participants an understanding of education under HST accountability to improve professional practice. Finally, the study serves as a starting point to help develop a better understanding of education under HST as a phenomenon and to take inventory of how closely current HST education coalesces with the fundamental goals of providing an equitable, enriching, and just education for students. The literature supports a study that extends beyond academic implications of practices aimed at helping students increase testing performance. Motivation, behavior, student–teacher relationships, and self-perceptions are all linked to improving academics; however, the literature is scant in exploring how the above non-cognitive traits are cultivated or jettisoned under the current HST phenomenon.

# CHAPTER 3

# METHODOLOGY

Decisions made about how to help achievement and the quality of education for all students rarely includes the voices of students. Moreover, the single most important measure education relies on to drive these decisions have been chiseled down to summative HST data. The experiences resulting from HST education rarely receive empirical attention from the academic world. The purpose of this research was to consider and interpret perceptions and experiences of eight students directly affected by the phenomenon of education under HST accountability. This chapter presents the methodology used in the study. The core of my study is the noncognitive, lived experiences and perceptions associated with HST education.

This chapter is organized in four sections: The first section includes rationale for selecting the methodology and an overview of hermeneutic phenomenology. The second section includes a description of the research design that I employed in this study. Following the research design is the third section, which discusses the research methods used in this study. This section includes the setting, sample, data collection, data analysis, and a discussion on validity and trustworthiness. I conclude with a chapter summary.

## Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Although various approaches fit this topic, the best methodology to study

the depths of students' perceptions and experiences is a qualitative approach known as phenomenology. According to philosopher Joseph J. Kockelmans, Hegel offered one of the first technical meanings of phenomenology: "Phenomenology referred to knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience" (as cited in Moustakes, 1995, p. 26).

A specific type of phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology is credited to Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and defined as descriptive and interpretive, focusing on the structure of the experience, and it aims to make the invisible visible and subscribes to the bracketing in historical elements, to help interpret the essence of the phenomenon. (as cited in Laverty, 2003).

This study, specifically, uses a hermeneutic phenomenological design. As a practitioner, suspending my beliefs about the phenomenon completely from the study by bracketing out my experiences seemed to adversely affect the purpose of the study. Whereas transcendental phenomenology demands extracting any presuppositions of the phenomenon, hermeneutic phenomenology asserts that one's interpretation is not only valuable to the study but impossible to factor out. "There is a transaction between the individual and the world as they constitute and are constituted by each other" (Hutchinson, 1991, as cited in Laverty, 2003, p. 8). Gadamer, an accomplished philosopher of hermeneutics stated, "Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting" (1960/1998, as cited in Laverty, 2003, p.10). For this study the transaction is between students and HST education. Specifically, the

transactions include how students experience and perceive teachers, incentives, coursework, scheduling practices, assemblies, and other forms of HST promotions.

Interpretation of these transactions begins with the trust that must be established between interviewer and interviewee. The bond that exists between researcher and participant was important to create and maintain in this study. Although both approaches seek to uncover the lived experiences of participants, hermeneutic phenomenology provided the framework that positioned tme where experiences and background are considered a benefit to the research and not a threat. It is what Munhall describes as "a transaction between the individual and the world as they constitute and are constituted by each other" (1989, as cited in Laverty, 2003, p.8).

## Research Methods

In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, the goal is to cull the essence of the phenomenon from the perspectives and experiences of eight participants. This is illustrated in the design of this study, as represented in Figure 2.

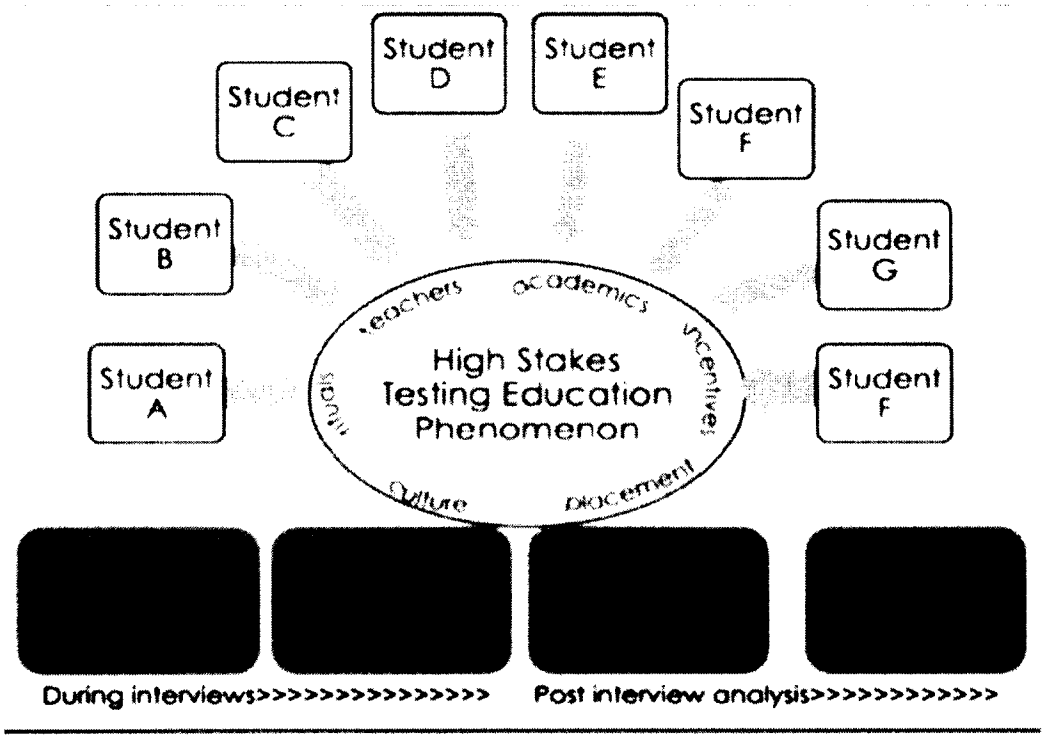


*Figure 2:* Diagram of research design.

The center cluster represents HST phenomenon and the expected transactions in which students engage within HST phenomenon. Each student is first interviewed about his or her individual experiences and perceptions. However the goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is to capture the essence of what HST phenomenon is for all the participants. The flow chart below the web outlines the steps I will take to cull from the experiences the essence of HST education. The green boxes, from left to right, represent the order in which the study will develop. The rest of this section will feature the steps of the study, describing the setting, sample, data collection, and data analysis, and the steps taken to ensure validity or trustworthiness

## Setting

Sand Dollar District (SDD), the district used for this study, is located 13 miles away from downtown Los Angeles, in Southern California. It includes three high schools, four middle schools, and 13 elementary schools. According to SDD's website, enrollment as of 2013 was 22,742 students. In terms of race and ethnicity, as of 2012, 86.5% of SDD's students were Hispanic, followed by non-Hispanic Whites, who made up 6.5% of the total population; 3.4% of the population is Black, and 1% is Filipino. Approximately 70% of SDD students receive free or reduced-priced lunch and are categorized as socially disadvantaged, and 47% of enrolled students listed a language other than English as their primary language. Currently, 35% of SD students are designated as English learners. Of the 35%, 19% are reclassified English learners.

