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# "Misplacement and a Side of Stigma: The Treatment of ESL and Special Need Students in a Bronx Middle School"

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Estefany Lopez  
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Dr. Naison  
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**“Misplacement and a Side of Stigma: The Treatment of ESL and Special Need Students  
in a Bronx Middle School”**

*“Nations have recently been led to borrow billions for war; no nation has ever borrowed largely for education. Probably, no nation is rich enough to pay for both war and civilization. We must make our choice; we cannot have both.” -Abraham Flexner*

**Abstract:** The public school educational system in New York City, especially in lower-income neighborhoods, has long been suffering from under funding and budget cuts which lead to important and vital programs being removed or merged, larger classroom sizes and general downsizing of schools, including staff. Students of minority groups, Latinos as a focal point of this research, are often misplaced in programs or have certain needs neglected all together. The present study will attempt to demonstrate how this neglect is prevalent using George J. Werdan III, or PS MS 20 as a case study (an elementary school located in the Bronx)—with the focus being placed on the K5 classroom—and some new “alternatives” that are being practiced. Latino students who are in need of either ESL (English as second language) or special needs services often times do not receive them or the needs are rejected and stigmatized by the parents and/or community. The present study will attempt to demonstrate how kindergarten students who belong in an ESL classroom are misplaced in a special education classroom because the language and cultural barrier is seen as a learning disability. The present study will also attempt to demonstrate how such labels as “special education” are seen as negative and stigmatized in the Latino community through conducted interviews of parents and teachers from PS MS 20. The results indicated that such perceived stigma does indeed exist, thus leading to parents resisting and/or not seeking proper services for their children.

**Chapter 1: *Entering the Field: The History and Shortcomings of PS MS 20 P.O George J. Werdan III***

The America Reads and America Counts Challenge (ARCC) is “a four-year grassroots national campaign challenging every American to help all our children learn to read. From college students and citizens of all ages tutoring children, to seniors starting lending libraries, to businesses donating time, money and books and from policy makers and elected officials focusing on literacy, to parents reading to their children every night, to children themselves promising to read thirty minutes per day in the summer, everyone had an important role in meeting the Challenge”

(<http://www2.ed.gov/inits/americanreads/index.html>). Different Colleges and Universities have this department, including Fordham University. This program is offered at Fordham University as a work-study job and offers students training and preparation before entering a specific location or field. On average, students working in the ARCC program dedicate 10-12 hours a week to working at set locations. Students are given a choice of the age group they would like to work with. I have been working under the ARCC program since freshman year, which has locations for tutors in daycare centers, elementary and middle schools, and high schools in the Bronx and Manhattan areas. Last year I worked at PS MS 20 P.O George J. Werdan III with kindergarteners. I enjoyed my experience and liked the teacher I worked with so much that I decided to return to work with the same grade and teacher.

Opened in 1996, PS MS 20 P.O George J. Werdan III is located on 3050 Webster Avenue in the Bronx NYC Geog District #10 - Isc-Bronx School District. It is an

elementary/middle school with grades pre-Kindergarten to 8<sup>th</sup> grade with an estimated 1,100 students enrolled; Mrs. Carol Carlson is the Principal. According to their website, PS MS 20 “is dedicated to striving for excellence for all students. Through our balanced partnership of teachers, staff, students, parents, and the community, all students are guided to take responsibility for their own learning. We believe that a supportive, risk-free learning environment supports students in their pursuit of lifelong academic and personal achievement. PS/MS 20 - George J Werdan III School is committed to providing high-quality education to our diverse student body. We achieve our goals through a challenging curriculum, quality teachers, and an atmosphere that emphasizes communication and cooperation. Together, these elements create a safe and engaging learning environment in which all students can excel”

(<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/10/X020/AboutUs/Overview/Our+Mission.htm>).

Furthermore, “the aim of PS/MS 20 - George J Werdan III School is to graduate responsible and productive citizens with strong critical thinking and academic skills by providing a rigorous, dynamic, comprehensive curriculum delivered in partnership with the community, family and a competent, qualified staff in a safe and caring environment.

Our teachers and staff work hard to provide the best educational experience for our students. Parent partnership is a high priority and is essential for student success. PS/MS 20 - George J Werdan III School has a rich tradition of outstanding student achievement and we provide a sound, standards-based education, while promoting high moral character of all students. We are committed to moving forward and continuing to pledge our best effort on behalf of your children”

(<http://newyork.webschoolpro.com/NY321000010020/vision.html>). The student

demographic is mostly made up of African American and Latino students. The setup is much like most public school in New York City: two security guards in the front of the main building's entrance checking ID's and making visitors sign in. There are four floors in the main building. The Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten and Special Education classes are located outside in an annex. The annex, probably the least safe area of the school, has no type of security whatsoever, with people entering and walking around the annex unsupervised (the annex is easily accessible to the public through a gate that is left unlocked, even while the students are outside during recess). Some of the strangers who have entered the annex "looking for their child" do not have a child located in the annex. This lack of security poses a real danger to the students and staff, especially during dismissal where there is non-stop chaos while children get picked up. Furthermore, the fire alarm system in the annex can only be manually triggered, not automatically. What does this mean? In the case of any emergency or fire drill, the fire alarm will go off in the main building and the Vice Principal, Ms. Joan Riley, walks over to the annex to manually trigger it. In the case of a real emergency, this poses a great hazard and danger to the students and staff in the annex.

There are 6 Kindergarten classrooms. Each classroom was equipped with a large rug for students to sit on during periods, before they were removed because of severe bed bug case. The kindergarten staff consists of six main teachers, all women: 3 Caucasians, 1 Latina, 1 Asian, and 2 Middle Eastern. The Latino kids are usually all kept together in Ms. Mata's class (the classroom I work in), the Middle Eastern kids with the respective Middle Eastern women, and so on and so forth. This modern day segregation worries me because it does not prepare or teach the kids about diversity and acceptance. Often times

Ms. Mata will speak in both English and Spanish even though it is not an ESL class and she is not ESL certified because the majority of students should be placed in ESL and therefore have difficulty with the material. For example, there was a little girl named Tanzima who only spoke Bengali and instead of being placed in an ESL class where she belongs she was moved into Ms. Begum's classroom because she too is and speaks Bengali. However, this is not as helpful as ESL nor is she receiving the attention she needs. This leaves little Tanzima neglected and at risk of being left behind in Kindergarten. Sadly, Tanzima's case is far too common in PS MS 20, especially amongst kindergarteners, such a crucial basic learning stage, a grade, which, according to Ms. Mata, is "not mandated"<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, there are two students (Destiny and Analeslie) who are promotion in doubt (PID) because they are still not receiving the proper services they need. Ms. Mata has discussed this injustice with her supervisor, Ms. Riley, and has explained to her that it is unjust that these students are going to repeat kindergarten because they have not been receiving the services they need to succeed. Unfortunately, Ms. Riley is insisting that these students repeat kindergarten. Because of this, Ms. Mata has been urging the parents of these students to fight the decision and dispute it because their children were not serviced. Moreover, she has been counseling these parents, off the record, on what steps to take.

