African American Perceptions of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and High School Graduation

Maressa L. Dixon

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African American Perceptions of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)
and High School Graduation

by

Maressa L. Dixon

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts Department of Anthropology College of Arts and Sciences University of South Florida

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Keywords: high school students, qualitative research, standardized testing, achievement gap, Critical Race Theory

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Ronald and Brenda Dixon, who supported me in words and deeds throughout the course of my education. Knowing that education neither begins nor ends with formal schooling, their parental guidance has encouraged me to reach beyond heights I could only imagine. For that, I am eternally grateful.
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African American Perceptions of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and High School Graduation

Maressa L. Dixon

ABSTRACT

While there is ample research theorizing reasons for so-called “achievement gaps” between African American and White students on standardized tests, few studies explore African Americans’ perceptions of the impact these tests have on overall education. Through interviews with six current students attending Hillsborough County public high schools, one recent graduate of a Hillsborough County high school, and two parents of students in Hillsborough County public schools, this research study probes participants’ perceptions of the impact of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) on their high school experiences. All participants in the study identified as African American or Black. Through archival research and participant observation with the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope (TBAH), a non-profit organization dedicated to developing leadership, behavioral, and academic skills for inner-city middle and high school students, this study also investigates the role of community-based organizations in facilitating the successful navigation of academic and bureaucratic challenges for African American students and
parents in the quest for academic success at and beyond the high school level in Hillsborough County.

The consequences of standardized testing in the Hillsborough County schools participants have attended reach beyond individuals’ successful graduation, affecting course options, academic tracking, school structure, and school climate. Here I argue that standardized testing is another method of academic tracking, and school-wide penalties and rewards associated with disaggregated standardized test scores impact student and parent perceptions of school climate and school-family relationship.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The research conducted as a part of this thesis was completed between June 2007 and February 2008 in Hillsborough County (Tampa), Florida. During the course of this research the author worked as an intern with the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope (TBAH), a non-profit leadership academy serving urban families. The mission of the TBAH is to, “instill in youth the values of becoming, knowing, belonging, and giving” (Tampa Bay Academy of Hope 2008) through its Leadership Through Education model. According to the organization’s website, this model focuses on “school attendance, school behavior, academic achievement, self-esteem, and leadership” (Tampa Bay Academy of Hope 2008). Working as an intern with this program allowed me to engage in discussions and interviews with African American students and parents concerning the impact of standardized testing on graduation and the overall quality of education they receive through the School District of Hillsborough County. This research originally focused on students who had taken the Tenth-Grade Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) at least once, and their parents. Due to research constraints, this study focuses only on student participants. This largely qualitative study was conducted in an effort to better understand the ways participants think about and experience the FCAT and graduation. I also explore the role community organizations such as the TBAH play in
addressing educational issues for African American students. The resulting study outlines the social context within which Hillsborough County high schools operate, efforts at remedying educational problems initiated by the TBAH, and participants’ views and opinions regarding the FCAT and graduation.

Research Problem and Purpose

While there is ample research theorizing reasons for so-called “achievement gaps” between African American and White students on standardized tests, few studies explore African Americans’ perceptions of the impact these tests have on other aspects of schooling. Anthropologists who study the intersection of African American student achievement, education policy, and culture have recently called for increased qualitative inquiry into the “multiple effects” of high stakes testing on individuals, groups, and schools (see March 2007 special issue of Anthropology & Education Quarterly). Part of this inquiry that deserves particular attention from the research community, educators, policymakers, grassroots organizations, and the general public, alike, is the voice of the students – their experiences, opinions, perceptions, and recommendations for change.

The research problems I address with this study permeate multiple layers of our understanding of African American student achievement and the tests that measure this achievement. First and foremost, deficit models of African American achievement continue to dominate the research literature, whereby researchers ask “why are African American students failing?” before examining the contexts in which success and failure are defined and realized. Second, African American students are most commonly considered a monolithic group, marked by academic failure, socio-economic disadvantage, and limited access to high quality schools. Third, policy research remains
heavily skewed toward outcomes that can be easily measured by statistics, like test scores and demographic makeup; this study examines the influence of educational policies on school culture and individual perceptions, which in turn may influence quantifiable outcomes. Finally, efforts at school reform and school improvement target a large range of stakeholders, from state governmental bodies to individual families. African American students and parents are more than just objects of reform directed at them, but are agents who actively negotiate these reforms and can analyze their effectiveness based on experiential knowledge.

This study addresses these four research problems primarily through qualitative inquiry, specifically semi-structured and unstructured interviewing, participant-observation, and archival data analysis. I also include exploratory and descriptive statistical analyses where appropriate in order to better contextualize the larger school district from which study participants draw their experiential knowledge. The purpose of this study is to better understand the ways African American students frame their thinking concerning the Tenth-Grade Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and graduation.

This study tackles the first research problem – the dominance of deficit models in examining African American academic achievement – by consciously avoiding questions of individual student achievement, except when students were asked if they received the test scores they originally expected and if they are on track for graduation. The ways administrators and teachers discuss achievement for the schools these students attend were explored in depth during the interview process. The purpose of this line of questioning was to gauge participants’ awareness of and opinions regarding the impact of
teachers’ and administrators’ discussions of the school’s overall achievement on school climate. The demographic and achievement profile of the Hillsborough County School District is also provided through descriptive and exploratory statistical analyses, with the purpose of providing a broader context within which these individual students have been educated. This study focuses on participants’ opinions and attitudes toward the Tenth-Grade Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), including their perceptions of the test’s impact on individual student achievement (i.e. graduation) and overall school climate.

The second research problem – the tendency to treat African American students as a monolithic group – is addressed by the very diversity of study participants. Some students in this study were enrolled in honors and Advanced Placement courses, others were tracked into regular academic courses, and others participated in technical/vocational programs or exceptional education courses. Complicating any simple academic characterizations even further, some students placed in advanced academic tracks initially did not pass one or more portions of the FCAT, and others placed in low academic tracks expressed a distinct awareness of their misplacement. As is the case for many qualitative studies, this research highlights the nuances of individual students’ achievement that are often lost when individuals are analyzed as small parts of a larger whole.

The third research problem – a preoccupation with statistically analyzable demographic and academic characteristics – is addressed by foregrounding student experiences and opinions. It is not my intention to suggest that statistical analysis is of little value; on the contrary, this study includes statistical analyses and quantitative data.
Neither do I claim that studies of African American students’ experiences and opinions have not been conducted in the past. The aim of this research is, in fact, to add to our understanding of student perceptions and experiences, painting a more holistic picture of the current state of education for African American students in a specific time and a specific place. The goal of this investigation is to move toward a more complex understanding of what it means to be an African American student in an urban school setting.

I examine the fourth research problem – the tendency to treat student populations as objects of educational reform and improvement rather than agents negotiating those reforms – through the very subject matter and participants involved in this research project. In other words, this project is rooted in a fundamental belief that African American students are cogently aware of and act in response to educational reform initiatives. The current wave of national education reform outlines local, state, and federal educational standards and utilizes statewide tests to assess students’ acquisition of these standards. Not only are students aware of the academic consequences of (not) meeting those standards for individuals and schools, they are uniquely aware of the school-based social impact of those standards. The goal of this study is to elucidate the ways by which participants frame their thoughts surrounding reform initiatives that stress the importance of standardized testing to academic advancement and graduation.

The scope of this research project does not allow us to conclusively solve these and other research problems for all African American students in the country, this school district, or even the individual schools the participants attended. However, this study is one piece of a larger corpus of knowledge regarding African American students’
experiences in urban high schools. This research is intended to offer a glimpse into the ways African American students understand and act in accordance with educational reform efforts largely targeted at them.

**Significance of Thesis**

This study is important in that it provides African Americans’ perspectives on the consequences of standardized testing for individuals, the schools they attend, and, by extension, the entire School District of Hillsborough County. By focusing on the perceptions of students, this study adds to the research community’s relatively limited understanding of the ways these students view standardized testing and the larger school structures impacted by such testing. By examining one community-based organization’s involvement in educational issues for African American students, this thesis is also significant in providing a glimpse into the non-school-based structures meant to improve student performance in schools. Combining student perceptions with overall demographic and achievement profiles for the schools they attend, this study is important in its contextualization of the experiences and perceptions recorded. This study helps us connect two types of knowledge about education for African Americans: experiential (qualitative) knowledge and statistical (quantitative) knowledge. In other words, this research is significant in that it links what these participants experience in the day-to-day operations of a school with the measures of academic achievement and efficacy that are officially recognized as measures of accountability to local, state, and federal officials, as well as parents, potential students, researchers, and other community members.

While the FCAT and graduation goals were developed by specific policymakers and educators for a specific state, the issues they raise are important to many
communities around the nation. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 ties school accountability and funding to standardized tests, and researchers in many disciplines are examining the direct and indirect consequences of this testing for individual students, for schools, and for school districts (Valenzuela, et. al. 2007). This study is significant as an addition to this body of literature meant to augment, not necessarily replace, the knowledge we have to date concerning African American students and standardized testing.

The Use of Terms

Certain terms used throughout the remainder of this thesis are important to understand and define before proceeding. This study specifically focuses on African American students’ perceptions and opinions, with African Americans defined as citizens with African ancestry born in the United States. The terms African American and Black are used purposefully throughout this study. The term “Black” is used to include all people of African ancestry and categorized as “Black,” particularly in official education statistics, regardless of national origin. The term “Black” is used extensively in the chapter describing the history of Hillsborough County schools, as segregation separated residents by skin color and (perceived) African origin rather than national origin. When discussing the participants of this particular study, the term “African American” is used, as participants all identified as Americans with African ancestry, though they sometimes used Black and African American interchangeably when speaking.

Throughout the thesis I use several terms to refer to the School District of Hillsborough County. The “School District of Hillsborough County” and “Hillsborough County School District” are the official names provided by the district in question.
However, the terms “Hillsborough County schools,” the “Hillsborough school district,”
“the school district,” and “the district” are all used to denote the School District of
Hillsborough County. Furthermore, the court case ordering desegregation (Manning vs.
the School District of Hillsborough County) was filed in 1958, when the school district’s
official name was “the Board of Public Instruction of Hillsborough County.” This name,
however, is only used for citation purposes in this manuscript.

Other terms relate to theoretical issues. The term “school culture” is used to refer
to attitudes and behaviors exhibited by multiple actors (e.g. students, teachers, and
administrators) within a school, attitudes and behaviors that are influenced by school
policies and practices. The term “school climate” is similar to “school culture,” but refers
more specifically to the mood or atmosphere within a school as students perceive it.
School climate is also influenced by school policies and practices. Finally, “school
structure” refers to the ways courses are organized within a school and the ways students
are organized based on course taking. Student participants in this study attended schools
with two different types of school structures. One type of structure characterized the
medical/technical school, where all students participated in a program focused on a
specific medical or technical track and their course taking depended in the specific track.
The other type of school structure separated students into either a “traditional” track –
general course taking – or a “magnet” track – Advanced Placement/Honor’s courses and
a focus on the specific magnet program offered (either arts or science/engineering). These
specific school structures will be further defined later.
Thesis Organization

This thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter One provides a brief introduction to the research conducted as a part of this thesis project. This chapter includes an overview of the research problems and purpose, the significance of this thesis, the usage of terms, and an outline of the chapters ahead. Chapter Two describes the research setting in detail, including a brief history of Hillsborough County schools, a description of the school choice options currently available to Hillsborough County high school students, and the community organization with which the researcher worked to recruit participants in the research. Chapter Three provides a literature review of the pertinent issues addressed by this research. These issues include anthropology and education, African American students and the academic achievement, the movement for standardization in American public schools, and community organizations and African American student achievement. Chapter Four outlines the research design and operationalization, including the specific research questions, definitions of the specific domains of interest the research addresses, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures.

Chapters Five and Six relate directly to the results of this research. Chapter Five describes the results in detail, including the important themes generated from the qualitative data and the results of quantitative analyses. Chapter Six summarizes the results of the study and offers recommendations for future studies of African American students, standardized testing, and graduation. This final chapter also includes students’ recommendations for improving FCAT testing and researcher recommendations to organizations like the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope.
CHAPTER TWO

Research Setting

The School District of Hillsborough County, FL

Tampa, located within the limits of Hillsborough County, Florida, has a history of race relations that is unique in some ways and typical in many others when compared to other major cities throughout the nation, particularly in the South. It is fair to characterize similarly the development, segregation, and desegregation of public education in Hillsborough County. With a substantial and growing Black population since its incorporation, the city of Tampa and the surrounding unincorporated Hillsborough County has endured some of the same historically persistent racialized challenges to social and educational justice as has been experienced across the South. It is not so much the school district’s responses to these various challenges that earns Hillsborough County a designation as “unique” in the long American fight for equity in education, but the unique convergence of time and place that composes a compelling context within which that fight still rages today. This brief history outlines the development of a race-segregated public school system in Hillsborough County, the historically Black high schools that served as community institutions for African Americans, and the struggle for and consequences of desegregation.
A Brief History of African American Education in Hillsborough County

Located in the central west coastal region of Florida, Tampa is a city that grew from a small town to a relatively populous Southern port city during the decade of the 1880s. As school districts encompass entire counties in the Florida educational system, the School District of Hillsborough County has always included schools in the inner-city of Tampa as well as in the less densely populated, relatively less ethnically diverse surrounding areas. The nesting of this urban center within a larger county-wide school system is the first unique characteristic of Hillsborough schools that has shaped historical and contemporary mechanisms through which the state delivers public education to its diverse citizenry. While many school districts in the southeastern United States are also contiguous with county boundaries (Orfield and Lee 2005: 4), this situation is not widely found in other areas of the country. As will be explored, the inclusion of urban, suburban, and rural settings within one school district offered opportunities for providing equal access to education that have alternately been capitalized upon and overlooked.

In step with the short-lived, progressive, justice-seeking political wave that was Reconstruction, the Florida Constitution “authorized the establishment of a uniform public education system” in 1868, though a school serving Black students is reported to have been constructed in Tampa as early as 1867 (Shircliffe 2000: 474). Shircliffe tells us that most communities in the South, including Florida, commonly segregated schools by race even in the absence of public laws requiring them to do so (2000: 474). Tampa’s Black residents opened a school for Black students in 1870, fifteen years before the legislature would follow local customs and segregate schools legally (Shircliffe 2000:}
Reconstruction’s heady promise of Black political representation and universal education was beginning to fade almost as quickly as it had appeared.

Beginning in 1885, statewide laws were enacted that ensured the inferiority of educational facilities and instruction for Black residents of the state (Shircliffe 2000: 473-475). These Jim Crow laws explicitly mandated educational inequity between White and Black children, to the extent that not even the textbooks were spared the iron hand of segregation. Shircliffe (2000: 474) tells us that, under a 1903 amendment to a free textbook provision in state law, the Florida legislature declared it illegal for a White student to use a textbook formerly used by a Black student. All aspects of schooling – from the establishment of separate tax bases to distinct teacher pay scales based upon race and gender – sustained state interventions that limited Black students’ access to educational opportunities compared to those enjoyed by White students (Shircliffe 2000: 473-475). Nevertheless, Southern Black communities in Tampa and elsewhere continued to nurture educational institutions in the face of this blatant educational injustice, primarily through grassroots efforts and embedded within such community-based institutions as churches and civic societies.

It is through community-based organizing and advocacy that Black residents established Tampa’s first high school training courses for Black youth in 1914 (Shircliffe 2000: 475). Through at least the year 1926, Black students in Tampa could only receive free high school training at overcrowded school sites sharing faculty, facilities, and equipment with elementary-aged students, a trend that began improving from the opening (in 1926) to the official accreditation (in 1935) of Booker T. Washington Senior High School. In 1935 Howard W. Blake became the principal of “the first ‘real’ high school
for African Americans in the county” (Shircliffe 2000: 476), a designation the school earned by offering regular academic and vocational courses for high school credit. Washington was located in west Tampa and served as a junior-senior, vocational-focused high school. Middleton Senior High School opened in east Tampa in 1934, before construction was completed in 1935, as a college preparatory high school (Shircliffe 2000: 476). Middleton would be destroyed by fire in 1938 and 1940, subsequently housed in a school building formerly serving White students, and rebuilt in 1943 (Shircliffe 2000: 476). For nearly the next thirty years Middleton would stand as both a neighborhood institution and an important college preparatory school for Hillsborough County’s Black population.

Despite the Black community’s continued fight for better funding to facilitate better schooling experiences for Black students, improvement in school facilities and general funding came slowly over several decades and always lagged behind that allocated to White schools. Legal segregation in Hillsborough County schools persisted through 1954 and beyond, despite the outlawing of segregated schooling by Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954). R. W. Puryear, writing in 1955, contends that the Florida public, “is well conditioned to the fact that desegregation is inevitable,” though still uneasy as to the prospects of actual implementation of desegregation (p. 219). In actuality, no comprehensive plans for complete school desegregation were implemented in Hillsborough County until 1971. The school district did, however, offer to build Howard W. Blake High School, which was completed in 1956 (Shircliffe 2000: 479). Some Black residents saw and still see the building of Blake as an effort on the part
of the school board to placate Black demands for equal education while maintaining a system of segregation (Shircliffe 2000: 480).