## Participants

Eight students were selected for the study. All eight students were in the fifth month of their eighth-grade school year. Students were selected based on having been assigned to at least one course because of their HST performance. All students had three consecutive years without an elective course, such as cooking, art, or band, due to a certain score on one or more HST. Furthermore, all students attended SD school throughout the three years; consequently, all eight students had experienced SD's approach to HST education for the previous three years. Selecting students who shared a common duration of intervention was an important filter for finding ideal participants. The HST phenomenon is defined as an experience where students have lived a direct consequence as a

result of testing results (Berliner, 2014). For some of the participants, the consequence was not only having an annual intervention but also, in the case of English language learners (ELLs), being labeled "lifers" (Olsen, 2010). To be considered an ELL lifer, students need to have over seven years of ELL instruction. Selecting ELL students in eighth grade who had attended SD for all three years ensured that a few of my seven interviews represented one of SD's most vulnerable groups. For the remaining participants, the three-year minimum HST intervention experience was required; however, the intervention was not exclusive to ELL. Having students who represented other interventions under the HST experience was critical in attempting to have a comprehensive phenomenological analysis. In addition to establishing minimum years in intervention as a criteria, the selection of eighth-grade participants was also purposeful.

Eighth grade is often seen as the last opportunity to exit academic interventions. It is a well-known fact at SD that students who begin high school with intervention courses rarely successfully exit out of intervention tracks. Therefore, eighth-grade teachers are often referred to as the gatekeepers of mainstream education. For these reasons, selecting students in eighth grade who had had at least three years of sustained intervention was a mindful decision. These parameters for participants created a baseline that would later help with analysis.

**Sampling**

This study utilized purposeful sampling to conduct the study. Three considerations must be made when developing a sampling group: size of sample group, sample archetype, and form of sample. Each of these will be addressed separately.

In terms of suggesting a definitive number, researchers shy away form such specificity. As a starting point however, the novice researcher considers some of the following literature: "The phenomenological method in human science recommends that one uses at least three participants" (Creswell, 2003). Creswell suggests five (2003, p. 64), and Morse at least six (1994, as cited in Mason, 2010). For this study's scope and nature, a total of eight participants were set as the initial goal.

Students selected for this study were selected based on their capacity to illuminate the phenomenon of HST education. Creswell (2013) defines purposeful sampling as a mindful selection of participants that can inform and understand the research problem and speak to the phenomenon in the study. Participants were selected based on having prior experience of the phenomenon being studied. Creswell (2013) refers to this as criterion sampling.

Participants remained anonymous throughout the study and were interviewed individually and then as a focus group. Along with receiving approval from the California State University at Fullerton Institutional Review Board, I examined other standards of ethical conduct as suggested by Creswell (2013). Participants were provided consent to participate forms to sign.

## Data Collection

Creswell (2013) describes data collection as "a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions" (p. 146). Richards and Morse (2013) make an important distinction between the ideas of *making* data as opposed to *collecting* data:

> To speak of data as being "gathered" or "collected" is to imply that the data preexist. . . . This is not so with data. Qualitative researchers collect not actual events but representations, usually reports or accounts of events. . . . Try challenging this convention by referring to data as being "made" (p. 119).

This is the approach to collecting data for this phenomenological study. The considerations for data collection and management will be introduced in the following three sections: (a) instrumentation, (b) procedures for data collection, and (c) data management.

### Instrumentation

The interview is the primary instrument through which to collect data in this study. Through the interview process I aim to collect stories that lead to a true understanding of how students experience the HST phenomenon. One advantage of using stories in educational research is poignantly expressed by Bertaux, " The subjects of inquiry in the social sciences can talk and think. 'If given the chance to talk freely, people appear to know a lot about what is going on'" (1981, as cited in Seidman, 2006 p. 8). Listening to stories is the most critical component of a phenomenological study. "Stories are a way of knowing"

(Seidman, 2006, p. 7). When researching a group phenomenon, stories are what help establish the experiences. When you add the hermeneutic approach to phenomenology, you must include *dialogue* (Dinkins, 2005). The "Socratic-Hermeneutic Interpre-view" is the primary instrument in collecting data. The addition of "Socratic" is a result of the work of Dinkins (2005). Her work contributed to the hermeneutic approach by comparing the need for back and forth interaction between interviewer and interviewee utilizing the method of questioning associated with Greek philosopher Socrates. The interviews as conducted were semistructured and open-ended and included an opportunity for participants to draw or sketch their perspective to help with "on demand" interpretation. The three broad questions every interview included were as follows:

1. What is your definition of high-stakes testing education?
2. What experiences have you had directly related to high-stakes testing?
3. How do schools, teachers, and administrators help you experience high-stakes testing education?

These questions represent the broader umbrella under which the finer (and deeper) details of students' experiences are to be understood. The study began by asking students to define the phenomenon (Roulston, 2010) of HST. Sample questions included "Define what you feel is meant by high-stakes testing?" and " How do you believe your score on these high-stakes tests changes or affects your school experience?" Depending on the specificity of the

responses students offer regarding their experiences, the follow-up questions included asking about vital components that make up the phenomenon of HST education. For example, "How do you see high-stakes testing being promoted at Sand Dollar Middle school?" "Can you tell me more? Exactly what happens? "What do teachers say regarding HST?" and "How does that make you feel?" Along with these initial questions, other specific protocols related to the interview include the use of analogies, sketches and disclosure question frames to help participants clarify for themselves and the interviewer what they mean and believe by their descriptions and drawings (Dinkins, 2005; Roulston, 2010).

The interview was selected as the primary instrument based on the goal of the study to illuminate the phenomenon as experienced by students. As a researcher who is also a practitioner, I believe engaging in on-demand interpretation will help students see the interview as a conversation as opposed to a rigid, formal interview. Because my participants may know me as a campus teacher or may even have me as a content teacher, Socratic-hermeneutic interviewing demands that I engage in active and instant interpretation. The use of a reflective journal was also presented to the students before the interview. I explained that I would be writing down interpretations during the interview (Laverty, 2003). The interpretations included deeply listening to what may seem trivial and unimportant with the goal of deriving meaning and a profound understanding of students' experiences (Wilson & Hutchinson,1991). In addition to writing down agreed upon interpretations, I also jotted down visible cues of what was being said with body language and not with words (Van Manen, 1997,

as cited in Laverty, 2003). At the completion of the interview, written interpretations were shared with the participant. This instant sharing allowed for the participant to hear what I heard and to elaborate, or even challenge their original thought, with an entirely new response. Prior to interviews, students were introduced to the study with parents present. This allowed not only for parents to provide consent but also for the student participant to understand what determined their candidacy. Every effort was made to help the students feel comfortable and unthreatened in expressing perceptions and emotions (Laverty, 2003) before and during the official interview. Before any formal interviewing was scheduled, a thorough explanation of their anonymity and quest for their voice—free of any consideration of what others may think—was encouraged. I accomplished this by fostering a communication protocol that promoted creating a genuine relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Marcel, 1971; as cited in Laverty, 2003). Trust was established during the preliminary interview with the participants. This preliminary interview included completing the consent and assent forms and a brief introduction to the research questions (Englander, 2012). Informal conversations regarding school and the unique opportunity to be able to discuss education through the eyes of a student in a safe and anonymous environment were all sincere starting conversations I engaged in prior to the formal interview (Laverty, 2003).

To conclude, the instrumentation of Socratic-hermeneutic interviewing is an ideal approach for this hermeneutic phenomenology. The approach was in line with the goals I had in mind when first developing this study. It combines

what intrigues me about hermeneutics with a slightly different slant to its interviewing protocol. As explained by Dinkins (2005) "the structure of this kind of interview is a back and forth process of 'continual reexamination' that resembles Heidegger's hermeneutic circle" (pp. 137-140).

**Procedures**

Students were selected based on their shared interaction with the phenomenon. Consent forms were distributed and collected before scheduling interviews. Each Wednesday is an early-release day at SD; therefore, it was determined that Wednesday afternoon was the ideal time slot for interviewing. This interviewing schedule allowed for a two-hour block of time for interviewing, while dismissing students at a regular schedule time of 3:00 pm. In addition to keeping the interviews within normal school hours, this schedule did not interfere with other school obligations. Two students were scheduled and interviewed for one hour every Wednesday. The last Wednesday interview, which would be a focus-group environment, was scheduled for the fifth week. A two-month time line was afforded to the interviews in case interviewees were unable to attend the first appointment or if a follow-up interview seemed necessary. All interviews were recorded, and I kept a journal for personal notes and observations. Participants were reminded that their names would not be used in the study and that they would receive a transcript of the interview. Participants were also made aware that they would have an opportunity to revisit any ideas or statements on the transcript if they felt it was necessary. To end the introduction protocol, critical school terms necessary to include in the interview were reviewed.