PS MS 20 is located in what would be considered a low-income neighborhood. Located next to the 52<sup>nd</sup> precinct, there are no large chain supermarkets around, just bodegas, Dunkin Donuts, and a gas station. There are also no banks in the area. The closest bank is about one-two miles away. Most of the students come from low-income

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<sup>1</sup> Mata, Esmeralda. Personal Interview. 3 March 2011.

families, often times single parent/care taker households.<sup>2</sup> The needs of the students at this school are different than others who might come from a middle class family. This translates into the problems the school faces as a “catch-all” bureaucracy. A “catch-all” bureaucracy is defined as an organization dealing with a huge array of problems (i.e. the domestic abuse encounters we have experienced, cultural segregation, students not receiving proper services, homelessness, etc.). Most students come from single-parent homes with the parent(s) working at least two jobs, or being completely unemployed.

The demographic of the students in PS MS 20 translates into difficult issues for the administration and staff, such as children with stress from home, lack of sleep or food. For example, there is at least one child in the K5 classroom who has admitted to sleeping on the floor at home because there are multiple extended family members living in the same apartment because of high living costs and expenses. Because of such living conditions there are many students who do not get enough sleep causing them to often times sleep during class. According to “Schools Put To the Test as Ranks Of Homeless Students Grow, Causing Stress for Kids, Staff” “While Washington Heights is hardest hit, student homelessness is a citywide trend. There was an increase of up to 7% last year, meaning 62,000 to 65,000 kids live in unstable homes. Staffers grappling with budget cuts try to provide extra help for these students, who lack basics like a spot to study. For many students, it's not just the instability and crowded conditions that press in on them -

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of this paper a family is not defined as an “average” nuclear family, consisting of father, mother, and brothers and/or sisters. Most of these kids live in a household that is comprised of many different families and structures all under one roof. Furthermore, a good portion of these kids are raised either in single-parent households (usually with mothers) or are being raised by another family members, often times grandparents (usually grandmothers) or aunts/uncles. Because the Bronx is the borough with the least vacancy, multiple families live in one apartment because they cannot afford to pay for rent, bills and costs on their own.

they also fight hard to keep their situations secret. 'Their homework is lacking because they have no space and no quiet time outside of school,' said Marie Andino, a math coach at PS 128. 'We see it in the classroom when they're falling asleep<sup>3</sup>.'" Most students come from families who do not have access to proper medical care or healthy foods. In an interview, Ms. Mata stated: "children are not getting the right nutritional food...there's a lot of junk food...parents are going to free clinics, they can't afford private insurance, so the care may not be the best<sup>4</sup>." For example, there is a second-year kindergartener<sup>5</sup> named Jessica R. who was out sick for about two weeks. Upon her return, Jessica explained to Ms. Mata and myself that her mother gave her "special baths" at least three times a week. Though what exactly these "special baths" entailed is a mystery to us, what we do know is that Jessica never saw a doctor. There are students who, instead of eating whatever snack Ms. Mata provides them with, save their snack and take it home, possibly because they are uncertain of when they will eat next. Most students have siblings or cousins attending the same school so it is normal for a family member to pick up more than one child at a time. We have also had students involved in domestic abuse situations. Earlier this year a student named Evelyn came in with a black eye and claimed that her mother had hit her. Evelyn was placed in a foster home for a few weeks but was ultimately sent back home. Louis had also claimed that his father was abusing his mother, though not

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<sup>3</sup> Kolodner, Meredith. "Schools Put To the Test as Ranks Of Homeless Students Grow, Causing Stress for Kids, Staff." *Daily News*. 30 March 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Mata, Esmeralda. Personal Interview. 3 March 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Second-year kindergarteners are students who are repeating kindergarten for a second year and therefore are to automatically be promoted to the first grade, regardless if they are ready or not. Such students often make little to no progress and are on the same level as first-year kindergarteners. Most parents of second-year kindergarteners are not concerned with their child's progress rather if their child will pass or not. Because they are automatically promoted less attention is placed on these students than others when they are not reaching the "bench mark," or level of progress where they should be for their grade at a given time period during the school year.



much was done about it because the mother denied it.

These are not the only problems the teachers are faced with. In the K5 classroom alone Ms. Mata has more on her plate than she can handle, with the majority of the students having specific or personal needs. Keilyann needs to be under constant surveillance because she suffers from epilepsy. Jessica R. is chronically late or absent and the school has yet to report this to the Administration for Child Services (ACS). Ms. Mata believes that Evelyn may have autism, yet her parents have not had her evaluated. Alan's dad keeps a gun at home and showed it to Alan. Evelyn, Alan and Louis spent the first half of the school year barely speaking. Students are not the only ones causing teacher headaches. Because teachers are like soldiers out on a battlefield, they notice things about students that parents may not be so comfortable with accepting. There are currently 4 students whose promotion is in doubt (PID), and not all parents take this news very lightly. One of the PID students', Jaylene, father refuses to accept that Jaylene is not meeting the benchmark and will be repeating kindergarten. He has hired a private tutor, costing the family thousands of dollars, to "ensure" that she does not fail. He has even threatened to transfer her to another school. Unfortunately, what he does not realize is that it is a little too late in the year to transfer, her transcript would be transferred to her new school, and she has been receiving extra help with little to no progress made. These are just a handful of situations that are brought to Ms. Mata's attention; all which she takes very seriously, on top of her already constantly growing workload.

The pandemonium continues within the walls of the annex at PS MS 20. The dismissal procedure up until October 2010 was pure madness. All of the students in the annex were stuffed into the small cafeteria located inside while parents walked in and out

to take their children. Too many times teachers were occupied, confused, or distracted to notice that their students had already been picked up. Ms. Mata had complained about this procedure and the craziness surrounding it multiple times but nothing was done about it until the wrong parent took a student. How the parent did not realize the child was not his or hers is something everyone wondered. After this incident, the dismissal procedure was modified. Students are now dismissed from their prospective classrooms and parents are to sign out their children and dismiss themselves from the teacher before they are to leave. This new method has proven to be very effective and organized. Another new addition to the kindergarten curriculum is gym, something that was not offered last year.

Because this is my second year there I am no stranger to their policies, methods and the way the bureaucracy works. Since my first year working there not much has changed. All the kids are tested before entering Kindergarten to monitor progress and see what services need to be provided for them, yet somehow there are kids that are neglected and fall through the cracks of the system. There are kids that need special attention due to learning disabilities, speech impediments, or language barriers (sometimes all). Last year we had two students who failed kindergarten because of some of the aforementioned factors. In a class of twenty-five students, twelve required ESL (English as second language) and three require special attention. Due to this lack of attention, five students in the K5 classroom are repeating kindergarten for the second year. Because of this, they are to be automatically promoted to the first grade, regardless of improvement. This practice creates a vicious cycle that students cannot escape and, from an early age, many are programmed to fail and fall through the cracks of the system. There are many reasons as to why this happens, one of the biggest being budget cuts and underfunding. PS MS 20

recently received millions of dollars worth of budget cuts leading them to be short staffed and low on resources. Because of this, instead of being placed in an ESL class, students who need ESL receive a few hours a week working one-on-one with an ESL teacher (the amount of time varying on how much attention the student needs). Students will receive up to six hours a week of one-on-one time. This underfunding also causes large classroom sizes. When I was growing up in Massachusetts there were never kindergarten classrooms with more than fifteen students. These large classrooms and overcrowding make it easier for students to catch illnesses and other conditions from one another. For example, a severe case of bed bugs was ~~growing~~ developing in the K5 classroom. Because of this, all the blue rugs were removed from all of the kindergarten classrooms and each student was given an individual mat. Such large classrooms, consisting of about twenty-five students and only one teacher, leads to some of the students' needs not being met. There are kids that need special attention due to learning disabilities, speech impediments, or language barriers (sometimes all). This lack of attention in the classroom is something that should gravely concern parents. A lot of children are neglected and get left behind in the process.