Blake was built in west Tampa as a replacement of the severely under-resourced Don Thompson High School, a general/vocational high school for Black youth and adults. Blake would also offer general and vocational courses, as well as serve as west Tampa’s Black neighborhood school and rival to Middleton. These two high schools quickly became educational institutions and rocks in the African American community in part through the school district’s efforts to maintain an unjustly segregated system. However, the district’s apparent plan to placate Black residents’ demands for equal education by building a new high school for Black students was not as successful as the school district had originally hoped. Two years after Blake was built, Andrew Manning of Tampa filed a lawsuit against Hillsborough County schools for operating a dual system. In 1962 Hillsborough County schools were ruled to be in violation of the Fourteen Amendment ensuring equal protection under the law and were ordered to desegregate (Manning 2001: 1).

The long process of desegregation that resulted from this ruling was characteristically slow, mirroring the pace of change resulting from desegregation orders of the time in other parts of the nation. However, Tampa did not experience the violent White protests or the closing of entire school districts that accompanied other desegregation efforts, particularly those in the South. Rather, the school district continued its non-confrontational maintenance of the status quo until the Swann vs. the School District of Charlotte-Mecklenburg (1971) Supreme Court decision offered specific guidelines as to the mechanisms by which schools were to be desegregated. In 1971, at
the behest of the plaintiffs in the *Manning* case, the school district was ordered to offer a comprehensive desegregation plan that would fundamentally restructure schooling in the county. The primary goal of the 1971 desegregation order was to remedy racial imbalances in schools serving 50 percent or higher Black student populations. The court further defined ideal race ratios for each of the three school levels (ideal White/Black ratios were defined as such: 79% / 21% for elementary schools, 80% / 20% for middle schools, and 86% / 14% for high schools). The 1971 desegregation plan included a system of school clustering, single-grade centers, and school closings, which resulted in a five-tier school system. Under this arrangement, both Blake and Middleton were clustered with one to three White middle schools. The formerly Black schools would serve as a seventh-grade center and the formerly White school(s) would serve grades eight and nine (*Manning* 2001: 3). Former high school students at Blake and Middleton would be dispersed amongst the remaining, formerly all-White high schools.

Desegregation was truly a process, with ample, though non-violent, White community resistance partially fueling (or at least used to justify) conservative measures the school district took before 1971. White parent groups stated “publicly that white parents would move, use false addresses, or keep their children out of school” (*Shircliffe* 2000: 480) if their children were zoned into historically Black schools. Black community resistance came in the form of urging the courts and Hillsborough County Schools to change school attendance boundaries to achieve desegregation and preserve important institutions in the Black community (*Shircliffe* 2000: 481). Many community members, as well as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (which took over as plaintiffs in the *Manning* case after *Swann* (1971)), objected to the final desegregation plan (*Shircliffe* 2000: 483).
Nevertheless, it was enacted, and Hillsborough County quickly desegregated its schools, in large part due to it being a countywide system large enough to desegregate across urban, rural, and suburban populations. The long fight for equity in education claimed Blake and Middleton as two casualties, wounded, but not forgotten by those alumni who would continue to fight to re-open these two schools (see Shircliffe 2002 for an analysis of the effort to re-open Blake).

For twenty years after 1971, the School District of Hillsborough County was largely successful at meeting race ratios originally proposed in the desegregation order. In this same period, presidents Nixon, Reagan, and Bush, Sr. supported legislation and judicial opinions that began to weaken the power desegregation orders, and eventually legislative and judicial oversight, had in compelling school districts to enact race-conscious equity strategies (Orfield and Lee 2005: 5). This wholesale judicial and legislative retreat from court-ordered desegregation intensified during the 1980s, at the same time race-based discrepancies in several measures of achievement decreased rapidly and schools became more integrated. By the 1990s trends in desegregation, race-based achievement measures, and general educational equity began to reverse, nationally (Orfield and Lee 2005). The Dowell decision in 1991 made it easier for school districts to meet desegregation orders satisfactorily, and systems across the country began to return to neighborhood – and oftentimes segregated – schooling (Holladay 2005: 5). In that same year, Hillsborough County Schools submitted a plan to the courts for changing the structure of the school system by re-establishing middle schools. Though a multimember task force concluded that sixteen schools were projected to have Black populations of 39% or more after restructuring, this plan became the new system under which the
district would “maintain a desegregated school system” (emphasis in original) (Manning 2001: 5). By the beginning of the millennium, Hillsborough County counted 26 majority Black schools (Shircliffe 2000: 472).

In 1996 the Hillsborough County School Board sought a declaration of unitary status by the courts. The Dowell (Board of Education of Oklahoma City vs. Dowell, 1991), Freeman (Freeman vs. Pitts, 1992), and Missouri (Missouri vs. Jenkins, 1995) decisions ushered in an era of school districts seeking unitary status, freeing them from court control. Hillsborough County was among these districts, and, in 1996, petitioned the courts to release them from a desegregation order that had persisted for twenty-five years. At that time 17 Hillsborough schools were considered “racially identifiable” (Manning 2001: 6); at issue was whether or not demographic changes in the county since the 1971 desegregation order caused these schools’ demographic profiles. The magistrate judge denied the school board’s request for unitary status, though she was convinced that demographic change was an important factor influencing these schools’ racial makeup (Manning 2001: 6). The magistrate’s judgment was overturned in 2001, and thus the school district became unitary.

The School District Today: Hillsborough Choice

In the 2007-2008 school year, the School District of Hillsborough County served 186,325 students from kindergarten to twelfth grade, 49,560 of them high school students attending twenty-five regular high schools (Hillsborough County Public Schools 2007: 2). The district serves a Black, non-Hispanic student population of 41,316, or approximately 22% of the total student population (Florida Department of Education 2007, http://www.fldoe.org/eias/flmove/hillsbor.asp). As part of the stipulation for
maintaining a desegregated school system agreed upon by plaintiffs and defendants in the original *Manning* case, Hillsborough Schools implemented Hillsborough Choice, a system of attendance area zoning and school choice options developed after the Court’s 1998 denial of unitary status. A sixteen member committee made up of district personnel, community members, and university faculty drafted this plan to increase the school choices available to Hillsborough County families and maintain desegregation (Hillsborough County School District 2002: 11). The reasoning behind such a plan is that families will choose to send their children to schools, even those in Tampa’s inner-city neighborhoods, based on their specialized program offerings, thus voluntarily desegregating schools in neighborhoods that may not already be racially/ethnically diverse.

The Supreme Court decision *Green vs. School Board of New Kent County* (1968) identified six factors for which to judge a school district’s compliance with its desegregation order. These so-called *Green* factors are student assignment, faculty/staff assignment, transportation, facilities, resource allocation, the quality of education, and extracurricular activities. Since the 1968 *Green* decision, these six factors have been examined by courts to determine the extent to which a school district has been successfully desegregated, as segregation apparent in any one category may be used to deny a district the ruling of unitary status. These six factors “serve[d] as an organizer” (Hillsborough County School District 2002: 13) for Hillsborough County’s choice plan. The resulting plan is over six hundred pages long and outlines the exact specifications the Hillsborough County school board planned to implement to reach unitary status. The two *Green* factors explored here – student assignment and quality of education – are
instrumental institutional aspects influencing current African American students’ experiences in Hillsborough County schools.

The first goals the School District of Hillsborough County identified to reach desegregation through student assignment was to “Increase the number of magnet options including magnet schools, attractor programs, and Academies” and provide a plan for controlled parent and student choice among these schools (Hillsborough County School District 2002: 13). Of the twenty-five regular public high schools in operation in Hillsborough County, nine specialized magnet programs are offered among nine schools. All schools offer at least some Advanced Placement (AP) courses and at least one of several vocational/technical programs. The students involved in this study attended the technical/medical high school; the performing arts magnet school; and the engineering, math, science, and technology magnet school. These specialized programs were initiated prior to the district’s pursuit of unitary status, but intentionally expanded to promote voluntary desegregation.

Each school in the county is zoned within one of seven attendance boundaries that demarcate neighborhood schools for all homes within the zone. With the exception of the technical/medical school, magnet and attractor programs are embedded within these neighborhood schools, and students wishing to enroll in these programs must apply and be accepted. The commonly utilized (though not the only) aspect of choice embedded in this system allows any student in the county to enroll in out-of-attendance-boundary schools. The “school choice” program allows a student to choose up to three out-of-attendance-area non-magnet schools that are not already at capacity. The student can enroll in out-of-attendance-area magnet or International Baccalaureate programs as long
as she or he qualifies for that program. Students living within the attendance boundary of a school containing a magnet/attractor program are admitted to the school but not automatically admitted to the magnet/attractor program.

The School District of Hillsborough County identified achievement tests as the first of many indicators of the relative quality of education among their schools. As a part of the final desegregation plan before achieving unitary status, the district acknowledged the quality of education as “a marker against which all green Factors must be judged” (Hillsborough County School District 2002: 20). Interestingly, the school district explicitly links magnet/attractor programs to increases in achievement test scores, particularly for “disadvantaged” students (Hillsborough County School District 2002: 20). One provision of the plan to increase achievement test scores is to, “provide programs that result in increased numbers of under-represented and disadvantaged student populations in gifted, honors, advanced placement courses, and International Baccalaureate programs” (Hillsborough County School District 2002: 20). Another provision is to, “Institute programs and initiatives to close any performance gaps between students who are advantaged and students who are identified as disadvantaged” (Hillsborough County School District 2002: 20). My research stands directly at the intersection of these goals outlined by the School District of Hillsborough County because it examines student perceptions of the school district’s implementation of these programs.

Though magnet and attractor programs comprise the mechanism for offering school choice in Hillsborough County that is most relevant to this study, the district offers other mechanisms of school choice as well. Such school choice options include
transfers from schools deemed “failing,” as provided under No Child Left Behind, and special out-of-attendance-area assignments for which parents must petition, gain acceptance, and provide their child’s transportation. Magnet and attractor programs are offered as a method of voluntary desegregation. In addition to greater focus on achievement tests, the school district identified drop-out rates and graduation rates as two other key indicators of the quality of education provided through its schools.

The Tampa Bay Academy of Hope

The Tampa Bay Academy of Hope (TBAH) was established in 1996 as a 501c3 non-profit organization working in conjunction with, though independent of, the School District of Hillsborough County. This organization implements a multi-faceted program for the families of students living in Tampa and attending Hillsborough County middle and high schools. Program participants are referred to the TBAH by counselors or other designated faculty their respective schools, but they must demonstrate the willingness to participate in program activities and initiatives before being fully accepted into the program. As a part of the program students and parents engage in leadership training, mentoring, and special events sponsored and supported by various individual community volunteers and businesses. Many – though not all – students and parents who participate in TBAH programs are African Americans with working class backgrounds. Ideally students enter the program as sixth-graders and continue through high school graduation, though students in any grade between sixth and twelfth are admitted yearly. The Academy’s funding comes from a combination of school district grants, business grants and donations, private individual and group donations, and annual fundraising events.
The founder and president of the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope is a former professional football player for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. His personal background plays a key role in his establishment and continued operation of the Academy. Born in rural Alabama as one of twenty children, the founder was designated as having learning disabilities as a young child (field notes 9/29/2007). His athletic abilities facilitated his promotion through school, but he acknowledges that schools and teachers often had low expectations of his academic abilities due to his labeling as learning disabled (field notes 9/29/2007). Spending just a short period of time with the founder and current program officer reveals their commitment to improving education for underserved families in the Tampa Bay area.

The Academy operates out of a small office in Tampa, just down the street from a public housing project that was demolished during the course of this research study. Employing a small staff of between five and six people, the Academy operates a Leadership Through Education program through which students develop personal goals in academics, school behavior, leadership, and self-esteem. Students progress through stages of the program under the guidance of leadership coaches and mentors, volunteers and employees who meet with students and parents to discuss their personal academic and social trajectories. Relative student participation is measured by the hours students spend meeting with leadership coaches, participating in events, or volunteering in the Academy office. Many students also participate in the Youth Leadership Council (YLC) to organize fundraising and recreational events for students in the program. Many of these same students have parents who are a part of the Parent Leadership Advocacy Network (PLAN), a parent group that also helps to organize events and advocate for
student and parent issues. Both of these committees are mechanisms through which TBAH members can participate more fully in the program, particularly in planning and implementing major events.

In any given year the TBAH organizes between three and six major events for its members, as well as a number of smaller events that both raise funds for the program and offer fun activities provided by program sponsors. For example, the TBAH offers a college tour whereby students and parents visit various Florida colleges and universities over the course of one week in the summer. The Academy’s daily operations include meetings between leadership coaches (primarily the founder and program officer) and members at the schools they attend. Daily operations also include meeting with students and parents seeking assistance in various school and family matters, planning and coordinating upcoming meetings and events, and organizing fund-raising operations.

The next chapter offers a review of literature pertinent to the questions guiding this research.
CHAPTER THREE

Review of Literature

This chapter offers a review of anthropological and educational literature that informs the research questions guiding this study. This thesis is situated at the conjunction of two broad topics within the anthropology of education: the academic achievement of African American students and the standardized testing movement in the United States. The majority of literature offered in this chapter was published in the last fifteen years, as movement toward more stringent standardization in education gained greater salience across the states throughout the 1990s, and the No Child Left Behind Act directed federal funding to districts based on standardized test scores beginning in 2002. The increased importance of standardized testing to overall educational attainment has fostered a public educational environment in which the impact of standardized testing must be taken into consideration when addressing and/or researching issues of academic achievement. When addressing African American students’ achievement in particular, the majority of research conducted in the last fifteen years is geared toward explaining reasons for educational disparities between White and African American student groups, while a smaller portion of research concerns high achieving African American students and/or the teachers and schools who serve them. This chapter will explore recent
literature that analyzes the mechanisms through which African American students are educated. I will then connect that literature to the research conducted for this study.

In this chapter I will first provide an overview of the major theoretical orientation that defines the anthropology of education as a specialized sub-field within cultural anthropology. I will then discuss three major analytical standpoints from which education researchers – particularly anthropologists of education – investigate African American student achievement and standardized testing. The subsequent sections of this chapter are organized based on the research questions developed as a part of this study, and, within those sections, I will discuss literature supporting each of the three major analytical standpoints anthropologists and other educational researchers take toward understanding these two main topics. The last section situates the development and analysis of this thesis within the theoretical orientations discussed.

The Anthropology of Education

The anthropology of education is a subfield within anthropology with an interdisciplinary focus. The anthropology of education can trace its disciplinary roots to the early work of such American anthropologists as Margaret Mead and Franz Boas (Gearing and Timball 1973: 96; McDermott and Varenne 2006: 5), though its articulation as a distinct subfield came largely through the efforts of George and Louise Spindler (McDermott and Varenne 2006: 5; Spindler 2000: xxiii). In 1954 George Spindler convened a conference at Stanford University where anthropologists, other social scientists, and educators came together to discuss the role anthropology had to play in understanding the educational process across cultures. The subsequent years saw a
dramatic increase in the number of works dedicated to anthropological and ethnographic research in education.

The foundational theories upon which the anthropology of education rests are the “understanding of school and society as socio-cultural phenomena” (Hoebel 1955: 301) and the contention that education occurs both inside and outside formal institutional settings. Schooling and education are not one and the same, as “schooling” entails formal institutional structures, while “education” is a much broader and culturally distinctive process of acquiring knowledge and skills (Levinson and Holland 1996: 2). For most participants in this current study, a portion of their education came through involvement with the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope, which stands outside the institutional schooling structure and provides perspectives that help students navigate that structure.

Anthropologists of education have long investigated the diversity of educational practices across cultures and societies. In the American context, much of our early understanding of different forms of education and schooling come through anthropologists studying original North American populations (for example, Mead 1943/1963). As anthropologists formally established the subfield through the 1950s and 1960s, they increasingly began to critically examine processes of education and schooling for other marginalized populations in the United States (Yon 2003: 413-415). African Americans were among those marginalized populations.

Anthropologists of education have focused on a wide variety of questions regarding the ways students are defined as successes or failures and reasons for disparities in educational attainment and academic achievement between students from socially marginalized communities (e.g. African American, indigenous, and working-
class communities) and students from mainstream communities (i.e. White, middle- and upper-class communities). Of particular interest for this research are questions directed toward understanding the experiences African American students have in urban schools and the social factors that influence these experiences. The next section defines and describes three theoretical orientations by which anthropological and educational research concerning African American student achievement and standardized testing will be categorized for this literature review.

Analytical Perspectives Used to Study African American Student Achievement and Standardized Testing

McDermott and Varenne (2006) define three stages of analysis from which researchers investigate educational problems: analysis of the individual, analysis of the social context, and analysis of the cultural context. When educational researchers investigate educational problems with the individual as the unit of analysis, it defines characteristics of the individual as the source of the problem being investigated. When educational researchers investigate educational problems with the social context as the unit of analysis, it defines characteristics of a school or other educational institution as the source of the problem being investigated. When education researchers investigate educational problems with the cultural context as the unit of analysis, it defines characteristics of the larger socio-political environment that creates and perpetuates the definition of the problem itself, as well as determines which individuals and groups are associated with the problem in question. McDermott and Varenne go on to define cultural analysts as those who “focus, first, on the collective constructions all actors must deal with – whether they personally accept, understand, or even know much about these
constructions – and, second, on what others will do, in the future, with what the original actors did” (2006: 10).