Participants were asked if they understood what was meant by "high-stakes education" The definition provided in the "Definitions of Terms" section of this study provided the definitions. Further elaboration was given if needed. Once I felt that the participant was clear on the terms and the phenomenon being studied, the interview commenced.

For this study, I used Dinkins's (2005) interviewing procedures to conduct a Socratic-hermeneutic in-depth interview. As suggested by Dinkins, each interview began with a definition. Each participant was asked to define the phenomenon that was being studied.

An important distinction is made by Dinkins (2005) regarding her development of Socratic-hermeneutic interpre-viewing. An article by Brinkmann (2007) explains, " Socrates' 'method' is not a method in the conventional sense, as Dinkins makes clear, but an *elenchus*, a Greek term that means examining a person and considering his or her statements normatively" (p.35). Gadamer, a seminal scholar to hermeneutic phenomenology asserts, "The Socratic conversation is a mode of understanding, rather than a method in any mechanical sense" (1960, as cited in Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1127 ).

Dinkins (2005) warns the researcher that the steps are not seen as essential or exclusive. "The specifics of the questions and paths should be led by the inquiry, and determined by what is appropriate and fruitful for the participant and for the subject matter" (p. 128). The procedures under Dinkins' model allows for a more conversational approach instead of the rigidity of a more classical hermeneutic approach that calls on the researcher to not interrupt but allow the

story to emerge naturally (Benner,1994, as cited in Dinkins, 2005). For this study, the procedures of conducting in-depth interviews utilizing Dinkins' Socratic-hermeneutic approach is to arrive at what Heidegger, the hermeneutics scholar, refers to as "unity of meaning" between researcher and participant or "co-inquirer" (as cited in Dinkins, 2005, p.126). This study will follow Dinkins's model during the interview process, which begins with student interviews to attempt to obtain rich and thick descriptions to "get the story straight" (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991, p. 270). Working together is a critical aspect of phenomenology and must include on-demand interpretation and journaling through constant reiteration and confirmation of what was interpreted to the participant.

**Data Management**

All recorded interviews were stored in a protected audio file. No other adult was given access to listening files. Participants were given pseudonyms that would be used throughout the study. Participants were made aware of their pseudonyms and a master list was kept in a protected digital file. Participants were given copies of their transcripts, but were not allowed to view other transcripts from other participants. Hard copy of the transcripts, along with all other printed material relating to the research, was kept in a locked filing cabinet away from the school site. Digital information was all securely stored using file back-up cloud storage system known as Dropbox. Only I will have access to all data and files collected.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

This section will be organized by research question in an effort to best explain the analysis and interpretation of each component of the interview.

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis then reducing the data in these through a process of coding and condensing the codes and, finally, representing the date in figures, table, or discussions (Creswell, 2013, p. 180). Within the approaches of qualitative research, Creswell stresses that each approach handles information differently depending on the nature of the study (2013, p. 180). In the hermeneutic phenomenology method, these differences of data analysis are evident in the administration and interpretation of the interview. The key differences are in the on-demand approach to interpretation, the inclusion or bracketing in of the researcher's bias, and the importance of reiterating to the participant the interpretation being made by the researcher for on-demand confirmation or clarification (Laverty, 2003).

**Question 1.** What is the essence of HST education, as experienced and perceived by eight middle school students?

**Question 2.** How do students position themselves in the phenomenon?

The first research question will be analyzed while interviewing and later coded by feeling descriptors. As suggested by Dinkins, a natural approach to questioning and restating what the researcher hears the participant saying will be paramount to the analysis process. The aim in on-demand analysis is to interpret

the conversations into meaningful expressions that capture the essence (Van Manen,1990). The essence was culled from the answers that participants provide regarding how they experience the impact of teachers, incentives, and rituals, as that experience pertains to HST. For this question, I focused on the transactions that occur between student and the phenomenon (see Figure 2). The responses were categorized into "interpretive themes" within the phenomena (Grbich, 2013, p. 97). For example, responses were first sorted as related to culture, teachers, class schedule, peers, behavior, classwork or other. Then, themes were clustered from largest to smallest clusters by frequency of times students discussed in detail a certain theme. Finally, once themes were ranked, an analysis of the intensity of language was conducted. Words describing the experiences were categorized along with illustrations that portrayed similar descriptors in "natural units" (Kvale, 2009, p. 207).

**Question 3.** How do students' perceptions of teachers affect their experience of HST education?

Whereas the first question focused on understanding the authenticity and depth of students' experiences, the second question required an analysis of the extent to which these experiences are related to their perceptions. The analysis began with conceptual coding which require me to reflect on my experiences and reflections and turn the conversation into meaningful journal entries (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009. This included helping participants rephrase and confirm statements into potential themes. I would ask, "It is accurate to say that you felt _____ about your teacher? "Would you agree that because you felt

_____toward your teacher, it made you feel _____about the (test, class, the intervention etc.). These journal entries were later coded by creating emergent themes (Smith et al., 2013. Each theme extracted from individual transcripts was given a separate file folder and each participant was given his or her own set of file folders. Finally, the process of abstraction called for sorting out themes from all participants into "super-ordinate." In other words, if students reported feeling "embarrassed by teachers' comments on how low they scored on a high stakes test" or "Sure that teachers hate teaching the intervention courses," these emergent themes would be clustered together as psychological negative perceptions of HST.

Transcriptions were part of this study to ensure validity by way of member checks. Transcriptions also helped develop rapport between me and my coinquirer. As suggested by Dinkins (2005), I attempted to conduct the vast majority of the analysis through the dialogue. The analysis in classical interview protocol calls upon the researcher to "look back" and categorize and identify themes; however, Dinkins argues that a true hermeneutic interview does not require such a separation from questioning and interpreting; therefore, a significant part of the interpretation occurred while interviewing.

As with the method itself, the specifics of the questions and paths should be led by the inquiry and determined by what is appropriate and fruitful for the participant and for the subject matter (Dinkins, 2005, p. 128). In conclusion, the analysis of this study included my verbalizing and revisiting significant statements, repeating words or phrases to the participant throughout the interview. Once a

consensus between researcher and co-inquirer was reached regarding significant statements or phrases, then I committed to a preliminary cluster of interpretive or conceptual themes within the reflective journal. Through these preliminary themes superordinate themes will be created. From these superordinate themes the essence of the phenomenon was drafted and included in the second round of interviews. The second round of interviews consisted of only individuals whose interviews rendered incomplete after the first round of interviews.

**Procedures to Ensure Validity**

Creswell (2013) defines validation as "an attempt to assess the 'accuracy' of the findings, as best described by the researcher and participant" (p. 250). The nature of this study is based on a dialogue between researcher and scholar. The most appropriate validation strategy for this type of study is member checking. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checking as "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314).

Member checking takes place when the researcher confirms with the participants (known in this study as the coinquirer) the credibility of what is found and how the findings are interpreted (Creswell, 2013). For this study, the analysis and interpretations was shared both during the interview and after the completion of the analysis. Member checking is an integral part of Socratic-hermeneutic interview, so it ensures validity as well as provide interviewing protocol.