Not all schools have such large class room sizes. Throughout my conversations with a fellow classmate named Alice, who worked in the Bronx charter school called BCC, I noticed that there are some major differences between PS MS 20 and BCC. The classroom sizes in BCC are a lot smaller with an average of about ten students per classroom. This set up of a smaller class size allows students to receive more attention and get the help they need. It also eliminates certain stresses from teachers by having a smaller set up in contrast to a larger classroom size. With this extra space comes more

time for each individual student. It is easier to focus on students who are experiencing a tougher time than others. In PS MS 20, the kindergarteners that are known to not do homework are required to stay for extended day Tuesdays-Thursdays to complete homework assignments (the regular school day is over by 2:20 p.m. and extended day is until 3p.m). This is a new initiative that was not present last year. Through this initiative PS MS 20 is taking a more proactive approach at trying to ensure the success of its students. This shows their commitment to their mission.

However, with budget cuts, it can be a tad bit difficult to fully stay true to such a mission. Such budget cuts lead to a lot of tension amongst the staff. These federal cuts have not only affected PS MS 20 but the ARCC program as well. During the 2009-2010 academic year, there were about 60 ARCC students working at PS MS 20, which translated into every kindergarten teacher having one student helper and at least one para<sup>6</sup> therefore alleviating the stress placed on the shoulders of teachers. For the 2010-2011 year, that number drastically dropped to less than 20 and only Ms. Barbel having one para; no other kindergarten teacher has a para and only two teachers, including Ms. Mata, have a student helper. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts they have not been able to hire as many "paras" as last year, another blow teachers received since they also depended

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<sup>6</sup> A para is described as a parent helper who gets paid hourly for their services. These parent helpers are a part of the PTA committee and do not hold any other employment. Since Paras are technically seen as paid volunteers, they are often times moved around from class to class on a need-by-need basis. They do the same an ARCC student helper does (duties which are usually miscellaneous ones that help alleviate some of the stress and responsibilities from the teacher i.e. checking homework, correcting tests, working with small groups, helping with dismissal, taking students to the nurse, and other miscellaneous things that are required of me at the moment). According to the ARCC program I should be working with small groups of students and teaching them how to read and write. However, this is not the case for most students working under this program. We are not certified teachers or even trained on how to teach kids, especially children in entry, basic grades like kindergarten.

heavily on the aid of "paras". However, PS MS 20 has a system set up with older students, usually in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grades, in which the students help out kindergarten teachers during their recess. Though these students do not do much but help staple handles and pass materials out, or whatever small task may be needed, it is still some kind of help that teachers are grateful to receive.

The lack of help is a source of a lot of tension amongst staff members. Amidst such cuts, the administrators have turned PS MS 20 into what Ms. Mata has called a "show and tell school." With fear of not meeting standard test scores and expectations, the administrators, mainly Mrs. Carlson and Ms. Riley, put forth unrealistic expectations for their staff. As if teachers do not have enough on their plate, they are expected to produce progress reports on a monthly basis, report cards every two months, and make their lesson plans a year in advance, alongside the day-to-day mounting workload they already face. They are also expected to upkeep bulletin boards outside of their classrooms on a monthly basis.

These unrealistic demands lead to stressed out teachers. By the beginning of the school year in early September the students had already undergone two assessments. The students are assessed at least twice a month. There is technically no snack or nap time and the kids are there from 8am-2:20pm, with some being there until 3pm for extended day, and others until 5pm for after school. The budget cuts have resulted in stressed out teachers and even more stressed students. The testing of students has multiplied which results in exhausted students. With after school and performing arts programs being cut there are less areas of escape for kids and less alternatives to stay off the streets and out

of trouble. It is because of these outside temptations that school should not be a place where children feel stressed.

Ms. Mata does her best to ensure that her students do not feel over stressed. One of the advantages of having an aide in the classroom is that teachers can do things that if alone would not be able to do such as neighborhood walks, which are encouraged by the school. Ms. Mata takes advantage of the fact I am there 3 days a week and we take the students a nearby park for about 20-25 minutes each week, weather permitting. Ms. Mata also allows the students about 20-30 minutes of free time every day after they have completed all of their work. She also asks parents to bring in snacks for the entire class every month so that the kids receive at least one snack break a day. Because of budget cuts and setbacks, this is a luxury that teachers without aides cannot afford.

**Chapter 2: In Need of A CEO: How Big Business has Made the NYC School System Damaged Goods and a "Last Resort"**

*"I just read that the search is on for a new CEO of the Chicago School System. CEO? Are they kidding? Has the model of leadership in US business been so successful that we should apply it to urban school systems serving immigrant and minority youth? Unless, of course, your motive is break the power of teachers unions and create huge salary gaps between workers and executives. There, American business has been quite successful." - Notorious Ph.D.*

*"I think Bloomberg's cuts are ridiculous. I think it is a political ploy between Bloomberg and Cuomo to try and pry more money from the state using teachers and students as pawns<sup>7</sup>." - Vilma Dillon, Public School teacher.*

As of 2010, Michael Rubens Bloomberg<sup>8</sup> was the 18<sup>th</sup> richest man in the country<sup>8</sup> and has been the mayor of New York City for the past ten years. He is the founder and majority owner of Bloomberg L.P., a financial news and information services media company. Bloomberg is the same man who, in 2008, campaigned for the New York City's term limits law to be amended, in order to make him eligible to run for a third term. He was re-elected by a narrow margin in 2009. After winning his third term, Bloomberg has been quoted in the media as stating that after his third term is over he will seek to have the law restored to its original form, only allowing a mayor to be in office for two terms. It is of no surprise, then, that Bloomberg has treated NYC's public school system like his company: a business. And, for anyone who previously doubted this, he proved this to be true by electing a very non-experienced Cathie Black, former chairman of Hearst Magazine and former president of USA Today, as the New York City Schools

<sup>7</sup> Dillon, Vilma. Personal Interview. 10 April 2011.

<sup>8</sup> "Forbes 400 Richest Americans (2010): #10 Michael Bloomberg". *Forbes*. September 16, 2010. Retrieved March 24, 2011.

<http://www.forbes.com/profile/michael-bloomberg>

Chancellor (a position from which she resigned within three months). The outrageous election came in the midst of Bloomberg's upsetting proposed cuts to NYC's public school system.

The New York City public education school system has been dealt with many blows in the past few years, with many more promised to come. The proposed \$1.2 billion state budget cut for the 2011-2012 fiscal year is one of the largest in state history<sup>9</sup> which means massive teacher layoffs, school closings (24 NYC public schools are currently on a closing list<sup>10</sup>, mostly PLA's<sup>11</sup>), social service programs being cut, and after school programs being eliminated, amongst other blows. City schools will see 4,666 teachers laid off and 1,500 positions eliminated. According to a published *New York Times* article, some other proposed cuts brought by Bloomberg include , but are not limited to, eliminating 20 fire companies and ultimately laying off 8,500 teachers and 3,150 police officers<sup>12</sup>. Even with a restoration of \$272 million, there seems to be no silver lining in sight for the NYC public school system. The city is estimated to have a \$2.4 billion budget deficit for the 2012 fiscal year. According to *The Independent*, ninety schools have already been shut down during Bloomberg's ten-year tenure.

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<sup>9</sup> "Statement from NYSSBA Executive Director Timothy G. Kremer: State budget agreement". New York State School Boards Association. Released March 28, 2011. <http://www.nyssba.org/index.php?src=news&srctype=detail&category=Press%20Releases&refno=1702>

<sup>10</sup> "NYC's Fight to Save Schools." *The Independent*. Released March 2, 2011. <http://www.independent.org/2011/03/02/nycs-fight-to-save-schools/>.