McDermott and Varenne argue that educational research, particularly research done by anthropologists, should move toward the cultural analytical stage if it is to truly contribute to solving problems in education. Though I draw upon their categorization of the three levels of analysis in educational research, the research that guides this study is not necessarily limited to educational problems. To focus attention narrowly only on educational problems would be to reify the idea that the achievement of African American students is marked solely by failure on standardized tests, an idea McDermott and Varenne (2006) criticize sharply. Rather, the three categories of educational research these anthropologists offer serve as a conceptual framework for the literature I present in this chapter.

Following McDermott and Varenne’s categorization, I separate educational research concerning African American student achievement and standardized testing into three realms of analysis: analysis of the attributes of a group, analysis of the structure of schooling, and analysis of the cultural environment. While these three categories mirror those provided by McDermott and Varenne, the categorization itself differs because these three perspectives are not hierarchically organized. Researchers starting from each of these perspectives have made substantial contributions to our understanding of African American student achievement and standardized testing. Furthermore, while these perspectives are starting points from which African American student achievement and/or standardized testing are investigated, interpretations resulting from research findings often incorporate one or more of the other analytical elements. Essentially, these three
categories are realms within which researchers investigate culture in regards to schooling. I accept the definition of culture as the shared values, behaviors, attributes, and materials, produced and reproduced from generation to generation, through which groups of people consciously and unconsciously organize and make meaning of their respective worlds (Levinson and Holland 1996: 13). Given this definition, understanding culture in regards to schooling can mean understanding the characteristics of a study’s participants; understanding the policies and practices of a school or school district; and/or understanding the ways groups of students come to be defined, categorized, and judged based on larger social forces that structure the institution of schooling in general. The remainder of this chapter discusses literature relevant to the specific research questions that guide this study.

African American Students, Standardized Testing, and Graduation

The first two research questions developed as the part of this study are:

1.) How do African American Hillsborough County public school students and parents frame their experiences with and opinions of the Tenth-Grade FCAT?

and

2.) How do African American Hillsborough County students and parents frame their experiences with and opinions of high school graduation?

These questions are combined in this section because they are interrelated; in Florida, a passing grade on the Tenth-Grade FCAT (or an equivalent score on specified alternative tests) is required for earning a standard or honor’s diploma. Researchers, policy makers, educators, and the general public most commonly measure academic achievement outcomes by scores on standardized tests and/or graduation rates, but
achievement is also measured by such outcomes as courses taken, grade point average, and post-secondary/career choices. The literature reviewed in this section includes investigations of academic achievement for African American students.

Many studies concerning African American students, standardized testing, and graduation are devoted to examining and explaining the reasons for disparities in achievement between White and Black students (Lynn 2006: 107). Theories for why African American students, as a group, achieve at lower levels academically than other student groups (particularly White and Asian students) implicate a range of actors, including the students themselves, parents, (urban) communities, teachers, and schools as a whole (Lynn 2006: 107). However, some researchers have also understood that it is important to examine the heterogeneity of African American perceptions of education as an important element rebutting literature that only associates African American students with academic underachievement (Carter 2006; Gayles 2005; Morris 1999). Part of the literature on education in African American communities also includes the ways families respond to such systemic issues as busing, desegregation, neighborhood schools, and magnet school availability (Phillips 1998; Baber 1999), and the ways institutional racism reproduces differences in academic achievement among different ethnic and socio-economic groups (Lynn 2006; Delgado and Stefancic 2000).

Explanations of disparities in achievement and explanations for high African American achievement that focus on individual students, families, and communities can be categorized as analyses of the attributes of a group. I begin this discussion of African American students and academic achievement with the work of John Ogbu, one of the most influential anthropologists studying African American academic outcomes in the
last three decades. Though many scholars have disputed Ogbu’s findings (Gibson 1997; Valenzuela 1999), his influence remains solid among many educational scholars and mirrors public opinion of the reasons for African Americans’ academic failure (Burris and Welner 2005: 594). According to Ogbu’s theory of “oppositional culture” (1974, 1994, 2003), African American students, as involuntary minorities, do not view school as a sufficient method of advancing socially and economically (1994: 4). As a result of this perception of schooling, African Americans perform below their potential academically because they believe that educational institutions are fundamentally opposed to their interests (Ogbu 1974, 1994, 2003). Ogbu juxtaposes involuntary minorities (e.g. African Americans, Chicano Americans, American Indians) with voluntary minorities (e.g. Latino, African, Caribbean, and Asian immigrants), noting that the former view schooling as a method of cultural dismemberment and an empty promise for social advancement, while the latter have no such associations (1994).

Of particular importance is Ogbu’s (2003) *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*, which analyzes African American student and community perceptions of and practices surrounding schooling in a middle to high income community. Interestingly, Ogbu’s early work (1974) concludes that American society needed to do more to ensure that African Americans are able to reap the social benefits schooling promises. In comparing White and Black students from relatively equal socio-economic backgrounds, his most recent work argues that differential academic outcomes “are *primarily* due to differences in the community forces of minorities” (Ogbu 2003: 46, emphasis added), or the differences in the non-school-based
influences (e.g. parental influences, peer influences) that guide students’ in-school performance.

While Ogbu approaches the connection between cultural ideas of schooling and broader social structures ethnographically, scholars from other disciplines have come to similar conclusions based on statistical modeling from survey data. Carpenter II, et al. (2006) challenge the assumption that only one achievement gap exists, and that it is between White and Black students, by regressing mathematics achievement data against several school and family variables for Black, White, and Latino/a students. The authors utilize National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 data to examine the factors predicting within-group and between-group variation in mathematics achievement. Part of their conclusion indicates that “Increases in SES [socio-economic status], time spent on homework, and parental involvement result in higher math achievement” (Carpenter II, et al. 2006: 120) for all three groups. None of the regression models the researchers generated included school-based variables as statistically significant for math achievement (Carpenter II, et al. 2006: 122). Rather, “the most significant predictors appear to be rooted in the home, including language, parental involvement, SES, and even the homework control variable” (Carpenter II, et al. 2006: 122). It is important to note that Carpenter II, et al. assert that race, alone, is not a significant factor in determining math achievement (2006: 122). However, their regression models consistently indicate a significant statistical difference in achievement between White and African American students and between Latino/a and African American students, but not between White and Latino/a students (Carpenter II, et al. 2006: 117-123). In essence,
then, the authors conclude that African American students’ households are less conducive to promoting high academic achievement than are White and Latino/a households. In a recent study published in *Urban Education*, Flowers and Flowers (2008) examine African American high school students’ reading achievement through ordinary least squares regression models using data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002. This study uses similar data and data analysis procedures as Carpenter II, et al., but come to slightly different conclusions and implications for education policy. The authors regressed a number of academic, familial, and economic variables on student achievement as measured by a standardized test, finding that parental expectations of their child’s educational future, the number of hours doing homework, and family income were statistically significant factors influencing reading achievement (Flowers and Flowers 2008: 162). The results of this study reveal similar variables influencing student achievement in reading as are revealed by Carpenter II, et al.’s results from mathematics data, but Flowers and Flowers make broader recommendations for improved practice that permeate the individual, home, and school levels. They suggest that administrators and teachers can improve teaching practices and attitudes to ensure that urban African American students have equal access to educational opportunities as all students (Flowers and Flowers 2008: 164). They also encourage parents – particularly African American parents – to monitor time spent on homework and television viewing and “model appropriate behaviors by reading with their children and engaging in learning opportunities” (Flowers and Flowers 2008: 164). Interestingly, the authors consider developing culturally relevant pedagogical practices as a mechanism for fostering
positive African American student relationships to the educational system, thus improving achievement (Flowers and Flowers 2008: 164-166).

High achieving African American students and schools are an important and under-researched topic that can shed valuable light upon the entirety of the African American educative experience (Wiggan 2007: 311). Ethnographic portraits of such students and schools offer insight into the meanings students make of academic achievement and the processes by which schools serving predominantly African American populations defy the norm of African American underachievement. Jonathan Gayles (2005) follows three African American male students through the last semester of their senior year in “one of the most violent and lowest-achieving high schools” (250) in their community. Gayles analyzes these students’ orientation toward high achievement, which included graduating with honor’s diplomas, “as a form of resistance” (2005: 251) to characterizations of African Americans – particularly males – as in opposition to the schooling process. Gayles concludes that these students did not think of high academic achievement as an indicator of who they intrinsically were, or even as an indicator of their intelligence (2005: 250, 254-259). By extension, then, students who did not achieve as well were not seen as “less than” (Gayles 2005: 255). Furthermore, these students “stated that the meaning of academic achievement was practical” (Gayles 2005: 256), a means of allowing them to move beyond their current working-class environment.

Despite social scientists,’ educators,’ and the general public’s overwhelmingly negative perspectives of the contexts within which urban African American students live and learn, African Americans themselves often take a much more nuanced position regarding the history and contemporary reality of their schools and communities (Gayles
2005; Morris 1999). Morris’ (1999) study of the predominantly Black Fairmont Elementary School in St. Louis, Missouri highlights the mechanisms through which the school strengthened parental and community linkages in the face of declining economic circumstances for the neighborhood and its residents. Morris characterizes this school as “a stabilizing force for a low-income African American community” (1999: 601), a characterization that challenges the accepted perception of predominantly African American schools as deficient in their ability to foster strong school-community bonds. Morris (1999) identifies the stability of faculty over time; the school’s willingness to accommodate parent needs concerning school involvement; the integration of parents as equal partners in the educative process; the dedication to community building exhibited by the principal; and the pervasive expectation of success fostered by faculty, administration, and parents alike as defining characteristics that have entrenched Fairmont as an integral aspect of the neighborhood it serves. Though this study focuses on the structure of schooling for one institution, it is categorized as an analysis of the attributes of a small group because the author analyzes strong school-community bonds as a unique characteristic this particular group of people nurtured.

Explanations of disparities in achievement that focus on inequitable conditions within and between schools – particularly those initiated or exacerbated by educational policies – can be categorized as analyses of the structure of schooling. By the time Congress passed The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, an accountability movement had been linking school quality, teacher performance, and student achievement to state standardized tests, in varying degrees, for almost twenty years (McNeil 2000: 4). The central stated purpose for No Child Left Behind legislation is “To close the achievement
gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice” (107th Congress 2002: 1425). The law further defines this “achievement gap” as existing “between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers” (107th Congress 2002: 1440) – essentially between students marginalized along racial/ethnic, socio-economic, language, and (dis)ability lines and White middle- and upper-middle-class students. The ultimate goal of this policy is for all students to perform at proficient levels – as defined by state academic standards – by the year 2014. Since 2002, an overwhelming factor shaping schooling for African American students is the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which firmly entrenched standardized tests as the barometer measuring academic success and failure.

With No Child Left Behind’s definition of accountability explicitly focusing on disaggregating achievement outcomes by race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, English language proficiency, and disability indicators, the development and implementation of this policy is of particular concern to anthropologists of education. From studies of one teacher (e.g. Valli & Chambliss, 2007), to studies of one school site (e.g. Valenzuela, 1999), to multiple site studies (e.g. Hubbard & Datnow, 2005), anthropologists of education have begun to produce descriptive analyses of the multi-layered educational processes surrounding the implementation of No Child Left Behind and other tangential state policies. The March 2007 special edition of Anthropology and Education Quarterly focuses specifically on qualitative research concerning No Child Left Behind. The authors in this special issue ask questions directly related to the impact of high-stakes testing on African American, Latino, and low-income students. Kris Sloan (2007) reviews ethnographies that document the effects of high-stakes testing on teacher outcomes and perceptions, student outcomes, and curriculum and pedagogy. Sloan
concludes that some ethnographic studies have documented high-stakes testing as having a positive effect by motivating teachers to succeed (2007: 25). However, the majority of ethnographic studies of high-stakes testing report that these tests negatively impact student graduation rates, teacher autonomy, teacher expectations for students to succeed, and overall student achievement (Sloan 2007). For African American students already marginalized through historical racism and contemporary disinvestment in urban public education, standardized testing “conceals from view the inequities in opportunities to learn” (Sloan 2007: 37) and restructures the inequalities long embedded in the American education system (McNeil 2000).

Linda Valli and Marilyn Chambliss (2007) examine two elementary reading classrooms taught by the same teacher to understand “the power of a test-taking environment” (70) in influencing teacher practices and classroom culture. One classroom was for regularly tracked students, while the other classroom served as an intervention for low-achieving students. Though the teacher in question created her own lesson plans for both classes, the differences in teaching quality, pedagogical content, and student/teacher engagement were stark. Regular track students were exposed to literature, discussion, and classroom activities that were both stimulating and appropriate for the students’ reading level (Valli and Chambliss 2007: 70). In the intervention class, on the other hand, the teacher “constructed her role narrowly, as a test coach attempting to train students to perform well on the state assessment by staying close to a test-preparation script” (Valli and Chambliss 2007: 71). Students were exposed to literature and activities that were not relevant to their everyday lives, but to testing structures that called for short texts and de-contextualized abstraction (Valli and Chambliss 2007: 70-71). These authors offer a
detailed picture of a test-driven classroom environment that effectively dismantles high quality pedagogical content and teaching strategies in favor of exercises narrowly devoted to test preparation. Though this study focused on one teacher and her classroom, this study is categorized as an analysis of the structure of schooling because policies embedded in the national education system structured the ways she approached content and pedagogy.

While the previous study focused on one teacher, the implications reach far beyond isolated incidences. The authors’ single-teacher study contextualizes observations they made across classrooms participating in their larger study (Valli and Chambliss 2007: 72). In other words, teachers of intervention classes across several school sites showed similar “test-centered culture[s]” (Valli and Chambliss 2007: 73). Furthermore, McNeil (2000) documents similar “drill and kill” curricula in a predominantly African American high school in Houston, contrasting their practices with the highest performing schools in the same district. The focus on basic, low-level skill acquisition, rote memorization, and test-taking strategies have the opposite effect of what they are meant to achieve, actually lowering student performance on standardized tests and denying them opportunities for more complex, high level curricula (McNeil 2000).

Schiller and Muller (2000) take a different approach to understanding the impact of standardized testing on schools and students, particularly when those tests are laden with consequences affecting future academic outcomes. Schiller and Muller’s (2000) statistical analyses of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988-92 and the National Longitudinal Study of Schools indicate that linking punitive consequences for individual students to test scores raises teacher expectations and graduation rates, while
basing punitive consequences for schools on those tests – as in the No Child Left Behind model – has the opposite effect on teacher expectations and graduation rates.

Baber’s study (1999) documents community responses to desegregation and busing, an action that qualitatively changed the nature of schooling for African American students (and the community) in Hillsborough County, FL. Since busing to meet desegregation directives had forced many African American students to attend schools far from their home neighborhoods (Baber 1999), grassroots organizing within the East Tampa community became essential for parents in their need to be involved in their children’s education. Baber examines how “a viable system of parent involvement at the local level has developed in East Tampa, Florida” (1999: 8) in the face of busing. Similar to what Phillips (1999) documents in Pinellas County around the same time, African American students bused outside of East Tampa suffered the consequences of teachers’ low expectations and the school district’s problem-oriented approach to African American parental involvement (1999: 167-170). Though desegregation was supposed to provide African Americans with better educational opportunities, the effects of desegregation show up in low teacher expectations and difficulty for parents to work closely with schools, which, in turn, translate to lower academic performance and higher rates of disciplinary actions for Black students (Baber 1999).

Linda Darling-Hammond (2004) takes a macro-level approach to analyzing the impact of educational policy on educational outcomes for students of color. The author criticizes educational scholarship that discounts the influence of resources and school structure on academic achievement and foregrounds such student-level variables as time spent on homework, attachment to school, and even socio-economic status (Darling-
Hammond 2004). Such research and analysis hinges on the assumption that education has been equalized (Darling-Hammond 2004: 214). Darling-Hammond reviews educational literature and official statistical analyses conducted for the U.S. Department of Education, departments of education in various states, and class-action lawsuits to argue that resource inequality impacts various structural aspects of schooling and is the most influential variable when predicting differential academic outcomes (2004). Funding disparities among and within districts serving student populations differentiated by race/ethnicity and socio-economic status directly affects teacher quality, curricula quality, and access to fundamental educational resources (e.g. textbooks), which, in turn, directly affects student performance on standardized tests (Darling-Hammond 2004: 217-227).

The author calls for widespread policies that equalize educational resources at all levels, develop equitable standards reform movements, infuse high quality curricula in all schools, and improve teacher quality (Darling-Hammond 2004: 236-241).

Explanations of disparities in achievement that describe schools as institutions that reproduce larger social inequalities can be categorized as analyses of the cultural environment that allows for such inequalities in the United States. In addition to studies of educational reform and standardized testing and their implications for African American students discussed previously, studies that explore the impact of policy initiatives on African American students begin with the premise that schooling is structured in such a way that institutions reproduce inequalities already woven into America’s social and cultural fabric. Critical Race Theory in education (Delgado and Stefancic 2000; Lynn 2006; Lynn and Parker 2006) examines education and schooling in
terms of the ways race has been defined and mobilized as a mechanism of oppression both historically and contemporaneously. As Lynn (2006) contends,

“A critical race analysis of Black education starts from the notion the education, as we know it, was never intended to have liberatory consequences for African Americans. In other words . . . the intent of schools and schooling practices in white supremacist contexts has always been to serve and further support the unequal system of privileges conferred upon whites.” (116)

Critical Race Theory first emerged in legal scholarship regarding the role of judicial systems in recreating race-based inequalities within social institutions (Lynn and Parker 2006: 259), and permeated educational scholarship as educational researchers began to explicitly and critically examine the role of schools in perpetuating White, middle-class supremacy.