To ensure triangulation as advised by Creswell (2013), peer review was included as the second validation strategy. The peer takes on the responsibility

of asking necessary questions regarding the integrity of the study. When applying both strategies to interpretations and findings of a study, it is possible to establish that the findings were valid.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the methodology of the qualitative study. The approach selected was aligned with the goal of this study, which was to explore the essence of HST education as experienced by eight middle school students. Hermeneutic phenomenology is all about the story. The structures and procedures found in hermeneutic phenomenology allow the researcher and coinquirer to dialogue to help discover and provide empirical evidence of a phenomenon. Along with fundamental elements of Heidegger and Gadamer's research on hermeneutic phenomenology, Dinkins's (2005) work on Socratic-hermeneutic interpre-view was utilized throughout the research process. The findings of the interviews are presented in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 4

## FINDINGS

'The study's focus was to research what experiences beyond the academic students' shared within a HSTHST environment. This research focused exclusively on the voices of students. The phenomenological study aimed to investigate how HST impacted students' outlook on learning and their perceptions of what it means to learn in a HST education. To arrive at the essence of this study the driving questions were

1. What experiences have you had directly related to high-stakes testing?
2. How do schools, teachers, and administrators help you experience high-stakes testing education?

The interviews were conducted with a collection of seven middle-school students who have experienced similar critical consequences over the span of several years due to HST performance. The findings detailed in this study are a result of student insight and personal reflection. During the interview process, students were viewed as coinquirers, equal in the process of unraveling the essence of the phenomenon beyond the academic. Dinkins' work on Socratic-Hermeneutic interpre-view (as cited in Ironside, 2005) was vital to how this research took shape. In a Socratic-hermeneutic interview, the dialogue and the interpretations become intertwined. The more researchers confirm or correctly

restate what they believe the participant is saying at the time of the interview, the closer the researchers will accurately represent the lived experiences of the participants. The interviews revealed findings that begin the discussion where most previous studies on HST end. For example, although this study confirms the negative impact HST continues to have on self-perception in low-performing students, it goes on to examine with greater depth how these negative impacts manifest themselves within students' actions and perceptions. With each interview, careful attention was given to what students were saying in terms of what it means to be "smart" and "successful." Coding procedure emphasized analysis of student phrasing and extrapolated inferred meaning from transcribed conversations. Exhaustive coding and cluster building was paramount to an accurate representation of students' lived experience. I approached the conversations by committing fully to the idea that experiences shape who you are because experiences are dynamic exchanges between people and phenomena (Moustakas,1995). Both the experience and the people living the experience are forever changed each time there is an exchange. What we know to be true is that experiences shape us by molding our perceptions and perspectives. The approach of value coding used in this study was especially critical in the first stages of analysis. Examining students' beliefs, values, and attitudes revealed shared views of how they perceived and internalized their lived worlds. The most important findings of this study were the understanding and interpreting of the exchange between the lived experiences and how the dynamic exchange shaped the participants.. Throughout the interview process and the data analysis, I

pondered a question that was never asked out loud of participants but was always in the forefront of my interpretation process: What type of learner has the HST phenomenon created and how does this type of student navigate current education? The combination of constantly referring back to the essential questions driving the study, exhaustive cycles of coding, ongoing memo writing, and my own internal question resulted in the following findings: (a) Low-scoring students' perceive learning as a means to an end, (b) SD's values and beliefs affect students outlook of education, and (c) the HST phenomenon denies low-performing students equal educational opportunity.

### Passing the Test Versus Learning

What students interpret as learning is an important component when examining education. For the students in this study, reaching testing targets was the only meaningful result of learning. Though having evaluative measures and goals is not entirely wrong, not acknowledging growth as a success when it falls short of the target has impacted the way students perceive learning. These mindsets can have lasting effects on how students navigate the school curriculum. When students are constantly measured, evaluated, and compared by HST, certain mindsets begin to take shape. The literature supports the importance of investigating these mindsets. As established in the literature review, a positive self-perception hinges on students' believing that they can influence the achievement of their goals through their own merit and efforts (Roderick & Engel, 2001). The students in this study felt overwhelmingly defeated and convinced that whatever needed to be learned in order to succeed

on high stakes tests was beyond their ability. As a consequence of this mindset, students felt whatever they were learning had no value. For example, all seven participants described themselves as not smart enough and having feelings of shame about the intervention classes they were placed in due to testing performance: "If you don't do good in your test, next year you might be put to classes that are very low and it makes you feel like you don't want to tell anyone about your classes" (Isaac, pseudonym). Another student, Pablo (pseudonym), stated the following: "You start thinking that, Oh man I'm in this class because I didn't do good. It makes you feel dumb and stuff." These comments reveal that students are experiencing an education where they believe the information must be out of their reach and each failed attempt to reach HST performance is internalized as confirmation that they are not capable. These perceptions become mindsets that position students in what Freire (2000) refers to as a "depositing" rather than "developing" approach to education. Students accept that they do not possess within them the natural ability to get smarter, and so they must wait to be given the information and the factoids that will get them to the end result they seek, which is performing well on the HST.

Education has shaped these students to be consumers rather than creators. As a result, students perceive that passing a test and learning are one and the same. This mindset limits the potential of education by creating a narrow perception of what it means to be smart and successful. The students identify education as a series of obstacle courses that must be met to "make it." The students in this study felt overwhelmingly defeated and convinced that what was

needed to succeed on HST was something they would never have. For instance, Frankie explained that he feels he tries and tries but never seems to be successful at earning the score that would allow him to have an elective. Throughout his middle school education, Frankie has never taken an elective class because he was always assigned instead to an intervention class in order to increase his testing performance. As a result of being assigned interventions for the previous four years, he believes his consistently low test performance proves he lacks the ability to pass the test. Throughout the interpre-view he exhibited self-deprecation and a negative mindset. Frankie was very open about his frustrations and was eager to let me know his feelings. He shared that he hated school because he felt he was being punished for not being smart enough. When asked about why he feels he is being punished for not being smart enough, Frankie remarked

> I think school is probably more fun and others have better classes than me. All you do is learn and learn and [I] can't have no fun. People who score like in a low score, they treat them like a baby. Just getting the extra work for no reason. Oh, just, here's more work, so you can learn better. Just more work. It doesn't really help me. They give you work from fifth grade or something. I already learned this. Forgot about this! It makes you feel like it's unfair. It's not our fault that we can't learn as fast as them.

Frankie's insights suggest that he feels his natural curiosities and interests are not important to the educational framework and what is valued as learning is beyond his ability.

In different conversation, one student, Sol, expressed that although she maintained some positive self-esteem and positive self-perception, she knew that others did not believe in her, which in turn, challenged her convictions about herself. She discussed this self-esteem battle in the following way: " [HST] affects me like when I know my number score, like I feel like I didn't try at all. I feel like when I see a score, I feel like I just need like . . . umm . . . I just felt like I didn't try, I give up. It looks like I give up." During the conversation, Sol was asked if she had given up. She answered emphatically, "I'm not giving up. I want to try!" This statement reveals she still believes in her abilities; however, as she proceeds, her discontent with decisions made for her in the name of improvement becomes apparent: "Sometimes I feel like I'm not learning at all because I've been having ELD for like three years, but then, I have like good grades in my classes so I don't know why I'm still in ELD." An in-depth discussion regarding this statement is included in the last theme, but it is mentioned here because her quote also speaks to the influence other stakeholders have on students' self-perception and mindset. Hellstrom refers to this in the literature as the "self-fulfilling prophecy," Hellstrom explaining that the phenomenon of a self-fulfilling prophecy exists between teacher expectations and a pupils' performance (2004, as cited in Ljusberg, 2009, p. 20). Another study discussed in the literature review discusses the teacher-student "reciprocity phenomenon as dynamic interaction" (Hong et al., 2011, p. 290). Sol's statement suggests the value of teacher support and its important role in how students internalize, interpret, and approach their educational challenges.