For ten years, *The Independent* has printed truth in the face of power. With political and economic systems faltering, there is an opportunity for real change from the bottom up.

<sup>11</sup> A PLA school is a persistently low-achieving school. Low test scores and poor graduation rates are grounds for a school to be labeled PLA. Most of these schools are located in urban areas and are public schools.

<sup>12</sup> Chen, David W. "Bloomberg Unveils a Grim Budget." *The New York Times* 29 Jan. 2011, New York ed., A18 sec.



Furthermore, “many of the 24 schools on the list this year were the same ones saved from closure by a United Federation of Teachers (UFT) lawsuit against the city’s Department of Education (DOE) last year. Speakers accurately described the school closings as racist and laid bare the DOE agenda of privatization of public schools. RaeVaughn Williams, a Posse Scholar winner from the Urban Assembly Academy of History and Citizenship for Young Men (UAAHC) in the Bronx, described school closings as ‘academic lynching.’ UAAHC is slated to close within three years. It serves young men of color in 9th to 12th grades and has a graduation rate of 55 percent, which is twice the city’s average for young men of color. Carmel Macklin, a teacher at the school, predicts a charter school will replace UAAHC once it is closed and spoke about the connection between privatizing the school systems and the prison system. ‘It’s a school-to-prison pipeline most of the time,’ said Macklin. It’s increasingly clear, however, that Bloomberg is not a negotiating partner and is only interested in extracting concessions from teachers. In the current climate of austerity, unions and public schools are increasingly finding themselves in a fight for their very existence...More and more people are recognizing the deeply anti-democratic nature of the DOE in New York, and there are few illusions anymore that we can stop school closures through ‘speaking truth to power’ alone. Activists must begin discussing how we can move from protest to resistance—to mass non-compliance and direct action in order to save our schools” (The Independent). Through the use of public demonstrations groups like Teachers Unite, the New York Collective of Radical Educators, and the Grassroots Education Movement have taken the lead in fighting against closures.

So what do all these things mean for NYC public schools, its students, its teachers and parents/care takers? An even bigger school reform, with more charter schools coming to existence? For many, charter schools are seen as alternatives to public schools and a better choice. My 10-year old sister just got accepted into Democracy Prep charter school and, as many other parents and students view it, this random acceptance is seen as her golden ticket to a better future. Taxpayer financed charter schools often times serve as a “reminder” and highlight the “failure” of public schools. However, there are quite a few problems with charter schools. First and foremost, not everyone gets in. Entry into charter schools is public lottery-based, so acceptance is random. The charter school system has often times been seen as a privatization of public schools, though there are already enough private schools. The key advantage of charter schools is classroom sizes. Charter school students are known to outperform public school students<sup>13</sup>. Charter schools, on average, have much smaller classroom sizes than public schools. This limitation on space serves as a restriction on the amount of students that are admitted. While some students gain a ticket to a “better education” with ivy-league teachers, others are “stuck” with an inferior public school education. Charter schools are only beneficial to those lucky enough to be chosen at random and ultimately teach kids that instead of working hard to gain a better education one must simply rely only on luck and chance.

Along with highlighting public schools “failure”, the expansion of charter schools also exposes the blame placed on teachers for poor student performance. The new initiative of grading teachers based off student success insinuates that public school

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<sup>13</sup> Weiner, Joann M. “Charter School Gambles With Kids’ Futures -- and Often Loses.” Politics Daily  
<http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/07/14/charter-school-lottery-gambles-with-kids-futures-and-often-l/>

teachers have failed our children, causing teachers to be seen as a problem. However, public school teachers do not get the credit they have deserved for years! These are the same teachers that fight for our children, who detect things about students that others miss, and, in some cases, even save students' lives by providing them with the tools to empower themselves and change their lives: a good education, hope and someone who cares. Charter schoolteachers, much like the school themselves, are seemingly supposed to be of better quality than public schools and its teachers.

Though charter schools, for the most part, have been praised as being a better alternative to public schools, more focus should be placed on making public schools better, instead of shutting them down. Instead of opening up more charter schools, that money should be used to strengthen public schools and preventing more school closures. As previously mentioned, there are enough private schools in NYC. The focus should shift to saving public schools and decreasing budget cuts. Such high cuts have resulted in overcrowding, removal of performing arts programs (such as art, music, chorus, etc.), special education programs (such as special education classes and ESL), and new "alternatives" schools have found to get by.

Such methods include either not offering gym and/or art class or, as in the case of PS MS 20, having teachers who are not certified. Students attend art class and gym, known as physical movement at PS MS 20, once a week. However, neither Ms. Haley (the art teacher) nor Ms. Williams (the gym teacher) are certified! They also have a "science" and "drama" teacher come to classrooms once a week. Again, neither is certified. During drama, the kids are read a book. During science, they are taught about the weather and matter, a topic I personally believe is far too advanced and complex for

5-year olds to fully grasp. Ultimately, the administrators at PS MS 20 try to do the best they can with the resources they are given. But looming budget cuts only seem to make things more difficult.

With the new proposed budget cuts classroom sizes promise to get even bigger ensuring even more stress being placed on teachers and less attention per student. All of the teachers interviewed referenced a lack of resources as being one of the school's weaknesses. Joseph Dillon, Dean of P.S./M.S. 4 in the Crotona Park East section of the Bronx, stated in an interview that the weaknesses of P.S/M.S 4 are "lack of parental involvement, limited school supplies, need of counseling services, and an under-sized school building<sup>14</sup>," as is the case for most public schools in NYC. Because of such budget cuts, PS MS 20 has resorted to new, unorthodox "methods" or "alternatives" such as having an ESL teacher come into the classroom, instead of an actual ESL class, and students spending a half hour multiple times a week with a speech coach, for those with speech impediments. As mentioned earlier, an ESL teacher visits ESL students on a weekly basis for a certain amount of hours a week, six being the maximum. Compared to a student who is placed in an ESL classroom, these students are virtually receiving very minimal help. Six hours a week does not amount to the same attention as being placed in an ESL classroom and learning through the use of ESL methods. So what happens to the student all the other hours during the week? They are left to virtually fend for themselves and adapt to their surroundings, but is this enough for our children?

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<sup>14</sup> Dillon, Joseph. Personal Interview. 10 April 2011.

### Chapter 3: No Speaky English: The Barrier to Overcome

I have always heard the expression “desperate times call for desperate measures” and with time I fully understood what that meant. When schools receive devastating budget cuts, they are left to fend for themselves and, as is the case with PS MS 20, resort to unusual methods. One of the methods they have resorted to is placing students who require ESL with teachers who speak the same language as them. However, there is a big difference between being a teacher who is bilingual and one who is ESL certified. Moreover, though students are placed in classrooms with teachers who speak the same language as them, teachers are discouraged from speaking to students in said language. So, this then begs the question: how is this beneficial to students? This is not to say that every now and then Ms. Mata does not explain certain instructions in Spanish to students who do not understand, but everything, overall, is spoken and taught in English. Unfortunately, this method is not too effective because students end up falling behind because they often times do not understand the material due to cultural and language barriers. Such “shortcomings” are too often misdiagnosed as the students having a learning disability causing students to be misplaced and still not receiving the attention they really need.