Critical Race Theory has been used to analyze educational policy, pedagogy, and the lives and experiences of students of color in both their ideological and material effects (Lynn and Parker 2006). McDermott and Varenne’s contention that “school success and failure have become crucial to the articulation and recreation of racial borders and inequalities” (2006: 22) highlights the relevance of CRT to the anthropology of education. When considering the impact of such specific policy initiatives as No Child Left Behind, a critical race analysis calls for researchers to “express skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy . . . challenge ahistoricism” and foreground “the experiential knowledge of people of color” (Lynn and Parker 2006: 261). As was demonstrated using the Hillsborough County
School District as a case in Chapter Two, race/ethnicity- and class-based inequity is a hallmark of public education in the United States; it would be naïve, at best, to assume that the larger socio-political structures that nurtured such inequity historically have little or no contemporary effects on schooling for African American students.

Trends in Standardized Testing and Graduation Rates

The third research question that focuses this study addresses trends in academic outcomes for African American students in Hillsborough County:

3.) What are the trends in school racial/ethnic and socioeconomic makeup, FCAT scores, and graduation rates in Hillsborough County?

Understanding trends in achievement and demographic variables in Hillsborough County means understanding larger state and national policies aimed at increasing African American students’ achievement, policies the School District of Hillsborough County is obliged to follow in order to receive funding. Demographic, judicial, and district policy changes in Hillsborough County that were explored in Chapter Two will not be repeated here. Instead, this section briefly explores Hillsborough County FCAT scores and graduation rates in relationship to changes in national and state education policies. The research in this section can be categorized as blending analyses of the structure of schooling with analyses of the cultural environment surrounding schooling.

Attention to disparities in educational achievement in education literature coincides with a larger national discussion of the failing American school system that has persisted since the standardized testing movement began in full earnest (Howard 2003: 81). The 1983 release of A Nation at Risk, published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, ushered in this new era of systemic reform and standardization
in education. Their report explicitly links lax educational standards to the nation’s weakening international clout as a manufacturing and economic giant. The alarmist language of the report sent shockwaves through public educational institutions and in private homes; the nation quickly and fervently turned its attention to student academic performance and the mechanisms used to measure that performance.

Social scientists studying the social and cultural impact of *A Nation at Risk* argue that systemic reforms energized by the Commission’s report had far-reaching consequences for the structure of education in the United States, and, by extension, student groups and individuals. The connection between the rhetoric of systemic reform and the on-the-ground effects of that reform remains a salient concern among these researchers (Borman and Greenman 1994: ix-xiii). Two significant rhetorical elements of the Commission’s report – the importance of educating America’s students for the changing workforce and the lack of systematic educational standards – set the stage for No Child Left Behind’s current domination of educational policies nationwide.

The report’s conflation of the failure of public education and economic instability through the 1970s and 1980s fundamentally changed the relationships between the business and education communities (Martin 1994: 133-140). Martin argues that business people at all levels, “who saw a poorly prepared work force as the root cause of the slumping U.S. economy . . . support[ed] increased appropriations and tax hikes for education” (1994: 139) as a result of the Commission’s report. Furthermore, federal disinvestment in public education funding opened a space for business leaders to exert greater influence on educational institutions’ policies in exchange for their financial support (Martin 1994: 139). The results of this greater business influence in public
education can be seen in the emphasis on student acquisition of basic skills, provisions for “choice” among public institutions, and the linking of school funding to student academic performance embedded in current nationwide policies (Bartlett et. al. 2002; Salinas and Reidel 2007).

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the call for educational standardization in *A Nation at Risk* to current educational policies. In the decades after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, state governments began to spearhead efforts at standardization and reform in education (Schwartz 2003: 132). Schwartz contends that president Ronald Reagan, who “had campaigned on a pledge to abolish the Department of Education[,] was an unlikely candidate to provide national leadership in responding to the conditions so graphically outlined in the Commission’s report” (2003: 132). In just months after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, governors around the nation, and particularly in the South, were assembling policy-making teams charged with analyzing the status of education in their states and creating reform policies to address educational inadequacies (Vinovskis 2003: 118). In the two decades after the Commission’s publication, state departments of education developed educational standards for their public K-12 schools and tests to assess student acquisition of these standards. What teachers were expected to teach and what students were expected to learn, as well as the importance of testing for academic promotion, varied throughout the nation. These individualized state efforts culminated in a federal system of oversight and accountability when the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 attached federal school district funding to student performance on tests already administered through state departments of education. Thus began a new chapter in standardized testing.
In Florida, *A Nation at Risk* further bolstered an education reform movement that was already in its infancy before the report was actually released (Elmore 2003: 25-26). Over the following two decades successive Florida governors would introduce more finely-tuned and wide-reaching reforms, one of the most significant being the institution of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in the 1990s. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) is used to measure progress in mathematics, science, reading, and writing for students in grades 3-11 which is, in turn, used to determine funding allocations to schools under No Child Left Behind guidelines. No Child Left Behind, in fact, is modeled after Florida’s A+ Plan, including its insistence that every child can succeed, “opportunities can and will be distributed equally among all students in all schools” (Lee & Borman 2007: 244), and that standardized testing will close the “achievement gap” between White and African American students (Lee & Borman 2007). Initiated in 1999, the A+ plan also attached school funding to school ratings on an ABCDF scale (Lee & Borman 2007: 245), and now students must pass the Tenth Grade FCAT to graduate from high school. Lee and Borman tell us, “Currently, attendance, discipline, and dropout rates are not part of the formula for assigning single-letter grades to schools” (2007: 245), although all these criteria were originally included in a school’s accountability measurement.

Florida’s A+ Plan is part of a larger focus on education that has shaped Florida education policy since the 1970s. In their examination of racial segregation and student performance in Florida schools, Borman et al. (2004) argue that the A+ Plan was built primarily upon an earlier reform effort (Blueprint 2000) aimed at “decentralizing school management while ensuring that accountability continued to be focused on the school and
the student” (612-613). However, the Florida Department of Education, the Florida legislature, the governor, and other state agencies were not similarly held accountable for equalizing educational funding, personnel, facilities, or equipment within and across districts (Borman et al. 2004: 613). The 1995 public release of names of the state’s lowest performing schools “served as the beginning of the implementation of sanctions against schools that did not make adequate progress” (Borman et al. 2004: 613) every three years. In essence, the A+ Plan ensures that schools are not funded equally, with high performing schools receiving extra funding and low performing schools facing state oversight (Borman et al. 2004: 613).

The ultimate consequence for students not meeting these state and federal mandates is non-promotion, including not graduating with a standard diploma at the end of high school. In Hillsborough County, the percentage of 10th-grade FCAT reading test takers to score at or above level 3 (passing) dropped from 42 percent in 2001 to 36 percent in 2007, with the year 2005 seeing as low as 34 percent at or above level 3 (Florida Department of Education 2008a). For math scores over the same years, the percentage of those at or above level 3 stayed relatively stable at 67 percent, with a high of 68 percent and a low of 65 percent (Florida Department of Education 2008a). These numbers tell us that a large proportion of all students, not just African American students, face the possibility of not graduating due to scores on one statewide test. The four-year graduation rate in Hillsborough County rose from 75.8 percent in the 2002-2003 school year to 79.1 percent in the 2006-2007 school year (Florida Department of Education 2008b). These numbers should be read with caution; though they reflect official state-calculated statistics, formulas for determining graduation and dropout rates can produce
higher and lower numbers (respectively) than the actual rates of students graduating and dropping out of school. If we are to take these statistics at face value, however, they are still woefully inadequate for the needs of a society that aims to be on the social and technological cutting edge. While there are safety mechanisms in place for students who do not pass one or more sections of the 10th- and 11th-Grade FCAT tests on the first try (e.g. multiple test taking opportunities and alternative tests), these numbers indicate that the goal of reaching 100% proficiency by 2014 is far from reach in Hillsborough County. The next chapter will provide a more detailed picture of test scores and graduation rates for Black students in particular.

Community Organizations and African American Students

The final research question that guides this study is related directly to the primary study site:

4.) How do community-based organizations in Hillsborough County address FCAT passage and high school graduation issues?

Community-based organizations like the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope can be characterized as youth serving organizations, and, more specifically, as youth development organizations (Bridglall 2005: 39). This program is considered a youth development organization because of its focus on developing leadership skills, positive social behaviors, academic achievement, and community engagement among its participants. Youth serving organizations, as a whole, are marked by their diversity of services offered, ages/grades targeted, funding sources, and intended purpose. Research concerning such services mirrors their diversity, in terms of the research questions investigated, research agenda, methodology, and conclusions. The research reviewed in
this section can be considered investigations of the characteristics of a group or the characteristics of individuals.

One study that quantitatively examines the characteristics of individual students was conducted among 14 urban and rural after-school sites in a Midwestern state (Morrissey and Werner-Wilson 2005). The authors approach participation in out-of-school-time activities as possible predictors of such positive social behaviors and attitudes as altruism, caring, and kindness (Morrissey and Werner-Wilson 2005). Over 300 young people engaged in after-school programs completed a survey that gauged their attitudes toward their family’s influence on behavior, opportunities for engagement in community activities, attitudes toward the communities in which they lived, attitudes toward and level of participation in out-of-school-time activities, and altruistic behaviors (Morrissey and Werner-Wilson 2005: 76-77). Correlations, causal analyses, and partial regression analyses were conducted to determine to the effect each independent variable (family structure, age/grade, and community structure) had on attitudinal and behavioral variables. The authors confirmed their hypotheses that attitudes toward community, attitudes toward family, and opportunities for engagement in the community predicted involvement in after-school activities; that attitudes toward family predicted attitudes toward community; and that attitudes toward community predicted pro-social behaviors (Morrissey and Werner-Wilson 2005: 82). However, attitudes toward family did not predict pro-social behaviors (Morrissey and Werner-Wilson 2005: 82).

While Morrissey and Werner-Wilson acknowledge the exploratory nature of their analysis, as well as the need for further study, they conclude that this study suggests that positive youth development is influenced more directly by the availability of and
participation in community-based activities than by family characteristics or attitudes toward family, particularly for older adolescents (2005: 82-83). The demographic makeup of the young people involved in Morrissey and Werner-Wilson’s study – predominantly White, middle income, Midwestern students – does not mirror the demographic makeup of participants in this research, though 11% of the participants in Morrissey and Werner-Wilson’s study were African American. At the same time, I do not suspect that race/ethnicity, alone, would be a significant factor in determining whether or not a student develops positive social attitudes and behaviors. Rather, I would expect that opportunities for and actual engagement in community-based activities – one of Morrissey and Werner-Wilson’s predictors of positive youth development – may vary depending on location and income (i.e. a low-income student may spend more time earning wages out of school than engaging in community-based organizations).

Morrissey and Werner-Wilson’s study is important to this research because it suggests that community-based organizations may play an important role in helping young people grow into healthy, socially aware adults.

Fine, Weis, Centrie, and Roberts (2000) take a qualitative approach to understanding the impact of community-based organizations, and this study can be considered an examination of the characteristics of groups. Their study of two community-based organizations – an arts program and a spiritual community – examines these programs as alternative spaces where participants build community across social differences (Fine et al. 2000). In other words, these are places in which participants who differ in race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, education level, and geographic origin come together to create positive social connections in urban places where little
opportunities to do so existed before. These “spaces of difference” (Fine et al. 2000) act as safe havens, sites of resistance to social oppression and marginalization, and institutions of social support. Importantly, the authors analyze these organizations as informal educational institutions, spaces where members have the freedom and power to reinvent personal and communal identities (Fine et al. 2000: 132). The MollyOlga arts center in Buffalo, New York and an Orisha community in New York City were chosen from a larger study of such organizations in these and other northeastern cities to serve as “emblems of pluralistic sites” (Fine et al. 2000: 131), places where participants redefine difference and social stratification by equalizing access to services and power within the organizations.

One characteristic that marks these sites is multi-aged participation. That is, older people, middle-aged people, young adults, and children were all welcome to engage in activities provided through these organizations. Though tensions within individuals and across groups were not completely erased through participation in these two communities, the authors conclude that participating represented “significant moments in educative practice in which young men and women came together to create community, amassing and specifically working with and against their differences – neither erasing nor reifying [them]” (Fine et al. 2000: 148). This study is important to this thesis research because it suggests that community-based organizations can offer informal education that not only supplements formal education, but offers alternative educative opportunities in which creativity and agency can be expressed even when they are stifled in other social arenas. Both the communities included in Fine et al.’s study served a large population of African American participants.
These two studies offer unique insight into youth development programs in that they examine these organizations as alternative spaces for education and examine youth development as a mechanism for promoting positive outcomes, rather than as a mechanism for preventing negative outcomes. Still, much research is needed in the area of youth development services, particularly the day-to-day operations that translate into actual positive social (and academic) outcomes.
CHAPTER FOUR

Research Design and Methodology

The impetus for this research began at a community town hall meeting in January 2007. The Tampa Bay Human Rights Coalition (TBHRC) organized this meeting for community members to discuss issues of African American cultural and historical awareness. “Cultural Awareness” was one of the eight community “pillars” the TBHRC identified as important to the well-being of the Tampa Bay community. Community members were asked to select issues, concerns, and problems they would like to see addressed in each of these eight pillars. As a new resident of Tampa, I was interested in gaining a better understanding of the social justice issues community members were concerned with, as well as the nature of community activism in this region. During the course of the meeting I learned that one of the other TBHRC pillars was education, my personal and professional interest. I spoke with the president of the TBHRC, who is also the president and founder of the TBAH, concerning becoming involved with the TBHRC’s efforts at improving education.

Part of my initial involvement with the TBHRC entailed learning more about the history of the organization. The organization was founded in 2005, after racial tensions arose following the deaths of two Black children due to a car accident involving a school teacher of White and Latin heritage. Neither the woman, who fled the scene of the
accident, nor her father, who helped her clean the children’s blood off her car, were sentenced to jail time following this tragedy. Many residents were outraged at this apparent miscarriage of justice, and both Black and White community members organized the TBHRC to investigate and address other issues of social injustice plaguing Tampa’s community. Over the course of 2006, the TBHRC held monthly town hall meetings for community members to share what they viewed as the most important issues threatening social justice in the areas of the family, legal systems, education, religion, economics, the media, and housing, eventually developing a set of goals under each of these broad topics. Cultural awareness was added in the meeting I attended in January of 2007.

Upon further discussion and involvement with the TBHRC I read through transcripts of some of the meetings from 2006. Of particular interest to me were the goals established under education. The first two education goals community members set were:

1.) The percentage of African American students passing the FCAT shall equal the percentage of all students passing the FCAT.

2.) The percentage of African American students graduating high school shall equal the percentage of all students graduating high school.” (Tampa Bay Human Rights Coalition 2007: 3).

The position of these goals at the top of the list indicated to me that they were topics of the utmost importance for the people who attended these town hall meetings. These goals indicated to me that some African Americans in the Tampa Bay area perceive a problem in both FCAT testing and high school graduation for African American students. The transcripts reveal, in fact, that some community members
originally wanted the first goal to be the dismantling of the FCAT altogether, a goal that was quickly considered to be unattainable at that meeting (Tampa Bay Human Rights Coalition 2007: 2). The research project I developed from these goals is meant to better understand the ways African American students and parents experience the impact of standardized testing and its relationship to high school graduation.

Research Questions

Four research questions guided this study:

1.) How do African American Hillsborough County public school students and parents frame their experiences with and opinions of the tenth-grade FCAT?

2.) How do African American Hillsborough County students and parents frame their experiences with and opinions of high school graduation?

In order to contextualize the data participants provided within a larger social context, I also asked:

3.) What are the trends in school racial/ethnic and socioeconomic makeup, FCAT scores, and graduation rates in Hillsborough County?

4.) How do community-based organizations in Hillsborough County address FCAT passage and high school graduation issues?

These questions developed over time within the context of the internships I sought out through the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope and the Tampa Bay Human Rights Coalition. Due to logistical difficulties – particularly, waning attendance at town hall meetings – my internship with the TBHRC did not materialize as originally expected. However, I continued to work with the TBAH, focusing on students’ perspectives. The focus on research participants’ perspectives and opinions serve as an approach to
understanding African American academic achievement from a perspective that is less often explored in other types of studies. One of the fundamental goals of anthropological inquiry is to connect etic (outsider) and emic (insider) points of view on a particular cultural institution. In the abundance of etic viewpoints on the causes and consequences of African American academic achievement, adding more of the emic perspective helps balance our knowledge base concerning this topic.

Research Design and Operationalization

The design for this research is a conjunction where the research problems, purpose, and questions meet with the actual data collection instruments. Developing this design involved defining and refining terms and domains of interest. Here I define “African American Hillsborough County public school students and parents” as current and recently graduated public school students, and their parents, who identify as African American or Black. This research focused primarily on inner-city residents of Hillsborough County who participate in programs associated with the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope. However, during the course of the research project I also interviewed four people who fell outside of this strict definition of participants. One father of middle and elementary school-aged children participated in this research. Also, a young woman who resides in an outer suburb of Tampa but attends an inner-city school and her mother participated in this research. Finally, I interviewed one recent graduate who had attended two inner-city high schools.