For these students, education has been minimized as an end goal of meeting testing targets. Students struggling with HST begin to see education as something they must "get" versus something they must "develop" SD, like many other schools across the region, claims to strive for creating "life-long learners." However, the natural curiosity that propels us to want to continue to learn, create, and develop is not fostered in the current consumer deficit model.

Finally, student Alicia discusses the weight of importance placed on HST and its effect on her mindset. Alicia perceives HST performance as the single most important criteria a student must meet for success and a positive self-perception: "Oh I have to do this [she motions at the table to refer to worksheets and books]. I have to read this. I have to study. I have to be perfect . . . [we] have lower self-esteem." When asked if she meant having lower self-esteem is resulting from the pressure of having to be "perfect," she confirmed and said, "Yes, I mean you know you will never be perfect, so you feel bad about yourself." Like all the other participants in this study, Alicia's self-perception hinges on her testing performance. Each year her test performance places her in an intervention, and consequently, her belief in herself and in her ability is affected.

All of these responses indicate that students perceive education as a series of events that must lead to meeting HST performance goals. Learning is not valued as a journey with many potential ends, because if it were, students, like Frankie, would have more opportunities to experience classes that delight and interest them, such as music, technology, art, and other enriching activities. As of now, these classes are handled as privileges for the select few and not

opportunities for all to experience and learn from. As a result of current practices, Frankie's educational pathways is limited to courses that focus on his passing HST, whereas others students who have met the HST targets are offered courses that focus on learning beyond what is tested. All the conversations indicated that the consequences associated with HST performance is greatly affecting students' mindsets and how they approach education and learning.

The second part of the interpre-views examined the impact of HST consequences, HST rituals, and HST customs established by SD school on students' overall education experience.

**HST Emphasis Shapes Students' Outlook on Education**

When a student is completing HST toward the end of the school year, many other experiences associated with HST have already occurred. These overlooked components experienced in the HST phenomenon are often disregarded as extraneous factors. The findings in this study, however, suggest that closer attention must be placed on all the practices that occur before, leading up to, and after HST. To examine all of the practices considered to be connected with HST, I engaged in a conversation about how students perceive and internalize practices that promote and advertise HST. The perceptions were further interpreted to determine the participants' general outlook on education. For this study, an *outlook* is defined as a person's point of view or attitude toward something, in this case, toward HST education. My reflective question continued to be considered: What type of learner has HST phenomenon created and how does this type of student navigate current education? Most of the students

commented that they felt the school valued test scores that met or exceeded performance goals above all else. Out of all the seven participants, one student's comment regarding SD's practices and rituals represented the common "lived experiences" found in each of the interviews:

> They had the luncheon for the kids who scored perfect or just a couple more points from perfect. Then the rest of the kids were just pushed aside. It made me feel bad because then I would think about my CST and then I would say I'm not even close to being perfect. I guess they should reward each of us because everybody is trying so hard to get out of ELD [a type of HST intervention] and they don't do anything [for us] at all. (Alicia)

Other participants also talked about the schools' lack of equality when it came to recognition. One student offered a suggestion: "They should look at my writing, or other work to determine if I am low, medium, or high" (Hachito). In addition to feeling excluded, students confirmed that they believe individualism is not valued. Pablo agreed with my describing being identified with a testing score: "Is it true to say that you believe every single students should be looked at as an individual not as a number? For example, here is a 321 student and here is a 400 student?" Pablo was not the only participant who felt schools should foster individualism by looking beyond test. Sol expressed how she felt dumb and full of doubt because she was placed in intervention year after year. By not building positivity around growth and placing so much emphasis on meeting testing targets, school are denying students the opportunity to create their personal educational visions that extend beyond the test.

One student's response clearly indicates that a broader definition of success needs to be considered to include more students: "They shouldn't just give it to the kids that score 600. They should give it to the kids that get near it or score at least some of that" (Bill). Frankie spoke adamantly about how schools should celebrate the individual: "What if it's 230, and now it's 330, you went up, right? Maybe it's not 600, but you went up!" When asked if he felt that his school recognized these scores, he gave me a sullen look and said, "no way--never." These conversations suggest that students perceive SD as valuing students who meet or exceed performance goals on HST over any other measures of learning. Each time students attend a recognition assembly for high-performing kids, observe a student getting a prize for his/her test score, hear an announcement of students who scored a perfect score on a high-stakes test, or see a group of kids be invited to a luncheon because of their scores, these students feel they are pushed further and further away from the educational spotlight. Ironically, these rituals and customs are designed to motivate these very students to perform better on the test, however, for all of the students I interviewed, these practices convinced them that they don't matter: " [Administration and teachers] shouldn't just give it to the kids that score 600. They should give it to the kids that get near it or score at least some of that" (Bill).

When asked about how intervention courses are connected to HST, many of the students interviewed felt intervention excluded them from the most engaging practices the school offered. All of the participants have yet to experience a mainstream elective. More recently, all of these students are

deemed ineligible to participate in the newly adopted STEM approach and "Project Lead the Way" courses at SD. These are programs that Sand Dollar has already invested hundreds of thousands of dollars into.

"Intervention keeps us back," Hachito states when asked about intervention practices at SD, and, she is right. If students are English language learners or low-scoring test performers, intervention trumps any other interest or opportunity that students may desire. Carlos understood the magnitude his test performance has on his life experience of HST, indicating that his classes depend on his test scores..

The connection between students' attitudes and behaviors and the values and beliefs of the school became intriguing to me because teachers often complain of the attitudes and behaviors students (generally intervention students) exhibit in class. It has been assumed that attitudes and behaviors are a by-product of family dynamics and other outside factors. Alhough these factors certainly may contribute to negative behaviors, they may not be the only contributing factors. The interviews posit that SD's values and beliefs are impacting students' lived experience of HST education and, as a result, impacting their attitudes and behaviors within the classroom. It is evident that SD's rituals and customs established, in part, the school's values and the beliefs. After the seven interpre-views, it was evident that the values and beliefs associated with HST were impacting the students' outlook on school and education in unintended ways. Regardless of whether the values and beliefs are intentional or passively being established at SD, the students' lived experience is

impacted, especially in how students approach an academic situation (attitude) and how they act (behavior) in a learning environment. Students cannot control what is valued in school, but they can control how they react to it.

Frankie, the study's most outspoken student, is considered by many teachers to have a negative attitude and overall negative demeanor. When analyzing his transcript, I considered Frankie the most articulate, reflective, and clear about his frustrations with the conditions set by SD, as evidenced again in his saying: "Sometimes they take me out of my classes and I would not like how they change my classes." When asked to elaborate on his feelings, he stated, "I'm done doing more work. I get lazy after years and years of more work. I don't want to do this anymore. I just gave up. I want zero, none of your (school's) help!"

Realizing the connection between Frankie's outlook and the conditions set by SD school could be a potentially important finding of this study. For Frankie, and students like him, it reveals the impact schools have on shaping students' overall outlook, which includes general feelings about school, attitude toward work and teachers, and behaviors in the classroom. For schools, it stresses the importance of evaluating the values and beliefs that are being established with routines and incentives promoting and highlighting only HST performance that meets or exceeds state targets.

In addition to interviews, students were asked to draw illustrations that represented how they experienced education under High Stakes testing. These pictures were used to facilitate conversations about feelings. Students were all very thoughtful when they began to draw and took time by adding dialogue

bubbles or other details significant to them. Following are some of the conversations that resulted from the pictures below regarding how HST makes them feel:


*Figure 3.* Picture drawn by Pablo.