According to the *National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities*, Special Education is defined as “specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability including instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings and instruction in physical education. Special Education includes each of the following...

speech-language pathology services, or any other related service, if the service is considered special education rather than a related service under State standards, travel training, and vocational education.” Furthermore, “special education is instruction that is specially designed to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. This means education that is individually developed to address a specific child’s needs that result from his or her disability. Since each child is unique, it is difficult to give an overall example of special education. It is individualized for each child...Special education for any student can consist of: an individualized curriculum that is *different* from that of same-age, nondisabled peers (for example, teaching a blind student to read and write using Braille); the *same* (general) curriculum as that for nondisabled peers, with adaptations or modifications made for the student (for example, teaching 3rd grade math but including the use of counting tools and assistive technology for the student); and a combination of these elements<sup>15</sup>.” Though special education can be received in different settings, it is most effective when a student is placed in a specialized classroom.

There are many conditions that constitute for a child needing to be placed in a special education classroom, and emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD) is one of them. In “Problems Related to Underservice of Students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders,” James M Kauffman, Devery R. Mock, and Richard L. Simpson understand the importance of children with significant problems being identified in a timely manner

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<sup>15</sup> “Special Education” *National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities*. September 2010.

<http://nichcy.org/schoolage/iep/iepcontents/specialeducation#definition>

and receiving the proper education and treatment<sup>16</sup>. Failure to receive such intervention and treatment will lead to problems becoming long lasting and requiring more intensive services over time. They argue that a majority of children in need of services are never identified and consequently do not receive the proper attention and services. Furthermore, too many of the wrong individuals have been identified as needing a special education or services. Throughout the article, they continue to discuss the long-term effects of children not receiving the proper services and being underserved. According to Kauffman et. Al, "80% of students with EBD are neither identified nor served by mental health" (p.44). According to the aforementioned authors, "government publications indicate that at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, about 1% of the public school population were identified as having emotional or behavioral disorders for special education purposes... a majority of SED [seriously emotionally disturbed] children are never identified as such and consequently do not receive the services they need" (p.43). Furthermore, they believe that "we must weigh the cost of stigma against the cost of not identifying and serving students with EBD, especially those whose disorders are not yet severe and who thus are good candidates for improvement" (p.45). They also realize that stigma is "a serious issue and legitimate concern."

There are many different conditions that would call for a child receiving a special education and since each child's case is different the curriculum of a special education classroom is different from a general curriculum. Some of the types of students that may end up in a special education classroom may struggle with behavioral problems, reading/writing deficiencies, ADHD, ADD, dyslexia, Autism, and more. Parents of

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<sup>16</sup> Kauffman, James M., Mock, Devery R. and Richard L. Simpson. "Problems Related to Underservice of Students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders." *Behavioral Disorders*, 33:1(2007) :43-57.

autistic children have claimed that it is hard enough as it is to find assistance for their children with autism. With budget cuts set to go in effect soon, special education programs will receive many cuts. According to a CBS New York News report "the New York State Board of Regents has voted down a long-time rule that mandated speech and language services for autistic kids. For more than 20 years, the Regents said kids with autism had to receive five days a week therapy and students who qualified for "related services" had to get two days a week of speech and language, until now... Districts are still required to evaluate each student and develop a speech and language schedule that meets their individual needs<sup>17</sup>."

However, even with evaluations, some cases go undetected for far too long until a teacher brings it to the parent's attention. Though it is clear that closer evaluations are needed, the question becomes how will they get done with budget cuts threatening such progress? It is no secret that these evaluations are very much necessary and vital in a student receiving proper services but who will execute them? Some parents have their child evaluated by doctors. However, a doctor is not as experienced, I believe, as a teacher in detecting such disabilities. This is not to say that most of these conditions are not medical, for many of them actually require medication. For example, there is a student in Ms. Mata's class named Analeslie who, Ms. Mata strongly suspects, suffers from dyslexia. Ms. Mata brought this suspicion to Analeslie's mother's attention, who then had her evaluated by a doctor. The doctor concluded that she does not, after all, suffer from dyslexia, though Ms. Mata still strongly believes the diagnosis is incorrect.

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<sup>17</sup> "Parents Angry Over Cuts To NYC Special Ed Programs" CBS New York News. November 17, 2010.  
<http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2010/11/17/parents-angry-over-cuts-to-nyc-special-ed-programs/>



Detecting special education needs can be a very difficult task. Too often, behavioral problems are ignored and only seen as a child “acting out” for attention. Not many people realize that behavioral problems are real issues and can hinder a child’s ability to focus. It is because of this, and funding reasons, that children requiring ESL are often times misdiagnosed with requiring a special education. Such a misplacement is brought in part by budget cuts and the neglect that results from such cuts. According to the Cambridge Dictionary online, English as a Second Language (ESL) is defined as “the teaching of English to speakers of other languages who live in a country where English is an official or important language<sup>18</sup>.” Language and cultural barriers are too often misdiagnosed as a learning disability causing children to receive the wrong services (if any are being received, offered or available).

A student requiring ESL and not receiving such services can result in the student failing the grade, as was the case with a handful of students in our classroom. When a child does not understand the language that is being spoken it is virtually impossible to learn anything, even the most basic of things (such as the alphabet or even counting). As an immigrant and former ESL student myself I know firsthand the difficulties and frustration of not understanding the language being spoken to you and even, at times, pretending to understand and nodding your head in agreement because you are too embarrassed to accept the fact that you are completely lost and feel incompetent and inferior to all the other students. Most students requiring ESL who are placed in a regular classroom often times do not complete the work because they grow irate and frustrated with themselves and the situation all together.

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<sup>18</sup> Cambridge Dictionaries Online.  
<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/esl>

The same can be said about children requiring special education and not receiving it. In "Appearances, Stigma, and Prevention"<sup>19</sup>, James M. Kauffman makes an interesting argument by saying that individuals with disabilities are left naked when they do not receive the proper services. In this article he focuses on individuals with mental retardation and the "cloak" and "appearance of competence" as being of extreme importance to those with mental retardation. However, Kauffman warns of such "cloaking" arguing that the main problem is that it "hampers prevention." Kauffman briefly discusses denial and urges us to speak openly about such disabilities and the stigmas associated with it and special education. Kauffman believes that "the cloak only misinterprets incompetence...mental retardation exists, regardless how we talk about it, even if we or people with it deny it exists. Incompetence of any stripe cannot be hidden successfully just by changing the way we speak of it, but its stigma can be managed, either poorly or well" (p.196). Kauffman makes even greater points: "a cloak makes matters worse. Pretending that disability doesn't exist only heightens stigma. People do not like to be fooled about disability or anything else. Stigma and its problems are better handled by directness and honesty. Special education is intended to give people skills not merely a cloak for trying to hide incompetence...the assumption that special education, which is at its best the fair treatment of disability, creates stigma is not just wrong; it is perverse. It confuses treatment with cause" (p.196).

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<sup>19</sup> Kauffman, James M. "Appearances, Stigma, and Prevention." *Remedial and Special Education* 24:4 (2003)195-198.