This project was primarily concerned with the Tenth-Grade Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) and the issues that surround the test and graduation. FCAT scores refer to the official FCAT achievement level (from 1 to 5) a
participant self-reports. Graduation rates refer to the type of diploma students are on track to receive or have already received: honor’s diploma, standard diploma, certificate of completion, special diploma, or no diploma. These terms are further defined in the findings chapter and in the Appendix. I determine trends in racial/ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of schools, FCAT scores, and graduation rates by examining these data – provided through the Florida Department of Education – for the 2007-2008 school year. Non-district organizations include programs and institutions dedicated to tutoring, advocacy, and/or educational policy change.

This study was originally designed to probe both students’ and parents’ perceptions, but time and logistical constraints made parent interviews much more difficult to obtain than student interviews. Additionally, though I originally hoped to provide profiles for more than one community organization, participant-observation with the TBAH revealed the depth of interactions and operations that may not be captured through descriptions or one-time visits with community-based organizations. Instead I focused solely on the TBAH, so as not to provide an incomplete picture of other programs due to a lack of extended involvement with their operations.

This study was designed to investigate the ways participants perceive the effects of specific school policies and practices on students in school and in the larger African American community, thus affecting FCAT scores and graduation rates for African American students in Hillsborough County. The specific aspects of policy and practice I studied are 1) FCAT preparation and testing, and 2) administrator and teacher encouragement. FCAT preparation and testing refers to the in-school and out-of-school activities available for students to prepare for the FCAT, FCAT testing procedures,
dissemination of FCAT results, and post-FCAT instruction and school activities. As Walpole, et al. (2005) suggest, student achievement and student perceptions of standardized tests are impacted by their test preparation experiences. In this case, test preparation takes place within schools and can potentially take place in community-based organizations. Preparation and testing is thus a major part of the school curriculum and the school’s climate. This study was meant to explore the ways students interpret the part preparation and testing plays in FCAT scores and graduation rates for themselves and their peers.

I also investigated the ways administrators and teachers discuss the FCAT, diploma options, and school course options with students and parents as aspects of administrator and teacher encouragement. Baber (1999), Valenzuela (1999), Valenzuela et al. (2007), and Sloan (2007) suggest that teachers and administrators impact student and parent perceptions of school, testing, and graduation both by enacting policy and through their attitudes toward and expectations of students and parents. Here I am interested in student experiences with administrators and teachers as they relate to the FCAT and graduation.

As a method of understanding the ways participants viewed the FCAT and graduation in general, I examined their shared thoughts and opinions. Shared opinions include perceived positive and negative aspects of the FCAT, the perceived purposes of the FCAT, the ways participants feel concerning the school’s role in helping facilitate achievement, and suggested improvements to the test and graduation requirements. Grounded in school policies and practices participants have experienced, this domain of
interest was also intended to encourage participants to connect these experiences to what they considered to be a more ideal educational environment.

Policies and practices also affect communities as they respond to the education they believe students in their communities receive. I explored the impact of FCAT and graduation rates on the African American community outside of school by investigating the ways the TBAH addresses FCAT and/or graduation issues for African American students. This type of institution is what Bridglall (2005: 39) defines as a youth development program. This research was intended to understand the mechanisms by which the TBAH, as a youth development program, addresses the FCAT and graduation for the students it serves.

Participants

The student and parent participants in this research project were primarily, though not solely, drawn from the larger Tampa Bay Academy of Hope membership. The sample population for semi-structured interviewing was originally based on two criteria: 10th grade FCAT experience and gender. Of the over fifty students who participated regularly in TBAH events, fifteen were in grades eleven and twelve and had taken the 10th grade FCAT at least once. However, not all these students participated in TBAH events and programs at equal levels. Certain young women tended to be more visible at events and at the Academy’s office than others participants. Therefore, students were ultimately asked to participate in interviewing based primarily on the amount of contact I had with them, and a conscious effort was made to include similar numbers of young men and young women. Participants were purposefully selected, and thus are not a representative sample of the population. A university-sponsored community organizing event allowed me the
opportunity to recruit one parent and student from outside the TBAH. Finally, parent interviews were not as easy to conduct as originally hoped for, as I encountered many parents only in passing or in short intervals. In all, one father, one mother, three young men, and five young women were interviewed. The final results only include data from the student participants.

Data Collection

Data collection activities consisted of observation, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and archival data collection. Observation and participant observation were conducted primarily in association with the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope, though I also attended three community-based events outside of the Academy. As an intern with the TBAH, I participated in daily activities at the office and events sponsored by the Academy elsewhere in the community. My role in daily office activities primarily consisted of contacting parents and students to inform them of upcoming events and schedule them for visits with leadership coaches. I spent an average of twelve hours per week in the TBAH office in this capacity, taking field notes during and after the time spent there. Handwritten notes were later typed for analysis. I also participated in weekend and non-school-day events sponsored by the TBAH. These events included Saturday meetings of the YLC and PLAN, a field trip to the movies during an in-service day for Hillsborough County teachers, the annual Youth Leadership Conference, and the induction ceremony for new students into the YLC.

I conducted two types of interviews during the course of this research project. I conducted semi-structured interviews with all student participants using the same interview protocol and adjusting and/or adding questions when appropriate. All except
one student interview was tape-recorded using a handheld cassette tape recorder and later transcribed. One student interview was not tape-recorded, and extensive hand-written notes were taken during and after this interview. One parent participated in an unstructured interview conducted spontaneously at the movie event described above. This interview loosely followed the parent interview protocol, and the questions and answers were recorded with hand-written notes. The other parent interview followed a protocol similar to the student interview, with questions added when appropriate.

Archival data collected as a part of this project include printed materials from the TBAH office at the times I was present and achievement and demographic data collected and stored by the Florida Department of Education and the School District of Hillsborough County. Printed materials from the TBAH office include correspondence between the Academy and members I drafted as an intern with the program, student call lists, and descriptions of the aims and intents of the Leadership Through Education program the Academy offers. Achievement and demographic data were downloaded from the Florida Department of Education and the School District of Hillsborough County websites and used to create descriptive and exploratory statistics that capture trends and provide an overall picture of the county’s high schools.

Data Analysis

All handwritten notes were word processed using Microsoft Word as close to the day of the actual event as possible. Tape-recorded interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word as well. To analyze text data gathered through participant-observation, interviewing, and archival research, I developed codes both deductively and inductively and compared these codes across the different types of data. I utilized the coding strategy
outlined by LeCompte and Schensul (1999) to identify structures, patterns, units, and items of analysis. The above-mentioned aspects of school policies and practices and the community impact of the FCAT and graduation were used to first develop deductive codes for structures, patterns, and units based on the respective domains, factors, sub-factors, and variables outlined in the research design (LeCompte and Schensul 1999: 33-34). I then analyzed the text data inductively to develop codes for items emerging from the data within each structure. For example, “administrator and teacher encouragement” is a structure developed deductively based on the questions I asked as a part of that domain. The item coded as “assemblies” was created inductively based on the ways students responded to questions related to administrator and teacher encouragement.

All interview transcripts, field notes, and archival data were coded by hand and the codes were entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for further analysis. Parent interviews were not added to student interviews due to the small number of parents who participated in the research. To identify salient themes under each of the four deductively created structures, I filtered excerpts of text that were labeled with each code and analyzed the extent to which different interviewees agreed with one another. Any topic that was discussed by four or more interviewees and was labeled with one of the four primary codes was considered a theme and included in the results of the study. This process allowed me to identify three major themes, which will be discussed in the results section of this thesis.

Descriptive and exploratory statistical analyses were conducted with the school as the unit of analysis. The county has twenty-five regular high schools. These statistics served two broad purposes. First, descriptive statistics were compiled to discern school-
based differences in the average percent passing (the FCAT), the average FCAT mean scale score, and the average percentages of students achieving at each of the five FCAT achievement levels for Black students, White students, and the entire student population. A principal components analysis was conducted to explore the characteristics that define schools in this district and variation among them. In other words, the principal components analysis allowed me to understand the differences that characterize Hillsborough County schools based on these performance and demographic data. These statistics were computed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 16.0. The data used to compute these statistics were collected by the Florida Department of Education (http://fcatresults.com/demog/).

To embark on this research I first sought Internal Review Board approval through the University of South Florida to work with vulnerable populations. I first introduced my research to participants’ parents in a letter sent to all TBAH members, inviting them to be a part of the research if they met the criteria outlined previously. Parent participants and the parents of student participants signed an informed consent agreement that described the purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and potential outcomes of the research. All student participants were at least sixteen years of age, and were thus asked to sign an assent agreement to participate in the research. Everyone asked to participate was given an explanation of the project and their rights of non-disclosure as participants. No actual names are used in this or any future publications, including the names of TBAH staff. Finally, I decided to conceal the names of the schools the students attend primarily because students did not represent all twenty-five schools. In other words, this research is in no way an indictment or endorsement of any individual schools, but a description of
the larger system within which these schools operate. The next chapter outlines the findings of this research project.
CHAPTER FIVE

Findings

The findings presented in this chapter are drawn from interviews of five African American females and three African American males, all students or former students from one of three predominantly African American Hillsborough County high schools. These schools include the medical/technical academy, the performing arts magnet school, and one of the science/technology magnet schools. I augment these data with participant observation data from events and everyday program operations of the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope, a non-profit youth development organization with which all but one interviewee was involved. I also include descriptive and exploratory statistics to further contextualize the district within which schools these students attended operate. The purpose of this research was to understand the ways African American students in Hillsborough County high schools frame their thinking regarding the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and high school graduation.

The Tenth-Grade FCAT is used to determine a student’s eligibility for graduation, as well as a high school’s overall school grade and its progress toward ensuring students in all ethnic/racial, gender, income, (dis)ability, and English language proficiency sub-groups perform at grade level. As students in this research study indicated, the FCAT is intertwined with fundamental elements of school structure as well as teacher-student and
administrator-student interactions. In fact, students’ discussion of the FCAT and graduation reflect elements of school structure, in that their opinions of the reasons for and consequences of the FCAT are colored by their experiences with FCAT preparation and testing. Part of the process of FCAT preparation and testing involves teachers’ and administrators’ speech and actions surrounding the FCAT. This chapter will describe the ways students connect the FCAT to larger school processes, thus impacting individual students’ educational trajectories.

This chapter will also utilize descriptive and exploratory statistics to contextualize Black student achievement within the larger district setting. A principal components analysis was conducted to explore connections between school structure and Black student achievement on the FCAT. What remains most apparent in these discussions of FCAT, graduation, and school structure is the degree to which students unanimously disagree with FCAT testing, not so much because of personal consequences of the test, but because of the seeming irrelevance of a test that determines graduation when other academic elements are in place to do the same thing. Students see the FCAT as punitive and relevant only to grading the school, as these other academic elements – particularly final examinations in each course and college entrance exams like the SAT and ACT – are already established and directly connected to what students must demonstrate they have learned during their high school careers.

FCAT Preparation, Testing, and the Receipt of Scores

This report of FCAT preparation, testing, and receipt of scores results from descriptions students provided when I asked them about their experiences regarding these three aspects of the test. The state of Florida requires students to pass the reading, math,
and writing, portions of the Tenth-Grade FCAT, and now the science portion of the Eleventh-Grade FCAT, in order to graduate. For students who participated in this study, the science portion was not yet a requirement. Students in the eleventh grade at the time of interviewing took the science portion in their tenth-grade year, but were not required to pass in order to graduate.

The Tenth-Grade FCAT is first administered in March of a student’s tenth-grade year. Some of the students who participated in interviewing passed all parts of the FCAT in the first attempt, while others did not pass one or more parts in the first attempt. This variation in testing experiences can be seen in their descriptions of classroom activities meant to prepare students for testing. Whether or not a student passes one or more sections of the test in the first attempt determines whether or not a student is placed in “intensive” reading or math classes. As one male student explained it, “they place you in intensive classes and take your electives away.” These “intensive” classes are designed to prepare students for test-taking by imparting specific test-taking skills. Placement in these “intensive” classes effectively tracks most students in remedial and regular courses, barring opportunities to participate in Advanced Placement and other higher-level courses. Students in this study described test-preparation activities specifically for their “intensive” reading classes in the most detail. When I asked what kinds of activities students did in class to prepare, they described a variety of activities meant to improve test-taking skills:

“for the reading portion of the test we do like scanning and proofreading for the FCAT, and finding the main idea, and like stuff for the article, and
stuff like that. What’s important, and what’s not important” (male student who attended the performing arts magnet).

“we receive worksheets and we do a lot of reading and a lot of comprehension of vocabulary. Um . . . taking, taking practice tests. Um, trying to do it on our own, because that’s basically what FCAT is, doing it on our own. And then you know . . . [the teacher] will go over it for to see what um how we did on it, and it would be our grade [for that assignment]” (female student who attended the medical/technical academy).

For math and writing, students were a bit more vague in their explanations of test preparation. For non-“intensive” classes, students saw test preparation as part of the regular curriculum. One female student who took honors and Advanced Placement courses and passed all parts in the first attempt said, “To be honest, the only class that really helped prepare for the FCAT was my English classes, and that’s pretty much basic stuff that’s required in English.” Another female student who also passed all parts in the first attempt described test preparation as a part of the specific class:

“we have to write essays and stuff, and it then depends on what class you’re in, that you have to do different stuff. Like with math, they have to teach you certain things so you can get ready for the [test].”

As this student indicates, math classes are generally seen as preparation for the tests themselves. A male student who passed the math portion in the first attempt confirmed the previous student’s comment by saying, “the math classes I take, they’re
not FCAT, but like, its most of the stuff that’s gonna be on the FCAT, so that’s kinda preparation.”

When I asked whether or not students felt well-prepared before taking the test, responses varied based on the schools the students attended. Students in the medical/technical school – an ‘A’ school – and the science/technology magnet school – an ‘F’ school – felt that teachers did all they could to help students prepare for the test. They said that they felt as prepared as they could have been at the time they first attempted the test in the 10th grade. Somewhat surprisingly, only one of these students passed all parts in the first attempt.

On the other hand, the four students who attended the performing arts magnet school – a ‘D’ school – were more critical of their school’s attempts at preparing students. One male student indicated that many administrators were new to the school, and they were not quite meeting their obligations for student preparation. The students offered examples:

“before they didn’t have like after school FCAT practice help and stuff like that, and like, somebody, I think somebody talked to them about that, so they just recently started having FCAT, like, after school and stuff like that to help you pass the FCAT, or if you wanna get a higher score. . .”

(male student)

One female student who passed all parts in the first attempt said:

“I think they try to act like they do all they can, but I don’t think that they do, really . . .for example, um, I believe the year I took the FCAT the principal had a sign put up in school, something about um, um, something
about, um ‘oh, we can beat the FCAT’ or something like that. And then, usually when it gets closer to the time they’ll be announcements made. Like, ‘oh, let’s get those FCAT scores up.’ You know, just kind of I guess encouragement.”

She and another female student offered almost the same explanation for why the attempt at preparation falls short. The other student, who took honors and AP courses but did not pass the math or writing parts in the first attempt, said:

“I walk into the high school and they have all these signs everywhere, you know ‘FCAT; FCAT Practice; Go FCAT; Go students; Go FCAT With Students.’ These crazy things that you would see in an elementary school, for, like, additions tables ‘one plus one equals two’ and you just see these FCAT signs.”

While they see visible indicators that the FCAT is important, actual preparation is, for them, too little and too late:

“Like, some of the math sections and science sections, they just had us take them, and we hadn’t even been trained on them in class. They’ll give us a packet and say that it’s been sufficiently covered, when we’re not even taught the material in class” (female student who attended performing arts magnet).

“They had pep rallies for the tenth graders to tell you about how important it is that you do your best . . . It would come on the morning show; they had [FCAT] pins on their shirts. But they don’t go into full detail until the month or maybe even the week of the FCAT. They don’t start talking
about it or preparing for it until the month or two before” (male former
student who attended performing arts and science/technology magnets).
These differences in test preparation among schools suggest that the emphasis placed on FCAT preparation is in part predicated on school-based administrative decisions.

When it comes to actual testing, however, teachers and schools are required to follow strict guidelines. I asked students about the mood in school during the time the FCAT is being taken, and most students indicated that their respective schools are quiet and focused on the test. The emphasis on being quiet is important, as students are not given the opportunity to influence their scores by discussing the test with the teachers or other students during the test or by roaming around the halls when any parts of the test are being taken. This ban on student movement in the hallways during test taking applies to students who are not taking the test as well. Each section of the test administered on that day (reading, writing, and math tests are taken on separate days) ranges from 45 minutes to an hour, and there are scheduled breaks between the sections. For tenth grade students, the test takes up half the school day, and, in many cases, the school day is over after lunch. If you are re-taking the test or if you are designated as in need of extended time, you are placed in a different area of the school and allowed the entire day to finish. (A student designated as needing extended time falls under a wide-ranging definition as an Exceptional Education student, or a student with one of many learning or behavioral disabilities. Approximately 15% of all students in Hillsborough County Schools are designated as such).

Students receive their scores months later, when they are sent home during the summer intersession. If that student did not pass one or more sections of the test, they
will have the opportunity to test again in October of their eleventh-grade year, with scores from the re-take arriving in December of that year. Re-take scores are sent home and handed out at the school.

**Teacher/Administrator Encouragement**

*FCAT*

Interview questions meant to understand “Teacher/Administrator Encouragement” refer to discussions between students and teachers, counselors, and/or administrators regarding the reasons for the FCAT, the school’s A+ grade, graduation rates at the school, and different types of diplomas (regular diploma, honor’s diploma, and certificate of completion) a student can receive. Interview responses coded as “Teacher/Administrator Encouragement” also included discussions students reported having with faculty concerning the connection between the FCAT and later coursework.