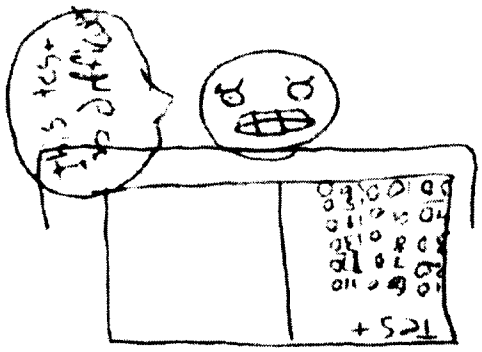

*Figure 4.* Picture drawn by Bill.

"Now that I am getting older, I feel like I need to do way better than ever" (Issac). "I always feel nervous that I am going to mess up and not get the classes I want again" (Bill). Pablo stated that his family puts a lot of value on test scores, and consequently, he feels a lot of pressure to perform better: "Like kind of my family. They tell me, 'Oh it's your future. You got to pick it up if you want to do better.'" Finally, one student draws and discusses his frustration with the lackluster results of ongoing intervention: "Sometimes I feel like I'm not learning at all because I've been having ELD for like three years, but then, I have like good grades in my classes so I don't know why I'm still in ELD" (Sol). Most students seemed very connected to how HST made them feel. Other questions asked during this interview included greater pauses and clarification between the researcher and the participant, but when it came time to ask how does HST make you feel, students would roll their eyes, clasp their hands, cave in their chest, breathe deeply and become very serious. As Pablo stated, hesitating only to shift his body as described above, " I feel so much pressure." Many studies have concluded that HST is a stressful, lived experience for students; however, this study adds to this understanding by revealing that the negative feelings students exhibit toward HST manifest themselves into specific actions, behaviors, and outlooks toward education and learning.

For schools like SD, it stresses the importance of evaluating the values and beliefs that are being established with routines and incentives promoting and highlighting only HST performance that meets or exceeds state targets. Most importantly, SD must take into account the impact these values and beliefs are

having on students' learning. The data is clear that changing students' educational experience can impact students' educational outlook. Schools I must take responsibility for their contributions to the shaping of attitudes and behaviors of students. The final theme explores how HST education leaves these students feeling marginalized and left behind.

**HST Denies Low-Performing Students Equal Opportunity**

The last theme students developed in this phenomenological study reveals a result in direct contrast to the intent of HST policy. Throughout the interpre-views, students engaged in similar dialogues regarding their experiences of being left out and excluded from what they believed was the best classes and activities SD had to offer. For example, Frankie stated, "I felt like, hold on. Hello, a lot of people feel a little left out." Issac comments, "I don't think they should do that [reward students who score high on HST]. I think they should just if you did good then you did good, if you did bad then you did bad. I don't think they should reward the people who did good". Many students expressed feeling like they were students looking from the outside in.

An interesting dichotomy emerged in many of these interpre-views. Even though, students perceived they were stuck in a never ending if-and-then experience—if you (students) reach your performance scores then you will be allowed to participate in enrichment classes and other "fun" activities—most students interviewed felt that teachers as well as other adult stakeholders had sincere intentions to help them successfully exit interventions. I saw this as a contrast, because on one hand students considered these exclusionary practices

flawed. On the other hand, students would often disassociate the teachers from these exclusionary practices. Students commented that they felt teachers wanted to help them and trusted that the teachers had their best interests in mind. One student commented, "I have a D minus and [my history teacher] wants me to raise it up, and she keeps me in because she wants to help me. Not all teachers do that. She does have different feelings for me" (Hachito). When Frankie discussed how teachers position themselves in the HST phenomenon I confirmed with him whether the following was an accurate statement of his feelings: "Frankie, are you saying teachers definitely try to help all students regardless of test scores?" (Interviewer). Frankie confirmed and continued to say, "Truthfully, teachers are here to help you." This unyielding trust in teachers suggests that students still believe that adults in education generally have good intentions. Students believe that, in the end, the teachers and the school is providing for them the best opportunities to succeed. However, the literature supports a critical interpretation of this unyielding trust for teachers. For students, separating systemic practices from teacher interactions has powerful implications that students may not be equipped to understand given their age. The research suggests that the illusion of opportunity often goes unchallenged because of widely held beliefs that adult stakeholders in education only have students' best interest in mind.

Howe (1997) argues that, for many students, opportunities are merely a sham or an illusion (p. 18) because, unbeknownst to students (for this study, "students" is referring to students in interventions due to HST performance),

decisions about how students experience school is left to the judgment of adult stakeholders, availability of courses, or accountability of policy. For example, students who demonstrate notable growth in ELD will remain limited to enrolling in certain courses until they officially reclassify into mainstream education. This means that accelerated content courses, exploratory courses such as tech education and robotics, and fine arts are not an option for them until they meet all reclassification criteria. So in truth, equal education is being denied to students who need it most. Within the same book, O'Neill remarks that "Equalizing educational results is fundamentally different from equalizing educational opportunity (1976, as cited in Howe, 1997, p. 17).

Many of the students interviewed relied on their own personal experiences when it came to discussing teachers, administrators, and other leaders in education. It was unexpected to hear all the students express their belief in teachers and generally accept the decisions as decisions that had their best interest in mind. I believe it is important to keep Howe's (1997) research in mind and ask to what extent adult stakeholders have misused the trust bestowed on us by students.

Students believe they are being left behind due to HST performance policy, what students don't realize is the local control schools have to provide a variety of experiences under HST education. Local gatekeepers hold much more power and control than most students realize. This leaves the onus of failure on adult stakeholders more than on students themselves. Neither students nor families are making most educational decisions for themselves. Counselors, teachers,

administrators, coordinators are shaping the experience of education for students, not the other way around; therefore, better attention must be paid to the classes we create, the pedagogy we practice, and the opportunities we provide.

## Summary

The goal of this study was to bring to the forefront student voices and lived experiences of HST education. The focus of the research was to understand the impact HST phenomenon had beyond the academic. Equally important in the research is the theoretical foundation for this study, which required we look at these lived experiences and reflect whether how we educate provides a just, equitable and enriching experience for all students. The participants represent the voices of many who, like them, are living a specific type of education because of test performance and are approaching learning in a ways that have been shaped by the phenomenon they are experiencing. The narratives indicate that students are receiving certain messages. These messages will be introduced and discussed in Chapter 5, which will further discuss and interpret the major findings of this study and present conclusion, recommendations, and implications for further study.

# CHAPTER 5

# DISCUSSION

This research aimed to highlight the voices of students experiencing HST as a phenomenon. The lived experiences of seven students were captured through interpre-views and illustrations. The conversations focused on what impact HST education has beyond the academic. The purpose of this study was to reveal the lifeworlds of students and to reveal the nonacademic outcomes that are being experienced and impacted through HST education. In this chapter, the study's findings were applied to the theoretical foundation. The research in the literature helps us to interpret these lived experiences and evaluate if how we educate provides a just, equitable and enriching experience for all students The participants represent the voices of many who, like them, are living a specific type of education due to test performance.

The Socratic-hermeneutic phenomenological approach to this study provided a nonthreatening, conversational approach to the interviews. The essential questions included in the conversations were:

1. What experiences have you had directly related to high-stakes testing?
2. How do schools, teachers, and administrators help you experience high-stakes testing education?

My question that were not part of the conversations but considered in throughout the interpretive process was what type of learner has the HST phenomenon created and how does this type of student navigate current education?

Through one-on-one semistructured interviews, seven students were given the unique opportunity to discuss HST education in their own words. After transcribing, memo writing, and coding all the interviews, four prominent themes emerged. This chapter will first interpret the essential findings/themes and connect the literature reviewed for this study with the four major findings/themes that were discussed in Chapter 4. Implications for policy and practice will follow, and the chapter will end with recommendations, and a conclusion of the study.