#### **Chapter 4: Flying Under the Radar: Needs Gone Undetected**

*“If a doctor, lawyer, or dentist had 40 people in his office at one time, all of whom had different needs, and some of whom didn't want to be there and were causing trouble, and the doctor, lawyer, or dentist, without assistance, had to treat them all with professional excellence for nine months, then he might have some conception of the classroom teacher's job.”-Donald D. Quinn*

Upon first entering the country a lot of immigrant children are placed in regular, English-speaking classrooms as opposed to ESL classrooms, where they belong. There are many reasons as to why this happens. Unfortunately, ESL classrooms are not as common as they were about fifteen years ago, due to budget cuts. Furthermore, children are often times misplaced in a special education classroom instead of ESL. Immigrant children not receiving proper ESL services, or any other service for that matter, can not only be blamed on budget cuts, misplacement or the schools. Parents need to ensure that their children receive the best education possible and the best way to be ensured is by being involved and asking questions. Far too many parents are not involved in the least bit in their children's education. Ensuring that children get thoroughly screened, placed in the correct classrooms and get the services that they need are key issues of focus that parents could rally behind. It is very important that children get the attention they need to succeed, especially at an entry level like kindergarten.

There are other reasons as to why there is a lack of parent involvement, which include: parents not being able to speak English, too busy with multiple jobs, or are simply not interested. All of these factors play a role in children not receiving proper services. As previously mentioned, a lot of ESL classrooms have been eliminated due to budget cuts and have since been replaced by supplemental ESL services. Besides such services being limited, there are a lot of parents who, at times, prefer for their children to

be placed in a regular, English-speaking classroom because they believe that their children will learn English quicker in such a setting. However, this is not the case as often times students, due to the language barrier, get left behind and are confused most of the time, barely absorbing the information being fed to them. This is a very detrimental misconception held by some immigrant parents. This is because immigrant parents themselves usually have a low educational attainment level. This language barrier that parents too face prevent them from being able to fully help their children out with homework. According to Patricia Alvarez McHatton and Vivian Correa, "for Latinos, lack of English language proficiency may further impede their ability to engage fully in the education of their child and may hinder receipt of available services for their child<sup>20</sup>." My mother, a non-English speaking immigrant, was never able to help my younger sister with homework because my mother herself could not even read it. Luckily, my sister has always had her English-speaking father and myself to offer assistance when needed. But, think about all the immigrant children who are not so lucky to have assistance at home. These children are at a huge disadvantage. Parents who do not know how to speak English may not know how to demand services for their children, or even what services they need. Whenever I noticed that my sister needed some extra help in a specific area I would bring it to my mother's attention and we would speak to her teacher. These are things that my mother would not be able to notice on her own. This is often the case for students whose parents do not speak any English. Often times parents simply do not know any better or what steps need to be done to ensure that their children have their needs met. Some parents do not even know that their children have needs to be met.

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<sup>20</sup> Alvarez McHatton, Patricia, and Vivian Correa. "Stigma and Discrimination: Perspectives from Mexican and Puerto Rican Mothers." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 25.3 (2005): 131-42.

It is during instances such as these that the agility and vigilance of teachers is key in the success of students. The agility and vigilance from teachers helps detect learning disabilities, such as ADHD or ADD, that parents may have overlooked or never noticed. A lot of these students come from single-parent homes, working at least two jobs. Because of this students are often times left at home under the care of a grandparent (who usually speaks no English). These same grandparents are then responsible for ensuring that these children do their homework. But if the grandparent does not speak English and the parent is working, who is going to make sure the child is on the right track and doing his/her homework correctly? Furthermore, if the progress of said child is going unmonitored by a parent/caretaker, how would they know if their child is struggling?

This is when teachers come in. Their professional, trained eye notices when a child is struggling with a certain condition or disorder or is simply not making the proper progress. Most parents are completely unaware of their child's state until a teacher brings it to their attention. Some parents, such as Analeslie's mother, spring into action and seek services for their children, if needed. If they do not know what steps to take, they consult the teacher for guidance and advice as to where they should be going for services. Unfortunately, there are other parents who simply do not care. As long as their child is passing that is all that matters to them. Such parents usually have a low educational attainment level, so the value on education may not be as high as other things, such as being employed.

However, it can become very difficult, especially if the teacher does not speak the language of the student, to decipher if the student is not progressing because of a language barrier or because of a learning disability. Granted, there are rare cases in which

students require both ESL and a special education<sup>21</sup>, but the instances are not as common as a student needing one or the other. Being placed in an ESL classroom is not stigmatized, while being placed in a special education classroom is. When a child is placed in a special education classroom, the labels that are accompanied by such education are usually everlasting. Such stigmatization, however, is affected by the parent's educational attainment more than anything else. In the next chapter, I will discuss how such stigmatization and labels are related to race and socioeconomic class.

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<sup>21</sup> At the beginning of the school year there was a student named Steven Fernandez placed in Ms. Mata's classroom who clearly required special services and ESL. Steven did not understand or speak much English and had a speech impediment. Steven received services from an ESL teacher and speech coach on a weekly basis, but it was clear that it was not enough for Steven to make the necessary progress. After consulting with Ms. Mata, Steven's mother realized it was best to move him to a specialized school where he would receive the proper attention and services necessary for progress.

## Chapter 5: The Everlasting Label

*"If your child is placed in a special education class, that's it. He'll never escape that label; it will always be attached to him"<sup>22</sup>"-Karen Martinez, parent.*

For a while I have been interested in looking more closely into the connection between one's education level and one's income, if there is any at all, and last year I wrote a term paper on this topic for my Methods of Social Research course. I discovered, to no surprise, that most people link economic success with a person's education attainment: the higher the education the higher the salary, which tends to be true in most cases. I also found that one's educational level affects one's income. In the article "On Formal Education, Skills, and Earnings: The Role of Educational Certificates in Earnings Determination," Alfred A. Hunter and Jean McKenzie Leiper discuss the importance of degrees and the effect they have on earnings. They argue that their research shows "that people with more years of schooling earn more partly because they are more productive... And those with more years and certificates earn more than one would predict from their skills"<sup>23</sup>. Hunter and Leiper point out that people acquire general knowledge and skills required for productivity on a job through education, and in most cases, credentials (for example a person who attends Columbia University would have more credentials than someone who might have attended a local community college). People invest in a higher-paying position by investing in school: people will defer working and receiving instant economic

<sup>22</sup> Martinez, Karen. Personal Interview. 3 March 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Hunter, Alfred A., Leiper, Jean McKenzie. 1993. "On Formal Education, Skill, and Earnings: The Role of Educational Certificates in Earnings Determination". *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 18:1. Pp. 21-42.

relief to stay longer in school to attain a higher education in hopes for higher pay. Hunter and Leiper go on to further argue that employers select among the better-educated first for high-paying jobs. The aforementioned authors believe that the higher your education, the higher pay rate you will receive. Though they believe this hypothesis to be true, they do not understand why the two are linked: “the belief that better-educated citizens yield a wealthier country is a cornerstone of public policy almost everywhere. Likewise, the conviction that better-educated people secure higher-status, higher-paying jobs is an organizing principle in most people’s lives. And, at least for individuals, it is true. In spite of considerable research on the topic, however, just how education is translated into occupational rewards remains unclear.”

Furthermore, Seppo Pontinen and Hannu Uusitalo, who wrote “Socioeconomic Background and Income,” understand that parents provide the “background and possibilities” for people’s schooling and that education is the most important factors influencing occupation<sup>24</sup>. The socioeconomic level affects the types of opportunities, access and resources one may have access to or be presented with. This lack of resources, access, and/or opportunities can act as a deterrent for attaining a higher education, which plays a large role in attaining higher-paying positions. Attaining a higher education can be costly and if a person comes from a low socioeconomic level it becomes more difficult to attain it.

Another scholar who conducted similar research includes Stephanie C. Berzin, who took a closer look at educational aspirations and attainment of poor youths in

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<sup>24</sup> Pontinen, Seppo, Uusitalo, Hannu. 1975. “Socioeconomic Background and Income.” *Acta Sociologica* (Taylor & Francis Ltd) 18:4. Pp. 322-329.