Given the flexibility of questioning a semi-structured interview protocol allows, these responses emerged during the course of some interviews. The purpose of this line of questioning was to understand the degree to which students see faculty explicitly connecting the FCAT to elements of student learning and achievement.

When I asked students about the types of discussions they had with faculty regarding the FCAT, the major source of information and encouragement students reported came in the forms of assemblies and incentives. Students from all three schools reported participating in school assemblies called explicitly for discussing FCAT issues. While the reasons for school assemblies varied, most students agreed that ninth- and tenth-graders were called together at assemblies where administrators stressed the
importance of passing the FCAT in order to graduate on time. As one male student described,

“They have assemblies. So they get like, the main focus for the FCAT is the tenth graders because it really counts that year. But for the like ninth, for like the freshmen, they tell them uh, that’s when they start needing to, they start need to be getting serious and be focused on passing the FCAT.”

A female student from another school echoed his sentiment:

“They’ll say that the ninth grade is when you should get ready for your career to start. That’s the time when you need to start getting serious, when you need to not come to school just because. They’ll say what you need, what you should do, like try to be on time is what they say. They’ll say what credits are required. They’ll say if you don’t pass the FCAT, you can still pass the SAT.”

Though assemblies are tied to the FCAT – especially for under classmen – assemblies can vary on a wide range of issues. The female student quoted above indicated that many assemblies at her school are discussions of attendance policy and the importance of making it to school and to every class on time. She also said that special assemblies were called when representatives from various colleges come to the school to discuss the college application process. The male student quoted above indicated that the focus of assemblies for upper classmen involves “telling [seniors] what they need, and everything like, from the SATs from the ACT and applying for college and stuff like that.”
One aspect of this discussion of the importance of the FCAT may have far-reaching consequences for students’ future academic trajectories. One male student indicated that the ninth-grade FCAT, a test that does not have implications for graduation or promotion to the tenth-grade, is extremely important for tenth-grade coursework. He said, “in the ninth grade, I Christmas Treed it. The tenth grade depended on what you did in the ninth grade.” In other words, he did not expend effort (i.e. – “Christmas Treed it”) on the ninth grade test because he knew it didn’t count for graduation or promotion. However, it did count for whether or not he would be tracked into regular or “intensive” classes in the tenth grade. When I asked him if he knew beforehand that his ninth grade scores would determine tenth grade course scheduling, he said, “No, at [that school] they didn’t say the ninth grade test would determine your tenth grade classes.”

This connection between ninth grade testing and tenth grade coursework was first introduced to me by this student, and thus not in the interview protocol. However, I did ask a student from a different school specifically about the impact of the ninth grade test when I felt the interview had opened up an appropriate space for me to do so. I asked him if the other student’s statement held true at his school.

“Yeah, mostly its true. Cuz if you don’t . . . cuz like, they don’t tell you, it doesn’t count, but it really doesn’t, so, most students kinda figure it out it doesn’t count, so like they don’t really try, cuz it’s just a practice test. So like, maybe like they don’t do good, and the upcoming, for the tenth grade year they might have like intensive reading, intensive math classes, and stuff like that, because of a practice test they took freshman year.”
I am unable to determine the extent to which this practice is ubiquitous across schools from this particular study, but this issue warrants further investigation. Not knowing that a practice exam in the ninth grade will have implications for future coursework has serious consequences for students’ opportunities for taking advanced courses.

Most students indicated that their respective schools offered incentives for high FCAT achievement. One female student, who described her administrators as “really passionate about making us pass the FCAT,” completed her thought saying that:

“they even try to get up, give us incentives, like, um, Ipods, Mp3 players, um, gift certificates, you know, based on if you make a certain amount.
Or, you know, the most improved score. Like, if you take it, one time you didn’t pass it, but you improved, like, so much, like, you got very high, they give you incentives and stuff.”

Despite admonishments regarding the importance of passing and encouragement in the form of gift incentives, students reported limited discussion from administrators and teachers regarding the actual purpose of the FCAT. One male student put it bluntly, saying,

Student: “No, they don’t talk about reasons. You just have to take it.”
Researcher: “They just say ‘you just have to take it.’”
Student: “Yeah”

One female student from the same school remembered specifically asking teachers why the FCAT was necessary:

Student: “I asked the teachers that, ‘why do we have FCAT if we have individual exams that basically tell us what we need to know?’”
Researcher: “What do they say when you ask them that?”

Student: “It’s a, it’s a state test. That they have to prepare us for. They don’t know.”

One male student said, “Basically they just say, uh, it seems like where you need to be and like what standard you’re on, and what kind of level you’re on. I guess it’s like a placement test.” Similarly, one female student from another school indicated that the new administration in her school did not discuss the reasons for the FCAT. When I asked her what she thought the reason was, she said, “I think it’s to see where you are, what you need more work on. To see where you are and what else you need.” As will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter, students were more likely to talk about the benefits of the FCAT in increasing student achievement, when asked if they thought there were any benefits to the test, than when they were asked what teachers and administrators indicated were the benefits of the test.

Finally, two female students from different schools indicated that faculty linked the reasons for the FCAT to the school’s overall A+ grade. One student said, “I think they say something about it’s good for the school grade. I know that much. Uh, it counts good against the students, if they do good. That’s if you do good.” The other student was highly critical of the connection between individual student performance and overall school grade. She also sums up a variety of issues discussed in this section concerning teacher and administrator encouragement regarding the FCAT:

“Like, the science FCAT that came out, they told us that we had to . . . at first she was – I think the principal – was telling us that we had to pass it to graduate, which wasn’t true. So they would lie to us, on occasion, about
the FCAT. And then they would try giving us incentives about the FCAT.

And, as I found out that it goes into a percentage of the grading system for
the school, of course.”

Though students differ in how they experience faculty discussion concerning the reasons for the FCAT, what underlies these discussions is how little faculty actually discuss the FCAT beyond the fact that one must pass it to graduate. Only one student indicated that faculty explicitly linked the FCAT to actual student learning or assessment of a student’s academic skills. Though some students indicated that some teachers express dismay at having to administer the test, they did not indicate that teachers or administrators explicitly discuss their dissatisfaction with students. Teachers may feel as if it is not their place or in their best interests, professionally, to voice negative opinions of the FCAT. As the next section details, discussions of the overall school grade – which is determined by FCAT scores – is much more common.

School Grades

As can be expected, there is a difference between what students in the ‘A’ graded school and students in the schools with consistently failing grades say about teacher/administrator encouragement surrounding school grades. All three students from the ‘A’ graded school said that administrators were encouraging about the fact that the school received an ‘A’ grade. One female student seemed proud when she said that, “the juniors made our school get an A last year;” which was her class. Another female student, when asked if her administrators talk about the school grade, linked the school grade to the benefits associated with high grades:
“Um hm, yeah, they post it up, and they’re like ‘good job school, good job students. We’ve raised our grade up’ because I think it was like a C or a B school last year, and now we’re an A. And um, yeah when you, I think when you have good grades like that, that the school receives a check, and, you know, it goes towards the students. And we have more, more events, and more opportunities to do stuff, you know. [The faculty are] not just [saying], ‘No, you can’t do this, you gotta have fundraisers, need money.’ So, yeah, they talk about it. They boost it. It’s good, they like it and we like it. It just looks good, smart.”

Students in lower performing schools indicated that discussions about the school grade were focused more on improving the current grade. One female student at one of the schools with a failing grade was critical of the effectiveness of the administration’s discussion of the school grade. She said, “The principal talks about it a lot, but like I said, she doesn’t really encourage the students that need it more. She says, she talks about it, but talking is not really enough . . .” Another female student at the same school was also critical, indicating that there are lots of signs around school promoting the FCAT, but it seemed to promote an exploitative view of what the FCAT is for. She said, “I really felt like I was in some type of, like, holding [back of students], like, ‘you don’t get out until you pass FCAT and higher our numbers.’ That’s just how I felt. And the teachers were very depressed about teaching the FCAT. Every time it came up it was like, ‘Aww man, man!’”

This student connects the school grade to teacher’s disappointment in having to teach the FCAT. This statement supports Sloan’s argument that high-stakes tests, “ultimately work
against teachers and teaching because they monitor, surveille, and ultimately control teachers” (2007: 25). Also, this student criticizes the responsibility that is placed on students to improve the school’s overall score.

Students who attended the other school with a failing grade did not talk at length about discussions concerning the school grade, other than the fact that one year, “[the] principal said he would throw a block party if they passed. We were like two points away from a B.”

What remained consistent across all interviews was that teachers, and especially administrators, discussed the school grade with students, whether it was to congratulate them for a job well done or express the importance of getting a better grade. Other than the student who spoke about the school receiving extra money, the students did not indicate that faculty discussed the greater benefits of getting a high grade. Perhaps this non-discussion was due to a lack of probing on my part. However, the fact that all students affirmed discussions of the school grade, but not the reasons for the FCAT, graduation rates, or diploma options (discussed below), suggests that the overall school grade is what administrators and teachers are concerned with improving. By extension, of course, improvement in the school grade necessitates improvement in the performance of all student sub-groups. But improvements in the overall school grade remains paramount, as resources are connected to this single indicator of school quality.

**Graduation Rates/Diploma Options**

In sharp contrast to discussions of school grades, none of the students indicated that administrators or teachers talked specifically about the graduation rates for their schools. Though students indicate that graduation is a topic of discussion, particularly in
assemblies for upper classmen, the actual graduation rates for the school are not. Three students said that they believe the percentage of students who do not graduate is small.

When discussing graduation, however, all but one student talked about personally knowing or knowing of students who must take the FCAT many times during their high school career, students who walked in the graduation ceremony but did not graduate until after passing the FCAT in the summer after their senior year, or students who are concerned about not graduating because of not passing the FCAT. While none of the students knew anyone who did not graduate because they did not pass the FCAT personally, one female student made an excellent point regarding such a situation: “I’m pretty sure a student wouldn’t really broadcast that information.”

A provision in the Florida school system allows students to leave school with a certificate of completion, which is not equivalent to a diploma or GED. This provision is controversial, as this certificate bars a student from entering higher education or from pursuing a GED at a later date. Given the negative consequences of leaving school with such a certificate, I did not expect administrators or teachers to encourage students to pursue this type of diploma. This expectation was confirmed, as none of the students indicated having heard about certificates of completion from administrators or teachers. Only one student, a female student at the medical/technical academy, offered details concerning receipt of a certificate of completion:

Student: “I know when some people walk across the stage they get their certificates of completion, because we have different classes for business. Like, I’m in accounting, you can graduate in a, under an accountant certificate, that means you’re qualified for the accounting field. So they
can get a certificate of completion like for accounting, but they won’t have any diploma saying that they graduated if they failed the FCAT.”

Researcher: “So what does that do . . . so, the certificate of completion, if they get one for accounting, they, are they able to go on and do accounting, are they able to go on to like college, do you know?”

Student: “All I know is that that certificate tells the people that you’re qualified to be an accountant, but I don’t know like certain jobs require a high school diploma also. So then you have to take, go back and take a GED or something. I’m not sure, I can’t really answer that.”

While it is not surprising that there is not much discussion of certificates of completion, students are also able to graduate from high school with an honor’s diploma, indicating that they have fulfilled honor’s level coursework in their high school career. Similar to the certificate of completion, students did not indicate having discussed this diploma option with teachers or administrators.

What two male students did discuss concerning diploma options, however, was the initiative students must take to find such information. They said that teachers, administrators, and counselors will not spontaneously initiate such conversations, but students must inquire about different types of diplomas and other help with school issues. While only two students specifically identified this situation in their schools, this issue may be important to understanding the mechanisms through which students obtain information regarding their educational options. Also, these two students attended two different schools. One student attending the medical/technical academy said, when I asked if faculty discuss different diploma options:
Student: “Overall, no, you have to ask about that. You have to go to the guidance counselor to talk about that kind of stuff. They don’t never mention that”.

Researcher: “So if somebody were interested, then they would have to go seek out the guidance counselors?”

Student: “Yeah, they wouldn’t never just mention it. You would ask for it”

The other student, attending the performing arts magnet school, was more critical of this situation. When I asked whether or not faculty discussed different diploma options for students he said:

“Uh, not really, somewhat, they might give like a piece of paper that says it, or you might have to go into the guidance office and like ask. Because in our school you gotta like, if you don’t do anything, won’t nobody help you. You have to like go and ask questions and ask all these questions just to get stuff. So it’s like, you have to do it yourself. If you don’t do it yourself, then they won’t help you. That’s why a lot of students are, like, behind because they, like, waiting on people to help them.”

This student links academic outcomes for students to inaction on the part of administrators, teachers, and counselors more so than individual students’ deficiencies, particularly when he says students have to, “ask all these questions just to get stuff.”

Experiences/Opinions of the FCAT

The most important finding to emerge from this research is the extent to which students in this study unanimously disagreed with FCAT testing. While I originally expected students to dislike and possibly disagree wholeheartedly with the FCAT, the
nature of this disagreement reflects student experiences with larger institutional structures intended to assess student ability and confer the right to graduate. In other words, students did not dislike the FCAT simply because it was boring, but because it does not complement other institutional practices aimed at testing whether or not students have learned the material they are expected to learn. One female student attending the medical/technical academy said, when I asked about her general opinion concerning the FCAT:

“I don’t think there is a point to it, why should we take it? Well, we could take it, but why should it be necessary for us to have it for graduation, if the exams that we take at the end of every semester is telling the state and everybody else what we know? Because they teach us certain stuff, and then we have a test at the end of the nine weeks or at the end of the semester. Well, the end of the nine weeks we have a test. And that should be able to tell the state what we, what the students know. Not the FCAT, and making it a graduation requirement.”

In her view, exams taken regularly at the end of each quarter should be sufficient in proving to “the state and everybody else” what students have learned and can do. The FCAT as an extra requirement for graduation does not make sense, since tests in each course are also required to pass classes and graduate.

All but two students specifically indicated that the FCAT is not needed for graduation or for entrance into college. Like the student quoted previously, these students linked graduation and college entrance to other exams already required for student assessment. One female student attending the performing arts academy said:
“I think it’s a waste of time. And I definitely think it should not be like so heavily considered when it comes to graduating. I think we already have tests for that. If they want to have a test that it, that is um, they wanted to use to determine who graduates, they should just use the SATs since it’s already mandatory. And from there, that would make sure that every senior took the SATs because it would be mandatory and they need it to graduate. And at the same time they need it in order to get admitted to a university. That’s my opinion.”

This student connects both graduation and college entrance to other tests, making the FCAT just another institutional hurdle for students to jump before they are allowed to graduate. Furthermore, her suggestion that the SAT be used in place of the FCAT serves a more utilitarian purpose than the FCAT, since it would ensure that all students take one of the two exams required for most college and university admissions.

Another reason students give for the pointlessness of the FCAT is that it technically is not required for high school graduation. As one female student attending the medical/technical academy said when I asked her general opinion of the FCAT:

“I really don’t know, like, why do we really need it if we can take the SATs in place of it, why do we have to take this? . . . I really don’t know why we need it. Just testing kids, and its nerve wracking for some of them.”

During participant-observation with the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope, the program director confirmed her statement. A passing score on either the SAT or the ACT, two exams used to determine student eligibility for most colleges and universities, can be
offered to the school district in place of the FCAT, conferring graduation. Another female
student attending the science/technology magnet also questioned the necessity of the
FCAT if SATs can be used in its stead. These students are members of the TBAH and
may have come across this information through discussions with its staff, though that was
not confirmed or denied in the interview process.

The student quoted previously is also critical of the FCAT as a tool used by the
state to assess – and often in the process, distress – students for no discernible utilitarian
purpose. One female student’s criticism of FCAT testing indicts the entire institution of
American schooling in a process of denying educational opportunities to students of
color. This student, who attended the performing arts magnet, describes what she sees as
the true intended purpose of standardized tests like the FCAT.

“African American people, and Hispanic people, do have literacy issues in
America. Statistically, factually, we do have a problem comprehending,
you know, even math. Have a problem meeting the standard school
system’s, you know, what they want us to meet. We have a problem with
that. Um, I feel like it’s a joke. I feel like they’re like, ‘Ha Ha, you’re
really gonna let us test you. And you’re gonna take this test, and you’re
gonna fail it, and you’re gonna be weeded out. And, you’re gonna let us
point out a problem that you have. You guys are the least performing.’
They do that, they come into the school systems – it’s the same thing as
when they come into the lower, lower end neighborhoods and the school
systems – they say, ‘We’re not giving you money because you can’t
perform this well. We’re not paying your teachers this much, because they
can’t teach you this much.’ But they have no, no facilitation process. They have no, no rehabilitation process. They have nothing. They won’t give you anything to bounce back from. They have, they have no commitment to filling up that gap.”

Her assessment of the FCAT is connected to the larger function it performs, which is to determine the allocation of resources to schools. The government uses the test to justify the denial of funding to schools serving higher proportions of Black and/or Latina/o students – who are typically already performing below grade level – with no proactive commitment to improving achievement in these schools. This student criticizes this policy, which effectively punishes victims of poor education rather than invests in improving their education.