## Interpretations of Findings

The narratives compiled through the interview process indicated that students are receiving the following messages: (a) I fail to meet my testing performance goals year-after-year; therefore, I must not be smart enough. (b) Small yet significant improvements in low performing students test performance is not valued in my school; therefore, I am my learning is not valued. (c) My test scores will always be low; therefore, all the enrichment opportunities and elective classes are not meant for me. These messages will be included in the discussion of the four major findings. Each major finding will be interpreted and discussed individually and supported and critiqued with either the study's empirical research and literary framework or both when appropriate. The sections that follow provide interpretations of each finding.

**Learning and HST**

The findings indicate that the students' self-perception is impacted by HST education. The finding is supported in the research that concluded how students feel about themselves and their abilities affects their overall academic performance and their approach to learning: "Compelling evidence from a variety of sources suggests that mindsets can have a powerful impact on academic performance in general, and in particular for how students behave and perform in the face of challenge" (Shechtman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall, 2013, p. 23). Self-perception is part of Bandura's theories on "self-systems." Self-perception is the mindset that encompasses general feeling about one's capabilities, especially in challenging situations. The findings reveal that students are convinced that they are lacking the intelligence and ability to meet HST performance goals. A critical interpretation of the findings is that the student narratives suggest students utilize HST performance as a measure of their capabilities and intelligence. Consequently, because these students are consistently scoring below the performance goals, students develop and maintain a negative self-perception and an overall negative approach to learning. As mentioned in the findings, students approach learning as consumers of information rather than creators of knowledge. This distinction changes the landscape of education because students are passive rather than engaged and dynamic. This suggests an answer to the following question: Does negative self-perception result in low-test performance, or does low test performance result in negative self-perception? It is evident that the exchange between the experience

and the student create, mold, and transform students in ways that manifest themselves in future academic endeavors and general perceptions of school.

In addition to literature on the power of mindsets, support for the impact certain conditions and approaches surrounding HST may have on students is provided by this finding from Roderick and Engel's study: "How teachers, parents, and peers Interact with students in relation to the policy [HST]—may be the most important factor in determining how students respond to the incentive" (2001, p. 201).

The participants of the study expressed that the "interactions" associated with their HST performance has them feeling marginalized and dejected.

Observational learning theory established that behaviors and attitudes are a result of direct experiences or through observation of others (Bandura, 1971). This means if students experience being excluded from opportunitiesand recognition ceremonies directly related to their test scores, students are learning that they are not smart enough and do not possess the abilities demonstrated by others. Knowing that these exclusionary practices happened more than once to all of these students, the research can conclude that students are confirming these negative perceptions they have of themselves each time they are excluded. Self-perception comes from many outside influences: family, peers, and other important figures (Bandura, 1971). However, the findings suggest that one major outside influence that has not been appropriately addressed is the experience associated with HST education. Finally, closer attention must be placed on how

outlooks vary within students and whether that variance depends on the way they are experiencing education.

**Overrating HST Performance Undervalues Students**

Values are the driving principles established within an individual, family community, or institution. Values can be broadly defined as the ideals that are of the upmost importance. For all seven students, SD's values were leaving them feeling undervalued. The second major finding suggests that SD's dedication to HST accountability has made some success seem insignificant and not substantial enough to matter. Although it could be postulated that most schools would rank equality as a top priority and as something that is deeply valued, schools like SD have bought in to the idea that equal results mean equal opportunity. The research in this study clearly establishes this belief as a negative shift in the educational value system creating an equally negative outlook in low-performing students. Exhaustive research exists in this study and beyond on the negative impact HST accountability has when it is prioritized over all other aspects of education. Daniel Dennet calls this negative shift "political retrograde" (1987, as cited in Howe, 1997, p. 18). The findings revealed that students feel embarrassed and segregated from their peers because of HST practices. These lived experiences are contrary to what you would expect students to express in an equitable and just educational system. Isaac's words encapsulate the reality of what students feel when you value accountability of students: "If you don't do good in your test, next year you might be put to classes

that are very low and it makes you feel like you don't want to tell anyone about your classes."

The impact of HST at SD extends beyond the obvious. The decisions made in the name of accountability have created a culture and climate that reflects the values of SD and impacts the educational outlook of students. SD bases all of its curriculum, opportunities, and interventions on yearly HST scores, and this study's results seems to support the research that asserts that low-performing students are receiving a narrowed curriculum with limited educational experiences and opportunity (Shepard, 1990, as cited in Roderick & Engel, 2001). Regardless of whether these practices are passively supported or overtly taught, students' interaction with the education experience is impacted negatively well beyond the academic.

**Intervention over Real Opportunity**

The last finding indicated that students feel left out of an ideal education experienced by other peers who are meeting HST performance goals. The most conclusive aspect of this finding is not that students feel left behind but that most students justified the practice as being in their best interest. This acceptance of conditions expressed by all of the students is discussed alongside the compelling research on equal opportunity education presented by Howe.

Howe (1997) argues that, for many students (such as the students in interventions due to HST performance), opportunities are merely a sham or an illusion, for unbeknownst to students, decisions about how students experience school is left to the judgment of adult stakeholders, the availability of courses, or

accountability of policy (Howe, 1997). This means students take education at face value and believe the education they are experiencing is the best they can be offered. This does not mean students are excited about the curriculum they are offered. On the contrary, many of the students expressed feelings of shame and embarrassment regarding their classes. For example, Issac stated, "If you don't do good in your test, you might be put to classes that are very low and it makes you feel like you don't want to tell anyone about your classes." The response from this student in this study parallels the responses of students from a study on intervention led by Donalson and Halsey (2007). That case study explored the perceptions of adolescent readers in a remedial reading class and concluded the following: "Students reported feelings of powerlessness when it came to school. Most students interviewed found out the first day of school they were in intervention and felt they could do nothing about their circumstances" (Donalson & Halsey, 2007, p. 24). Students in my study experienced the same feeling of powerlessness. Frankie states, "Sometimes they take me out my classes and I wouldn't like how they change it." Students are aware that their class options revolve around their HST scores. Students accept this practice because they believe the school must be correctly correlating testing results with class opportunities.

However the research in Howe's book states clearly, "equalizing educational results is fundamentally different from equalizing educational opportunity (O'Neill, 1976, as cited in Howe, 1997, p. 17). Howe's (1997) work on understanding equal educational opportunity supports the interpretation that

students and perhaps even teachers hold erroneous assumptions regarding intervention and real opportunity.

Finally, interpreting the students' comments of support for a system they dislike yet accept through the theoretical lens of critical pedagogy offers another layer of analysis. Freire (2000) wrote about the acceptance of roles of both the oppressor as well as the oppressed. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* he explained how those who are oppressed know their roles and may sometimes feel afraid of real freedom. The scope of this study does not allow for the deep conversations that would need to transpire between the researcher and the student to explore and discuss this further; however, given the answers that were provided by students regarding the acceptance of their fate and the general blind trust in the system, it is certainly a consideration for future studies.

Students trust adults in charge of their education. They believe that adults making decisions have their best interest in mind. The unwavering loyalty from students despite their disillusionment with their schedules is a reminder of the immense responsibility adults have in providing an equitable and just education. We owe it to our students to be self-accountable and to question our motives and our practices each time we make decisions affecting a student's life experience.

## Implications

### Soft Skills

Educational policy must address the importance of developing, cultivating, and refining "soft skills." Students must be given the opportunity to develop an awareness of how certain emotional attributes evolve, thrive, and influence their

behaviors and attitudes (see Dweck, 2006). Funding needs to become available for teacher training in emotional intelligence, and emotional intelligence awareness must move beyond current character education programs that only superficially promote certain clusters of personality traits. Self-perception (often called *mindfulness*) of students must be prioritized as a critical component of academic success. It must be understood that self-perception and a person's outlook is a result of a multitude of entry points, including teacher interaction and a school's culture and climate. Most importantly, school stakeholders need to stop underestimating the affect they have on how students' navigate their educational experiences. Dweck's (2006) research reminds us that traits that lead to academic success are malleable, and the decisions teachers, counselors, and administrations make for students all send messages to students about their abilities and intelligence. These messages eventually manifest themselves in how students act, interact, and counteract with the learning process.