“Educational Aspirations among Low-Income Youths: Examining Multiple Conceptual Models.” Berzin argues that “educational aspirations are one of the most important predictors of educational attainment” and believes that many factors, not just one, influence such aspirations. These include: parent academic involvement, socioeconomic status (SES), institutional context, family background, and so on. Berzin observes that youths from poor families continue to have lower aspirations in comparison to other youths (78% of poor youths expect to attend college compared to 86% of middle class youths and 94% of higher class youths). Berzin also believes that poor parents may be less engaged in academics because they may lack experience in the educational arena. Poor youths may also attend schools with less experienced teachers and may feel additional constraints when deciding on a higher education because of their low SES level<sup>25</sup>.

To further develop her argument on the numerous factors affecting educational aspirations and attainment, Berzin analyzes three different theories that, together, she believes help better explain this phenomenon: status attainment, blocked opportunities, and social support. Under status attainment models SES has the largest impact on educational aspirations and attainment. Under this model, parental income, education, employment and more influence youths. The importance of the parents’ education level and how this will, in turn, affect their child’s aspirations and attainment which can affect their future income level is seen under this model. Under the blocked opportunities model negative experiences with the educational system undermine educational aspirations. Lastly, under the social support model support from parents, peers, teachers, and the

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<sup>25</sup> Berzin, Stephanie C. 2010. “Educational Aspirations among Low-Income Youths: Examining Multiple Conceptual Models.” *Children & Schools* 32:2. Pp.112-124.

community have been linked to academic achievement. This kind of support has a positive influence on career aspirations and development which can help in the attainment of a higher income level: the higher the educational aspirations the higher the educational attainment, the higher the educational attainment, the higher the income level will be.

As previously mentioned, mostly all students attending PS MS 20 come from a low-income, lower class family, which can possibly indicate the educational attainment of the parent. While conducting research and interviews for this study, it was found that acceptance of special education is mostly affected by educational attainment than anything else. The higher the value on education, the more accepting of special services the parent is. Unfortunately, there is existing stigma<sup>26</sup> and negative connotations linked to special education. Such labels come from parents, society, and professionals. Generally speaking, there is considerably more acceptance of students being placed in a special needs class by middle and upper class families, while there is resistance and existing stigma amongst the working and lower class families. Such negative connotations and labels make parents resistant to ensuring that their children receive the proper services that they need. This same resistance makes it difficult for not just teachers, but also the students themselves, who become more susceptible to developing behavioral problems. Students who do not receive proper services are never up to speed with their peers.

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<sup>26</sup> For the sake of this thesis stigma is defined as a “discrediting attribute assigned by society to those who differ in some manner from society’s expectations, customs, and mores. It results from a social categorization process that allows for the quick identification of those who are similar and those who are different and can therefore be considered as ‘others’ ...disability and ethnicity are two such characteristics used to categorize individuals into stigmatized groups.” As found in: Alvarez McHatton, Patricia, and Vivian Correa. "Stigma and Discrimination: Perspectives from Mexican and Puerto Rican Mothers." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 25.3 (2005): 131-42.

Middle class parents will fight tooth and nail and pay whatever extra fee is required for their children to get the extra attention and services they need so that they do not fall behind. However, even the mention of special education placement puts lower and working class parents on edge. These parents will resist and request that their children remain in a "normal" classroom with "normal" students. Unfortunately, there is a stigma that has been created, especially amongst the African American and Latino communities, behind being placed in a special education class. If a teacher is persistent in informing parents that their child would really benefit from the extra attention, parents can even become irate! No child of theirs is "stupid" or "retarded."

In "Stigma and Discrimination: Perspectives from Mexican and Puerto Rican Mothers," Patricia Alvarez McHatton and Vivian Correa, both who are Latinas and have experience in special education, discuss the investigation of the stigma-related discrimination and experiences Puerto Rican and Mexican single mothers of young children with disabilities had. They discuss the continuing lack of cultural awareness that may result in stigmatization as well as the socio-economic conditions from which Latino children usually come from, which provides some insight as to which opportunities are accessible to them. Alvarez McHatton and Correa discuss the stigmatization and discrimination that are associated with the special education system, especially cultural stigmatization. Alvarez McHatton and Correa discover that "according to the latest report from the U.S Census Bureau (2003), Latinos are the largest minority group in the country. They account for 13% of the population living in the continental United States. Latinos have higher unemployment rates, receive lower wages, and are more likely to live in poverty than non-Hispanic Whites...Latino children and youths experience poor

outcomes in multiple areas, placing them at risk for poor cognitive and educational outcomes...They are more likely to live in poverty and...are at high risk for behavioral and developmental disorders resulting in early placement in special education...several studies report that discrimination is a factor for a majority of Latinos, resulting in significant negative impact on their success in both school and the workplace...The increased risk of developmental and behavioral disorders results in early and possibly frequent interactions with a variety of service providers in both early intervention and pre-K-12 settings.” Furthermore, Alvarez McHatton and Correa acknowledge that there is a strong correlation between race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and employment. They also recognize that “single mothers, especially single mothers of color, are often negatively stereotyped, further increasing the possibility of stigmatization and higher levels of discrimination” (p.131).

Moreover, Alvarez McHatton and Correa also acknowledge that the special education system can be stigmatizing and discriminating and found that “individuals who believe that they will be discriminated against may respond by withdrawing and avoiding social contact, thereby negatively affecting their support network and increasing their levels of stress...concealment of the condition, advocacy, and withdrawal have been identified as possible responses to real or perceived stigmatization and discrimination<sup>27</sup>...mothers of children with disabilities who feared discrimination were less likely or willing to interact with others. Their children were also less likely to interact with peers” (p.132). This fear can be very detrimental to both the parent and the child,

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<sup>27</sup> “Experiences of discrimination were defined as any exchange indicating disparate treatment that could or did affect life chances.” As found in: Alvarez McHatton, Patricia, and Vivian Correa. “Stigma and Discrimination: Perspectives from Mexican and Puerto Rican Mothers.” *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 25.3 (2005): 131-42.

both whom would benefit from a strong support system. Alvarez McHatton and Correa discovered that discrimination based on disability was first attributed to strangers and professionals, followed by family members (specifically the father). In the study, women recounted how they had husbands who left them due to the disability of their child. Disabled children are often stigmatized and require a lot of attention from parents; neither of which these men could handle. Working at PS MS 20, I have noticed that fathers (or whatever male figure is present, if any) are more resistant and less likely to admit that their child requires special services (i.e. Jaylene's father not accepting the fact that she will be repeating kindergarten). This then creates a lot of stress for the mothers, who must ensure that their children receive the services they need and please their husbands all the same.

In "Children with Gifts and Talents: Looking beyond Traditional Labels," Jillian Gates discusses one of the most important things when it comes to stigmatization: labeling (by professionals, strangers, and even family members). Gates points out that labeling has become commonplace in schools and the power that such labels have to positively or negatively affect children and their beliefs about themselves. Unfortunately, children are judged today by standardized test scores that can either place them under the "below level" "at level" or "above level" mark. Such labeling helps educators explain a child's weaknesses and strengths. Gates further states that educators and professionals get so enraptured in labels that they forget to look at the child. To further support her arguments Gates uses Labeling and Control theory which explain why things like being in a special education class are often accompanied by a negative label. Gates also discusses the differences between the labels of being "gifted" and needing a "special

education” and what these labels do to the self esteem and expectations of children as well as the perception of self and perception by others<sup>28</sup>. Gates also recognizes that “labeling tends to influence the way adults view the student and the student views herself or himself...labels become the primary focus and the child seems to be forgotten” (p.200).