In July 2008 Florida was selected as one of six states to receive funding to better align the statewide school grading system with No Child Left Behind’s system of determining Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (Florida Department of Education 2008a: 3). Among the many changes to school improvement procedures the state has implemented to increase achievement in the lowest performing schools, one mandate requires remedial education services for these schools. While previously the school could choose among multiple strategies for improving achievement, after-school or extended day remediation is the sole option for the lowest performing schools under the new plan (Florida Department of Education 2008a: 2). Thus, available funding for improving achievement in the lowest performing schools, allocated to Florida as a pilot grant through the U.S. Department of Education, is largely set aside for remedial education. For example, previously Florida would require schools that were repeatedly graded as ‘F’
to “offer multiple strategies for struggling students, including but not limited to tutoring, credit recovery, and/or remediation” (Florida Department of Education 2008b: 2). Under the pilot program, schools must provide extended day or after school programs for remediation and enrichment (Florida Department of Education 2008b: 2). Hillsborough’s science/technology magnet high school is one of the thirteen schools statewide that has been identified as one of these lowest performing schools.

In light of my initial expectations and the participants’ disappointment with the test, I was surprised that the number of students who found positive aspects of the FCAT was higher than the number of students who saw no positive aspects (four to three). Of the four students who cited positive aspects to the FCAT, one had passed all parts in the first attempt. Two of these four students had not passed the reading section in the first attempt, and one did not pass the math section in the first attempt. Three of the four who cited positive aspects of the FCAT indicated that it at least partially facilitated learning. One female student attending the medical/technical academy said, in addition to receiving incentives for high scores, a positive outcome of the test is that:

“You gain more knowledge, from uh, you know, the brain wanting to learn more, when you learn something, when you actually like it. You know, more reading comprehension and more just, understanding something better. Yeah, that’s that’s something you can gain, that I gained.”

Students indicated as positive aspects of the FCAT: learning gains, assessment concerning what a student knows and what a student needs to study, an academic challenge, and practice for future testing. Despite the overwhelmingly negative opinion
of FCAT testing among all students, some still saw positive aspects of the test, and they most often linked the positive aspects to individual academic goals. Most importantly, the students were mainly critical of the importance of the test for graduation and its ascendancy over more relevant forms of assessment, like final exams and the SAT. As will be argued in the conclusion, this finding is an indication not only of students’ acute awareness of institutional factors that structure schooling, but also a rebuttal to arguments that characterize African American students who are “failing” (as determined by a standardized test) as wholly uninterested in learning.

School Structure: Magnet Programs in Hillsborough County

Though the focus of this research was not aimed at understanding the implications of Hillsborough County’s magnet programs for student learning and other academic outcomes, some students connected magnet programs to aspects of FCAT testing and graduation during the course of interviews. Because of this emergent trend, I began asking other students questions about whether or not they chose the school they attended based on its magnet program offering. Students varied as to what program – traditional or magnet – in which they participated at the science/technology and performing arts magnet schools. The three students interviewed from the medical/technical academy all participated in the technical academy, with the medical component serving as a magnet program for that school. Magnet programs are meant to attract students from all over the district to a particular school, and different programs employ different application processes for admission. While any student could declare as a focus one of several technical programs in the medical/technical magnet, the medical magnet program requires an application and selection process.
One theme linked the three students who talked about the science/technology and performing arts magnet schools without questions related specifically to the magnet program. This theme was that there is a division between ‘traditional’ and ‘magnet’ students in the ways teachers and administrators treat the two groups. One former student who attended both magnet schools described them as such: “They’re predominantly Black schools with a magnet component. There is no difference between students in the magnet program and students that aren’t.” These students agree that there is no difference in intellect or ability between the groups, but that teachers and administrators perceptibly hold ‘magnet’ students in higher esteem than ‘traditional’ students. When I asked about the general mood in school during the time the FCAT is being taken, one female student attending the performing arts magnet program explained:

Student: “Um, I think it just depends on the students. My school is half magnet, half traditional. So the traditional kids tend to be a little more tense than us [magnet students]. But I wouldn’t say that it’s because um they’re not smart. I would say it’s because they do kinda put an emphasis on the magnet kids. And the principal has made pretty clear statements that she favors the magnet students over traditional students.”

Researcher: “Wow. What kind of things does she say?”

Student: “Um, she’ll say, she’s said things like in the meetings like, oh, ‘the magnet students are like the backbone of the school’ or, yeah, just things along that line.”

Another female student attending the same program agreed with this assessment:
“My sister came in to do observational hours for being a teacher, and the teachers are like, ‘Oh, why do you wanna observe my regular class? Don’t you wanna observe my AP class? Or my magnet class? I have a lot of magnet students in that class.’ Like they’re the heaven of things, and the traditional students are hell. And they’re just what you have to get through to get to teaching the magnet students.”

This student offered lengthy explanations and harsh critiques of the differences between the ways ‘traditional’ and ‘magnet’ students are treated in school, including the differential opportunities such students are exposed to. She discussed meetings the school calls for students to prepare them for the upcoming year:

“They separate the meetings. They separate the magnet, cuz they say, ‘You’re gonna have to take different classes and you’re gonna need to know about different things cuz you’re gonna have different schedules.’ I sort of understand that because we have to factor in like two dramas things – if you want a master’s certification in whatever area we’re studying before we get out of high school, we have to have extra classes for that. I understand that. But they separate these meetings and then, you know, I’m friends with traditional students, some magnet people are friends with traditional students. Most of the Black kids in magnet are gonna be friends with traditional students. So we, we’re talking, and they’re like, ‘Dang, they ain’t even tell us about that in our traditional,’ you know, ‘meeting. They don’t tell us about the AP courses, they don’t tell us about the pre-
AP courses. They totally gear us towards prepping for the . . . work prep, pretty much,’ or whatever it’s called.”

This student explained that, though the school decides who is able to take AP courses due to their grade point average, ‘traditional’ students with high grade point averages are not informed as to their eligibility for this higher quality coursework. Such coursework is preparation for post-secondary schooling.

The male student’s description of these schools as “predominantly Black” with a magnet program built in is extremely important when considering the division between ‘magnet’ and ‘traditional’ students. The female student who talked at length about the magnet program at her school explained the situation as such:

“the majority of magnet students are White. That’s just how it is, you know, there’s not too many Black students in the magnet program, and the majority of traditional students are Black. I don’t really know how many White students I’ve met that are traditional over the past few years. Maybe five, but I couldn’t name any of them. . . . one of them, sorry.”

That ‘magnet’ and ‘traditional’ students are segregated racially has incredible implications for Black students’ access to higher level coursework throughout the county, as all high school magnet programs are embedded within schools. Though not gathered as a part of this research study, information I have received from other sources – former students, parents, and current teachers at schools none of the students in this study attended – this segregation and curriculum tracking is replicated at other sites.

The purpose and focus of this study does not allow me to make generalizations concerning all Hillsborough County schools with magnet programs. However, this issue
warrants further study, given the nationwide use of magnet schools and magnet programs to 1.) desegregate schools and 2.) offer options for specialized and high quality coursework for all students within a district. As described in chapter two of this thesis, the School District of Hillsborough County initiated magnet programs to improve education, offer school choice, and maintain a desegregated school system. Part of the agreement to expand magnet programs included a commitment to promoting higher non-White student enrollment in such programs. Determining the extent to which this commitment is being honored will rest in the hands of those willing and able to conduct research concerning students’ actual experiences within such schools.

Statistical Analyses

Descriptive and exploratory statistics using district-collected demographic and achievement data serves as means of understanding these qualitative findings within a district-wide context. The unit of analysis for these quantitative data is the school; there are twenty-five (n=25) schools analyzed in regards to each demographic and achievement variable. Three demographic groups are analyzed across schools: the entire school population, the Black student population, and the White student population. The Black student population and the White student population are compared to the entire student population in two separate tables. The following achievement measures from the 2007 10th Grade Reading FCAT are summarized for each demographic group: total (test takers), percent passing, mean scale score, and percent at Levels 1-5. A student must achieve a mean scale score of 300 or above to be considered passing; this score corresponds to achievement Level 3. Level 1 represents the lowest level of achievement and Level 5 represents the highest level of achievement. It is important to note that
Hillsborough County serves a diverse population of students identified as Hispanic, Asian, and Multiracial as well. These demographic groups are not included in this analysis because it is my aim to understand Black student achievement in relationship to all students in general and White students – the largest and most historically privileged demographic group in this context – in particular.

Table 1 displays the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation of selected FCAT achievement measures for Black students and for the total student population. Table 2 displays these same statistics for White students and for the total student population.

Tables 1 and 2 reveal differences between Black student achievement and White student achievement, when both groups are compared independently to the total student population. The mean percent passing for Black students is below 40%, while the minimum percent passing for White students is above 50%. The mean percentage of Black students at Level 1 is over 50%, while the mean percentage of Black students at Level 5 is under 3%. For White students, these values are 22.16% and 19.36%, respectively.
Table 1
Descriptive Statistics: Achievement Measures for Black Students Compared to Total Enrollment, 10th-Grade Reading FCAT, 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>497.96</td>
<td>114.483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Black</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>106.48</td>
<td>68.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Passing Enrollment</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>54.48</td>
<td>12.217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Passing Black</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>36.28</td>
<td>11.415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Scale Score Enrollment</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>303.28</td>
<td>16.935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Scale Score Black</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>278.60</td>
<td>15.540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level 1 Enrollment</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>37.04</td>
<td>12.354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level 1 Black</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>53.92</td>
<td>13.197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level 2 Enrollment</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27.60</td>
<td>5.132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level 2 Black</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>29.32</td>
<td>7.658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level 3 Enrollment</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level 3 Black</td>
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<td>24</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level 4 Enrollment</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level 4 Black</td>
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<td>2.581</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent at Level 5 Enrollment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11.64</td>
<td>6.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level 5 Black</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>2.279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>497.96</td>
<td>114.483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total White</td>
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<td>454</td>
<td>233.32</td>
<td>124.879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Passing</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>54.48</td>
<td>12.217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Passing</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Scale Score White</td>
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<td>371</td>
<td>325.20</td>
<td>16.401</td>
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<td>Percent at Level</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Enrollment</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>37.04</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 White</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>22.16</td>
<td>7.739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Enrollment</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27.60</td>
<td>5.132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 White</td>
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<td>38</td>
<td>27.16</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Enrollment</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16.76</td>
<td>4.465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 White</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>20.96</td>
<td>3.680</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent at Level</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Enrollment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.88</td>
<td>2.635</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent at Level</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 White</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>10.20</td>
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<td>Percent at Level</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Enrollment</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>11.64</td>
<td>6.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 White</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>19.36</td>
<td>11.284</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whereas descriptive statistics give a general summation of relevant statistical measures, a Principal Components Analysis explores variation in the data. Principal Components Analysis is used to reduce the amount of variables into uncorrelated indices that measure different dimensions of data (Manly 2005: 75). This Principal Components Analysis includes all variables used in the descriptive analyses except percent at Levels 2-4. Table 3 summarizes the eigenvalues and percent of variation explained for each principal component. Table 4 summarizes the positive and negative values for each variable within the first three components.

**Table 3**  
Principal Components Analysis: Total Variance Explained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Initial Eigenvalues</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% of Variance</th>
<th>Cumulative %</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>7.706</td>
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<td>51.371</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>4.168</td>
<td>95.791</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>.253</td>
<td>1.685</td>
<td>97.475</td>
<td>97.475</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>1.177</td>
<td>98.652</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>99.533</td>
<td>99.533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
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<td>99.720</td>
<td>99.720</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.124</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>99.921</td>
<td>99.921</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
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<td>.053</td>
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<td>99.974</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>99.988</td>
<td>99.988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td>100.000</td>
<td>100.000</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Table 4
Principal Components Analysis: Component Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Component 1</th>
<th>Component 2</th>
<th>Component 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
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<td>.335</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Black</td>
<td>-.310</td>
<td>.721</td>
<td>-.319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total White</td>
<td>.707</td>
<td>-.322</td>
<td>.547</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent Passing</td>
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<td>Enrollment</td>
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<td>-.383</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent Passing</td>
<td>.636</td>
<td>.708</td>
<td>-.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>.957</td>
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<td>.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Scale Score</td>
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<td>-.339</td>
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<td>Enrollment</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Scale Score</td>
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<td>Black</td>
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<td>.359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Scale Score</td>
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<td>-.639</td>
<td>.157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>.712</td>
<td>.514</td>
<td>.309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent at Level 1</td>
<td>.621</td>
<td>-.058</td>
<td>-.122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>.273</td>
<td>.915</td>
<td>.060</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 3 components extracted.
Principal Component #1 reveals a difference between schools with high percentages of students (Black, White, and total enrollment) at Level 1 and schools with high percentages of students (Black, White, and total enrollment) passing, Black students and the total enrollment at Level 5, and high total and White student enrollment. This component is best described as reflecting variations in achievement and attendance, and this component explains approximately 51.4% of all variation. Principal Component #2 reveals a difference between schools with high Black student enrollment and high White student achievement measures, on the one hand, and schools with a high percentage of White students at Level 1, on the other. When understood within the context of the Hillsborough County School District’s method of student assignment, I label this component the “magnet school component” because it reflects variation in schools serving a large population of Black students while simultaneously producing high levels of White student achievement. Magnet schools in this district have been embedded within neighborhood schools in Tampa’s inner-city to attract and sustain White student enrollment, thus sustaining desegregation mandates.

Figure #1 is a graph that plots each school in the district along Principal Component #1 (x-axis) and Principal Component #2 (y-axis). This graph reveals that all but one of the urban magnet schools (U.M.) have high positive values for Principal Component #2 – the “magnet school component.” The four schools with the highest positive values for the “magnet school component” are all urban magnet schools.
The descriptive statistics used in this analysis reveal that mean scores for different achievement variables differ from and reflect lower levels of achievement for Black students than those for all students and for White students. The Principal Components Analysis, coupled with the qualitative data students provided through interviews, suggests that the school-within-a-school magnet structure in Hillsborough County offers White and Black students different and inequitable opportunities for high academic achievement in four of the five urban magnet schools.
Understanding African American students’ experiences and perceptions of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and high school graduation is important when considering new directions educational policy makers – from the federal government to local grassroots organizations – take in efforts to improve student academic outcomes. The “achievement gap” between White and Asian students, on the one hand, and African American, Latino/a, and working-class students of all ethnicities, on the other hand, has become one of the most salient concerns of educators, researchers, and, increasingly, the general public since the early 1980s. However, it must first be understood that African American students – as well as Latino/a and working-class students of all ethnicities – have a variety of experiences related to and affecting academic achievement that cannot be easily captured by the singular phrase “achievement gap.” Rather, as this study highlights, elements of school policy and school structure, school climate and culture, and even the presentation of testing materials impacts achievement outcomes and prospects for graduation, oftentimes with significant consequences. The underlying purpose of this research was to highlight the importance of students’ experiences and opinions when considering policy initiatives aimed at improving academic achievement and intellectual development. For participants in this
study, opinions of the FCAT were rooted in their lived experiences, and those experiences were shaped by policies that determined the information about the test and graduation they received from faculty and the very structure of schooling that determined who had access to which classes.

This chapter offers conclusions drawn from the findings outlined in the previous chapter, recommendations for youth development organizations like the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope, and suggestions for future research. I begin by discussing the findings within the larger framework of education policy both inside and outside the school building. I will then provide a brief overview of the Tampa Bay Academy of Hope’s efforts at discussing issues of the FCAT and graduation with their members. I offer recommendations for youth development organizations aiming to facilitate successful navigation of the FCAT and graduation. Using participants’ own recommendations for change as a guide, I will then offer suggestions for opening spaces for dialogue and action surrounding the FCAT, graduation, and other pertinent educational issues. Finally, I will discuss avenues for future research on the issues raised in this thesis.

Conclusions

The three major conclusions I draw from this study can be understood as being in conversation with one another. In other words, the conclusions presented here are intimately intertwined because they stem from educational policies and practices that structure the nature of high stakes testing in this district. Differences in FCAT preparation activities between students who did and did not pass one or more parts of the FCAT on the first attempt reflect the tracking of non-passers into “intensive” classes meant to reinforce test-taking strategies. Students question the importance of FCAT testing when
final exams are required for passing each class and SAT or ACT are required for college/university admissions. Finally, administrators and teachers do not systematically discuss the reasons for the FCAT, though they do discuss the importance of raising the school’s overall grade. These three conclusions stem from the importance placed on standardized testing at both the federal and state levels, as the FCAT is used to determine overall school grades – which are tied to funding – and individual students’ opportunities for graduation.

The major theme that emerged when participants discussed FCAT preparation, testing, and receipt of scores is the differences in experiences students have in classes designated for test preparation and classes that are a part of the regular or accelerated curriculum. Students who did not pass the reading or math sections on the first attempt were required to take “intensive” reading or math classes the following year. These classes were scheduled in place of electives and prevented students from entering Advanced Placement or Honors courses for English/Language Arts or math. “Intensive” classes focused on improving test-taking skills and strategies. For example, students in “intensive” reading classes discussed learning strategies for finding the main idea of a literature passage, scanning a passage for important information, reading as much of a passage as possible in three minutes, and proofreading.