Future research must include the effectiveness and impact of curriculum that develops creativity and positive perceptions about what students are capable of learning. Best practices must be identified regarding lesson planning, assessment, and feedback that approaches learning from a developmental perspective rather than a deficit standpoint. Students need to understand that learning is a life-long journey where setbacks are seen as temporary situations that provide information on how to continue to grow and learn.

Finally, an immediate change in practice must include a more comprehensive understanding of accountability. Common formative assessments

(CFA) administered throughout the year for immediate feedback and curriculum adjustments need to be implemented at SD. When a school has ongoing smaller scale assessments that are used as roadmaps to help students, HST begins to loosen its grip on students' life experience. The consequences of HST as they stand today at SD are too high; shifting the focus away from HST to CFA could potentially change the lifeworlds of students like the ones introduced in this study.

**Reestablishing School Ideals**

This study confirms that the beliefs and values of an institution can impact lasting attitudes and behavior. Messages of what a school believes and values are all around campus: signs, assemblies, newsletters, incentives, class configurations, and recognition awards all convey a message to students. The message students at SD are receiving is that their value as a member of that school is directly related to their HST score. SD must evaluate its practices surrounding HST and begin to instill a more positive approach to testing performance results, such as celebrating progress over perfection.

Evaluation should include surveys from all stakeholders surveying the perceived values of SD. Future research should include examining the connections between students' behavior and attitude and the institution's' values. Practices surrounding HST must be evaluated critically by asking what messages—intentional and unintentional—are conveyed.

SD's value system is the result of policy accountability. With the shifting from NCLB state standards to Common Core standards, a new approach to testing accountability may evolve. Common Core assessments promise to be

more project based and evaluate critical thinking over rote memorization. The shift in policy focus provides an ideal opportunity for SD to regain its focus on students, not test scores.

**Opportunity Over Intervention**

The findings in the study suggest that SD must undertake a seismic shift with its intervention programs. In congruence with the work of Critical theorists like Frieire, Darder, and Kozol, this study advocates for a complete overhaul of educational practices under HST, beginning with developing students to be creators instead of consumers. Passive students are a result of the environment we have created in classrooms. Students are approaching learning as a set of factoids that must be memorized and obstacles that must be met instead of viewing learning as a process of how to think, grow, and reveal how they can become productive and happy citizens.

First, opportunities like field trips, projects, and art education are often not available for low-performing students. Providing these experiences and opportunities to all students regardless of HST performance would be the start of a more equitable and just education.

Second, education policy continues to follow the "deficit model to education. First described by Freire, the deficit model is an approach to student learning similar to a bank deposit. Information is disseminated and students are expected to internalize and memorize factoids (Freire, 2000). Education needs to consider the philosophy that students begin school with funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzales, 1992). When education accepts that students all have something to

contribute and all have potential, it will begin to naturally sway away from striving for equal results and begin to work towards equal opportunity.

Future studies should include an investigation of how creative application of resources, such as money, teachers, electives, and afterschool programs, enhances the experience of low-performing students and the impact such creativity can have on academic success in comparison with traditional intervention models.

## Recommendations

The study's findings and the review of the literature have resulted in three recommendations for improving how students experience HST education. The three recommendations are as follows: (a) Every student should have an equal possibility to all the opportunities. (b) Mindfulness should be core content taught to all students to help them successfully navigate through their education. (c) Internal accountability must be included in the school's yearly evaluation.

### Shift to a Growth Model

The most important recommendation that needs immediate action is shifting the model of education from a deficit model to a growth model. We must take heed of the suggestions that Frankie affirms during the interview: "Frankie what I hear you saying is, you're tired of this. You don't want to do this type of school anymore. A school experience that means if a test is low, let's give him intervention, but then we give you intervention, and, for you, you're saying, 'It actually has made you try less.' You want a different experience" (interviewer). "Yes! That's exactly what I want to say" (Frankie).

In a growth model, schools do not rely on HST performance alone to place students in classes or interventions. Instead, ongoing smaller snapshots of students' performance known as CFA guides student learning and provides for specific and specialized support. Moreover, students are not marginalized in what Darder (2012) calls a dehumanizing curriculum. The study affirms that intervention has not only proven unsuccessful in many schools, it has proven harmful and counterproductive for our most vulnerable students. Opportunity over intervention aims to look at how we can enrich a student's lifeworld, not how we can fill in the academic gaps. Doing so has only alienated students. The stakes are too high if one test leaves such a devastating impact.

**Mindfulness Should Be Core Content**

A rigorous curriculum focusing on student's noncognitive skills needs to be implemented nationwide. The findings suggest that students are developing certain outlooks and approaching learning in a very specific way as a result of how we educate. Knowing the power that experiences have in shaping students, character posters and generic lessons interwoven haphazardly throughout the year is nowhere close to the level of depth that is needed to reshape our most vulnerable students. Bandura's (1971, 1986) seminal work on self-efficacy is still relevant for today's student. Recent research continues to offer compelling evidence of the power of mindfulness and positive self-perception (Tough, 2013). Educators can no longer have their heads in the sand about the impact they have on students' outlook on learning. Stakeholders are responsible for many of the behaviors and attitudes they complain about. Shifting from being reactive to

being proactive will have lasting benefits for students as well on the culture and climate of education in general. Teaching students the habits of scholarliness, the power of grit, and the goal of learning as progress not perfection are all strategies that can have lasting effects on students' approach to learning.

**Internal Accountability Must Be Included in Yearly Evaluations**

Each year, a school must review its schools goals under federal policy. This final recommendation would include adding an evaluation of the schools values and beliefs as perceived by students and parents as part of its school review process. Until we give equal attention to the impact our decisions have on students beyond academic, these reports are incomplete. Numbers, graphs, chart,s and quantitative data are only partial accounts of what students experience in school. Surveys, interviews, and other qualitative data must be included in formal reports to give it the importance it merits. For example Hoffman and Nottis (2008) assert that the voices and perspectives of students can never be heard through the voices of adults, yet we seldom include their student voices in formal evaluations about the education they are experiencing first-hand. The last finding in this study suggests that many students are not experiencing an education that positions them in a place of any power of control. Education is happening to them not with them. Students need to have a role in their journey of being educated.

## Summary of the Dissertation

Rawls (1971) writes, "The social system is not an unchangeable order beyond human control but a pattern of human action (p. 102). This study

explored what nonacademic factors are resulting from the HST phenomenon. The study's findings reveal that in the pursuit of policy accountability adult stakeholders in education are not being accountable to our most vulnerable students. HST phenomenon is impacting how students feel about themselves and how they position themselves in this HST landscape. Actions always speak louder than words, and the actions students are experiencing are telling them they don't matter, they are not smart enough, and they are excluded from the best opportunities because of their low testing performance. The study cannot claim that all these actions are a result of a deliberate plan but rather a result of a system that is so deeply entrenched as status quo that few ever bother to critique or challenge the way things are done. But as Rawls asserts, we are victims of habit; it is not beyond us to change things drastically and immediately.

This study was conducted through the lens of critical theory and critical pedagogy. As mentioned in the literary review, Bronner defines critical theory as a "theory [that is] always concerned not merely with how things were but how they might be and should be" (2011, Kindle ed., location 423). Things are not how they should be in education, especially for the students that struggle. They are being left behind and not given the opportunities and experiences others are granted because of their numerical score on a test. This study ends with a final plea to always keep in mind that students will forevermore be more than a number.

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