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<sup>28</sup> Gates, Jillian. "Children with Gifts and Talents: Looking beyond Traditional Labels." *Roeper Review* 32.3 (2010): 200-06.

**Chapter 6:** Conclusion: *Where Do We Go from Here?: What Lies Ahead for Our Children.*

*"In teaching you cannot see the fruit of a day's work. It is invisible and remains so, maybe for twenty years."- Jacques Barzun*

Considering that kindergarten is not a mandated grade I cannot help but ask: why, then, are some children repeating kindergarten? Granted, it is a very crucial stage, one in which the basics are learned. But, if by law it is not required then it seems a little unjust for students to be required to repeat the grade. As an immigrant, ESL student, who went straight into first grade, I know that success is attainable. However, being labeled by society can hamper such success.

The existence of labels is a big reason why special education is as stigmatized as it is. As Karen Martinez mentioned, such a label is one that seems inescapable. The negative connotation and perceived discrimination lies in the label and the way people react to it. Gates believes that "the way children are labeled begins to define who they are and influences how they feel about themselves" (p.202). The process of labeling and the effects it has need to be re-evaluated. Gates argues that "educators need to consider the child first and the label second" (p.203). Children are very much aware of the labels given to them. Negative, discriminatory and/or stigmatized labels affect the way a child performs. Gates found that "scholars have asserted where once a child's educational needs were the first priority they have now become the last in the process of meeting academic standards and producing annual yearly progress in state mandated tests" (p.204). We cannot allow the stress of meeting state standards to overshadow a child's

educational needs. That should always remain the top priority. Gates makes a great point by stating: “educators need to be the agents of change and stop defining children by their abilities, high or low, and begin to see them in terms of their whole identity” (p.205).

There are many necessary changes that need to be made to the way we view special education, mainly the stigmatizing label that accompanies it.

In conclusion, as long as labels exist so will the stigma. There will continue to be budget cuts, resulting in more programs and services being eliminated. It is because of this that we need more teachers like Ms. Mata around; teachers who will fight for their students, provide support and advice for parents, and challenge their supervisors when they see an injustice being done. Unfortunately, at the time being, there is not much we can do to prevent the inevitable budget cuts. So what can we do? We need to be honest with one another. We must recognize that there are children who will require more attention than others and that is completely normal. We must admit that as adults we need to acknowledge that there is nothing stigmatizing or abnormal about receiving special services before children themselves can be comfortable with it. We must accept that there is nothing wrong with receiving special services to be equipped with the tools for a successful future and an equally fair shot at actually making it.

Unfortunately, far too many Latino parents, especially immigrants, are very uncomfortable with this topic. Seeking Latino parents to interview was nearly impossible, as soon as they were informed of the topic of the research they declined to comment. This desire of wanting no affiliation with the topic of a special education demonstrates the real resistance parents have. Somehow, receiving special services, or extra attention, are grounds for being seen as different, disabled, incompetent, and inferior. But, parent



perception is very difficult to change, especially if the parent does not understand the full extent and value of a good education and services.

So how can we honestly change public perception? First and foremost, we should follow Kauffman's advice and have open and honest discussions about the stigma, discrimination and labeling behind a special education. We must not act like these things do not exist and do not affect our children and parents. Furthermore, we must advocate tolerance and understanding. Though these may be difficult things to accomplish as budget cuts take center stage, we cannot forget about the children. With such budget cuts looming over our heads, it is inevitable that more services will be eliminated. Though the methods that PS MS 20 practices are not ideal, they do their best. Unfortunately, it seems as though other schools may have no choice but to exercise such orthodox practices as well. Sydney J. Harris once said: "The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows" and I think it is time for these kids to have a clear window to look out of.

Interview questions for the teachers and paras.

- 1.) How many years have you been teaching?
- 2.) How many students on average do you have per year?
- 3.) Where do you teach?
- 4.) What grade do you teach?
- 5.) What are the school's greatest strengths?
- 6.) What are some weaknesses?
- 7.) Why did you choose to teach at this school, in this area? How did you end up here?
- 8.) How many students with behavioral problems, on average, wind up in your class?
- 9.) To your knowledge, how many children are being raised by parents/household members?
- 10.) Can you contact someone from the family when experiencing behavioral problems?
- 11.) Do you think students get enough sleep? Enough to eat? Proper medical care?
- 12.) Have you noticed students with stress from home?
- 13.) What is the demographic of your students?
- 14.) Has your school experienced considerable budget cuts, yet?
- 15.) If so, has it affected any programs or services at your school?
- 16.) Which programs or services have been cut because of under funding?
- 17.) Do students have time to have fun while in school? In what ways?
- 18.) Do your students receive Art or physical education classes during the week? How often?
- 19.) Are kids taught how to play musical instruments in school?
- 20.) Have students requiring ESL wound up in your classroom?

- 21.) Does your school offer ESL? In what way?
- 22.) Does your school offer Special Education?
- 23.) What challenges do you face when a student has difficulty understanding English?
- 24.) Have you had any students this year that you have noticed require special attention?
- 25.) Within the last five years have you had to move a child to receive special education?
- 26.) How do parents react when told that their child is not meeting the grade standard?
- 27.) How much pressure do you feel for students to pass standardized tests?
- 28.) Are parents involved with their child's progress?
- 29.) Has your classroom size changed in the past five years? If so, in what way?
- 30.) What "conditions" do students usually have in your class?
- 31.) When a student is entering a special education class for the first time how do parents usually act?
- 32.) Do you experience resistance from parents if you mention the possible need of extra evaluation or possibly transferring to a special education class?
- 33.) As a teacher, how do you feel about Bloomberg's proposed budget cuts?
- 34.) How do you think such cuts will affect the school you work in alongside the programs and services it provides?

Interview questions for parents:

- 1.) How many kids are you caring for?
- 2.) What grades are they in?
- 3.) Why did you choose this school?
- 4.) What are the school's strengths?

- 5.) What are the school's weaknesses?
- 6.) Is your child bilingual?
- 7.) Has he/she ever required ESL?
- 8.) Do you think your child has received all the services he/she has needed?
- 9.) If you were told your child needed to be placed in a special education class how would you react?
- 10.) If you were told that your child needed extra services but was not receiving them what would you do?
- 11.) How do you think family and friends would react if your child was in a special education class?
- 12.) How involved would you say you are with your child's education?
- 13.) How would you describe your relationship to your child's teacher?
- 14.) Do you think your child's teacher communicates effectively with you about your child's progress or lack thereof?
- 15.) If your child is or needs ESL what are some of the challenges you have faced, if any?
- 16.) If your child was evaluated and it was determined that he/she needed to be placed in a special education class but you disagreed with the recommendation what would you do?
- 17.) Has your child ever been evaluated before?
- 18.) If so, did you agree with the outcome?
- 19.) Do you think your child is progressing? If so, are you content with the pace at which your child is progressing?
- 20.) Do you think your child's school does all it can to provide your child with proper

services?

21.) Are you content with the class sizes in your child's school?

22.) Does your child attend an after school program?

23.) Are there sports or arts opportunities for your child to be a part of in or outside of school?

24.) How do you feel about Bloomberg's proposed budget cuts?

25.) How do you think such cuts will affect the services your child receives?