While these strategies are important to facilitating efficient reading, they are geared specifically for achieving on standardized tests. Scholars doing ethnography in classrooms and schools scaffolding learning based on such test-taking skills have argued that such a narrow focus on one test sidelines instruction in higher level, culturally relevant critical thinking skills (McNeil 2000; Valli and Chambliss 2007). Two students
in this study specifically commented on the utility of repeating such classes year after year. One female student attending the science/technology magnet school said that administrators did not want students to take such “intensive” classes over and over. Another student, a male attending the performing arts magnet school, said that he did not think it was necessary for an entire class to be devoted to such test-taking strategies. Despite this evidence that students, teachers, and administrators are not in wholesale agreement that these types of classes are effective and necessary, school policies continue to track students who do not initially pass one or more sections of the FCAT into these remedial classes.

Another finding concerning test preparation is the perception among students that math and writing test preparation is embedded in the curriculum of math and English/Language Arts classes. Students see the regular curriculum in these courses as dovetailing with FCAT testing, in terms of the types of skills students are expected to demonstrate through the test. The question remains, however, as to the logic in duplicating examinations on these skills. That is, when students were asked about their general opinion of the FCAT and what they would like to see changed, they pointed to final exams in every course and SAT/ACT testing as more relevant tests of their knowledge than the FCAT. They asked why, if such tests are already instituted, one more test was needed to determine graduation.

That students unanimously disliked FCAT testing was not surprising. What is more important is the extent to which their opinions of the FCAT were shaped by their comparisons of FCAT testing to the general curriculum already in place and the necessity of taking the SAT or ACT for applying to college. As critical anthropologists of
education argue, despite proponents’ rhetoric that such tests are meant to increase achievement and decrease disparities in achievement, high stakes exit exams effectively control who has access to higher level coursework and opportunities for education beyond high school (Fine, et. al 2007; Valli and Chambliss 2007; Salinas and Reidel 2007). Such exams, what Fine, et. al call “subtractive public policy” (2007: 77), exacerbate educational inequities for African American, Latino/a, immigrant, and working-class youth. On a broader level, such exams are also a mechanism by which our culture defines and treats “failures” and “successes” (McDermott and Varenne 2006).

Students’ questions regarding the necessity of the FCAT are not systematically answered by teachers and administrators, adults who work as the primary mediators between students and educational policy. Even when students report asking administrators and teachers about the reasons for the FCAT, they do not satisfactorily answer these questions. All students reported that these faculty members discuss the importance of increasing the school’s grade (in the schools with low grades) or congratulate students for maintaining high grades (in the high graded school). Encouragement to pass the test comes in the form of posters hung throughout the school, assemblies that promote FCAT passage, and material incentives for passing. Encouragement does not include systematic critical examination of testing and policies that require testing or widespread utilization of the provision within the district that allows the SAT or ACT to be taken in its stead.

This lack of critical discussion concerning the FCAT is important because the test carries major consequences for students’ curriculum choices. Two students in this study reported that students who perform poorly on the 9th-grade practice FCAT are funneled
into remedial “intensive” classes the following year. Clearly, students who do not pass a section of the test in the 10th-grade are tracked into such classes in the 11th-grade, and possibly beyond. Rather than discussing these implications or changing school practices to disallow such tracking, administrators seem to encourage FCAT testing without encouraging students to critically examine or navigate around the policies that place such emphasis on the test in the first place. As Gayles (2005) concludes after following high achieving African American males through their senior years in high school, part of their strategy for success in school was adopting a utilitarian perspective regarding achievement. In other words, the students Gayles interviewed saw high achievement as a means for achieving their longer-term goals, not as an end in and of itself. Given the ongoing pattern of disinvestment in African American students’ education embedded in the American system of schooling, administrators and teachers in predominantly Black schools can stand at the vanguard of developing such a critical stance toward schooling and education.

The Tampa Bay Academy of Hope as a Youth Development Service

The Tampa Bay Academy of Hope (TBAH), the organization for which I served as an intern during the course of this study, can be described as a youth development service. Broadly, such programs support “normal socialization and healthy development of young people” (Bridglall 2005: 39). The TBAH is primarily focused on developing leadership skills in youth, but it serves as an organization to which members can turn for a variety of school and non-school related support. In the time I was there, youth and their parents participated in fundraising activities and social events, sought help with communicating with school officials regarding student promotion, held meetings to plan
future events, and participated in casual discussions concerning school and life. Some of these discussions touched on issues of the FCAT and graduation, primarily in regards to the successful navigation of a biased system of testing. That is, most discussions of the FCAT revolved around aspects of the test that schools concealed from the average student and parent. For example, I learned of a student’s ability to take the SAT in place of the FCAT during discussions program officers were having with students and parents.

The TBAH takes a critical approach to addressing issues of the FCAT and graduation, as well as larger school policies and practices. They emphasized knowing school policies and how to access school services, particularly for parents who need assistance in settling disputes with school officials or accessing specific services. The approach taken by the TBAH positions academic achievement as one element of a holistic understanding of youth development, with other elements including behavior, community involvement, self-esteem, career development, and leadership. This approach to academic achievement also reflects an emphasis on practicality and working within the established system to reap the benefits of that system, the very orientation to schooling Gayles (2005) found in the high achieving African American participants in his study. In regards to the FCAT in particular, program officers were cogently aware of and spoke about the barriers to achievement on the test that disproportionately affected African American students. The program director informed me that most of the students involved with the program, if they did not pass one part of the test, did not pass the reading portion. At the time I was an intern with this organization, they were proposing a summer program for older students to work with younger students on increasing vocabulary and spelling skills.
The overall theme that emerged during participant-observation with the TBAH was their emphasis on developing confident, skilled, poised, well-rounded youth through interactions with one another, program officials, and business leaders in the community.

One of the major events I attended during my internship was the Youth Leadership Conference, an event the Academy holds every year. This event serves several purposes. First, it allows for parents who do not have children in the program to learn about the types of events and services offered through the program. More importantly, however, the conference invites speakers from business and academic fields to inform students of opportunities they may want to pursue. One speaker manages several McDonald’s franchise stores in the area and owns his own restaurant. He gave students tips for applying and interviewing for their first jobs and discussed his own career trajectory. The keynote speaker was April Griffin, one of seven members of the Hillsborough County School Board. She spoke about her own humble beginnings and the impact one teacher had on setting her in the direction for success. Though the TBAH focused on school success, their overall goal is to help students develop into healthy, successful, contributing members of their respective communities.

Recommendations

*What Students Say*

I begin the section on recommendations with student recommendations for change for two reasons. First, the purpose of this research was to understand the FCAT and graduation from the perspective of the student, and any recommendations for improving students’ experiences necessarily start from the ways students understand their
experiences. Second, students’ voices are far too often left out of discussions of what change should look like, never mind their total absence in decisions about school policy.

When I asked students about what they would change about the FCAT, answers ranged from elements of the test itself to lowering the passing score, from not linking it to graduation to replacing it with testing that already exists. These recommendations reflect student experiences with the FCAT as embedded within larger school practices and policies, not so much the curriculum. In other words, for these students the FCAT is separate from the curriculum in the sense that it is treated as a separate, though incredibly important state test. Administrators and teachers do not make it explicitly or implicitly apparent why such a test is necessary for actual student learning, but the implications the test has for graduation and the overall school grade is clear.

Below is Table 5, which displays all but one of the participants’ responses to the question of recommendations they had for improving or changing the test. I offer these students’ responses, first and foremost, to re-emphasize the idea of learning from what students tell us as a group and as individuals. Furthermore, the variety of responses attests to the heterogeneity of African American student populations in this and every community. Finally, the challenge we all face as researchers, educators, activists, and anyone else truly invested in improving educational opportunities for African Americans is how to reverse the one-way trend of policy shaping experiences rather than using students’ experiences to influence policy. Students are too often considered objects of educational policy rather than subjects who engage with, think about, and act within the boundaries of educational policy in ways that influence their future trajectories. If policies are meant to improve academic outcomes, the experiences students have and the
opinions they form from those experiences should be cogently understood to determine the extent to which those policies are accomplishing their stated goals.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changing Elements of the Test’s Content</th>
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<tr>
<td>“If I could change it, um . . . I would probably not put as much poetry. Because most students at school, we don’t like really like read a lot of poetry, we don’t really have a lot of poetry classes or anything like that. I would just take the poetry out of the reading portion” (male student attending performing arts magnet).</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Colors. Colors. Not black and white, I don’t like black and white. A lot of more people would pass it with pictures” (male student attending medical/technical academy).</td>
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<td>Student: “what we’re reading. What it, what are we actually reading. If we don’t understand, first of all, what it, what is a manatee. We probably don’t know what it is. But we’re in Florida, most people do know. Why do we wanna learn about it? Its an animal, its not a regular animal that everybody else have. It’s in the sea, off doing it’s own thing.” Researcher: “So you think the reading selections . . .”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student: “Yeah, the reading selections, more interesting. Uh, the multiple choice part shouldn’t be so, some of the answers look like they’re basically the same, so they kinda trick you. And then, on the poems and stuff, like, not so, the poems shouldn’t be so, just you’re sitting there trying to take your time reading it cuz you don’t understand. And you can read it over several different times, but you still don’t understand it. Cuz it’s just so out there” (female student attending medical/technical academy).</td>
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<th>Replacing the Test</th>
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<td>“Not taking it. Changing, instead of making FCAT required, changing it for our end of exams, and you just do good on your exams” (female student attending medical/technical academy).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t think you should have to take it at all. They can give you another test. You have to take [final] exams in every class. Instead of taking a big exam when only two parts of it count, you should just have to take final exams” (female student attending science/technology magnet).</td>
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<th>Reducing the Requirements for Passage</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Lower the score, the passing score. They should be lenient, like, if they were two points away or something” (male graduate of performing arts magnet, also attended science/technology magnet).</td>
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<tr>
<th>Improving Test Preparation</th>
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<tr>
<td>“It would be that, um, preparation is um would be more efficient and it would be more detailed. And that we would take practice tests if they wanted to make it like that. At least, um, for the main subjects which would be reading and math. . . Just that, at least the head of the whichever department, whether it be English or math, should kinda come up with a uniform practice test of the FCAT. That should be taken every week, at least, or every other week until they actually take the FCAT” (female student attending performing arts magnet).</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
It is clear from these responses that, though students have different ideas about what should be done concerning the FCAT, something needs to be done differently. These responses also suggest that students are thinking about changes or improvements to the test in terms of their experiences with testing, test preparation, receiving of scores, or other elements of the curriculum. The experiences they have in regards to testing and graduation inform the knowledge base they develop concerning education in general. None of the students are opposing assessment in their recommendations. Rather, they are suggesting that the test (or, in the last case, the curriculum) should be more reflective of their experiences as test-takers and as students.

**Linking Grassroots Organizing to Student Experiences**

Grassroots youth development services are poised to offer more spaces for dialogue and develop programs to make even more apparent the connection between students’ experiences and the ways these experiences impact overall education. The research conducted for this thesis revealed that schools do not structure opportunities for students to discuss the reasons for the FCAT or the place the FCAT occupies within the overall curriculum. My recommendation for grassroots organizations that are geared toward developing critical awareness of educational issues affecting African American students is to create opportunities for young people to gather and discuss these issues in an open, yet structured, environment. Such an environment should be open in the sense that youth can discuss their experiences with the knowledge that their experiences will be valued and validated as they are, not as someone else thinks they should be. This environment should be structured in the sense that those organizing the sessions would act as facilitators of discussion and purveyors of information when it is requested. If
participants become interested in activism or advocacy, session organizers could provide assistance in developing and implementing such an action plan.

As discussed previously, the students in this study recommended that assessments should take into consideration their experiences as test-takers and should be more relevant to the curriculum they already are expected to master. It is through asking students about their experiences that this information is revealed. The extent to which these same sentiments are repeated can be determined by systematically examining students’ opinions and experiences. This systematic examination, however, requires a willingness on the part of researchers (i.e. people who are interested in systematically examining students’ opinions and experiences, not just professionals) to embark on such a project and policy-makers to accept the results thereof. The nature of this systematic examination remains to be determined. For example, a randomly-selected, representative sample as small as thirty individuals is enough to determine statistical significance through hypothesis testing, as long as that sample meets the additional statistical assumptions warranted by the statistical procedure being used. However, the rules for determining a quantity and “quality” of individuals participating in a study that would be acceptable and acted upon by educational policy-makers are much less clear.

My opinion is aligned with those of the participants of this study, that a change to high-stakes testing is necessary and long overdue. The exact nature of that change – which would stem from the nature of activism surrounding the issue – should closely reflect what students think, feel, and know about the test and its relationship to the larger curriculum.
Suggestions for Future Research

One question this research uncovered was the extent to which students are segregated by race within magnet schools, a type of segregation instigated through methods of academic tracking. Some participants in this study indicated that administrators and teachers hold magnet or advanced placement students in higher esteem than students tracked into the regular curriculum. Other participants indicated that the ninth-grade FCAT determined whether or not a student would be placed in remedial classes for the tenth-grade year, thus impeding that student’s ability to pursue higher level coursework. These two situations call for greater investigation into the ways students are admitted to or barred from certain classes, the nature of instruction in these different classes, and the implications academic tracking has for future educational opportunities. Of increasing concern is the extent to which standardized testing, a ubiquitous practice across the nation, reinforces such a dual system of education.

While there are researchers who have pursued this and related topics (i.e. Bush et. al 2004; McNeil 2000; Valli and Chambliss 2007), more research needs to be done concerning the connections among standardized testing, magnet programs, academic tracking, and African American students to better develop methods for preventing such a situation. These researchers have revealed that less experienced teachers are often placed in remedial classes (McNeil 2000), and that, even when experienced teachers are teaching remedial classes, their teaching style differs drastically (Valli and Chambliss 2007). To what extent is this situation occurring in Hillsborough County’s magnet schools, and what can be done to develop a more equitable system of providing all students with opportunities at advanced coursework? These questions are crucial to any discussion of
educational justice, as they challenge researchers, educators, and policy makers to
scrutinize the extent to which offering equal access has also offered equitable
opportunities for education.
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APPENDIX A

Definitions for Different Types of Diplomas

Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Completion

Definitions for Standard Diploma and Special Diploma were found on the Florida Department of Education Website, at:


Standard Diploma:
Diploma awarded to students who have earned passing scores on the state approved graduation test, successfully completed the minimum number of academic credits as identified in Section 1003.43, F.S. or Section 1003.428, F.S., achieved a cumulative grade point average of 2.0 on a 4.0 scale, and successfully completed any other requirements prescribed by the state or the local school board.

Special Diploma:
Diploma awarded to students who have been properly identified as educable mentally handicapped, trainable mentally handicapped, profoundly mentally handicapped, deaf or hard-of-hearing, specific learning disabled, emotional/behavioral disabled, orthopedically
impaired, dual sensory impaired, other health impaired, traumatic brain injury, autism
spectrum disorder, or language impaired.

The definition of a Certificate of Completion was found at:

http://fcat.fldoe.org/pdf/fc_exit_options.pdf

Certificate of Completion as an Exit Option:

Students who have completed the required coursework for graduation but have
not earned passing scores on the FCAT or have not achieved a minimum cumulative
GPA of 2.0 are eligible to receive a certificate of completion. The certificate of
completion does not carry any of the privileges of a standard high school diploma. These
students should be encouraged to participate in summer school, return for continued
education during the following school year, or enroll in a GED preparation program
through an adult education program.
APPENDIX B

Student Interview Protocol

Student Interview Questions

This interview is designed to understand student experiences and thoughts concerning the tenth-grade FCAT and high school graduation. The 6 aspects these questions particularly explore are: FCAT preparation, FCAT testing, FCAT scores, student experiences and opinions, teacher/administrator encouragement, and teacher/administrator encouragement and graduation. Students will sign a consent form prior to the interview, which will also include a section that asks about background information (age, gender, racial/ethnic identity, school, and month/year the tenth-grade FCAT was taken).

FCAT Preparation

1.) What kinds of activities, exercises, or assignments do you do in class to prepare for the FCAT?

2.) Do you think your school (i.e. teachers and administrators at your school) does all it can to help students pass the FCAT? Why or why not?

FCAT Testing

3.) What is the general mood in school the week the FCAT is being taken?

4.) How many hours of the day do you spend each day during the week you are taking the test?

5.) Did you feel nervous when you took the FCAT or any parts of it?

6.) Do you feel you were well prepared while you were taking the test? Why or why not?
FCAT Scores

7.) About how long after the test did you find out your score?

8.) Did you get the score you wanted? Did you get the score you expected?
   (probe) Why do you think that is?

Your Experience/Opinion

9.) What is your opinion of the FCAT?
   (probe) Are there positive aspects of the FCAT? Are there negative aspects of
   the FCAT?

10.) If there was anything you could change or improve about the FCAT, what
     would it be?

11.) In your experience, how does the FCAT affect graduation for students at your
     school?

Teacher/Administrator Encouragement

12.) Do administrators, counselors, or teachers say anything about the reasons for
     the FCAT? Who are these people and what do they say?
     Do you agree with them?

13.) Do administrators, counselors, or teachers say anything about your school’s
     A+/NCLB grade or rating? (If yes) what do (each of the types of educational
     professionals) say?
     (If applicable) do you agree?

Teacher/Administrator Encouragement and Graduation

14.) Do administrators, counselors, or teachers say anything about graduation
     rates at your school?
     (If yes) what do (each type of educator) say?
     (If applicable) do you agree?

15.) Do administrators, counselors, or teachers talk to you or your peers about
     different diploma options?
     (If yes) what do (each type of educator) say?
     (If applicable) do you agree?
     (If no) Are you aware that there are different types of diplomas? (If yes) How
     did you learn about these different types of diplomas?
     (if no, explain different types)