(RE)DEFINING PRIORITIES: TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON SUPPORTING DIVERSE LEARNERS WITHIN A FLEXIBLE CURRICULUM IN A HIGH-STAKES TESTING ATMOSPHERE

by

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A thesis submitted in the conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts Graduate Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Ontario Institute for Studies in Education University of Toronto

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This thesis investigates how teachers navigate Common Core State Standards, high-stakes testing, and teacher evaluation while creating their own curriculum to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. As a former teacher, I conducted a practitioner research case study of four successful colleagues in a bilingual Pre-K-8 school in Washington, DC. When given flexibility in curriculum, teachers integrated knowledge from their relationships with students to foster a caring environment that supports learning and created their own systems of accountability by deciding what data matters. Teachers centered student engagement as what drives their curriculum and used a variety of differentiation methods based on their own “toolbox” of instructional strategies. Findings suggest a flexible curriculum model allows teachers to be curriculum makers who actively go beyond the standards to integrate knowledge from their practice and relationships with students to create curriculum that successfully supports language learners.
Acknowledgements

First I want to thank my colleagues who participated in this research. Thank you for your dedication to teaching, to creating engaging opportunities for our students, and for seeing the humanity in your work. I also want to thank the principal for welcoming my research and for believing that teachers can find success for language learners through creating their own curriculum.

Secondly, I want to acknowledge my thesis supervisors, Rob Simon and Jim Cummins. Thank you Rob for opening me up to the world of practitioner research and New Literacy Studies. Thank you Jim for teaching me how to use research and my experience to counteract top-down educational policy.

Lastly, I want to thank the thesis gang (Carolyn, Sarah, Kate & Emma) for making what is primarily solitary work a time for friendship and support. And of course, thank you Henry for your love, support, and patience.
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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mother who inspires everything in me, to my former students who lit up the classroom with their energy, and to teachers who are dedicated to the work they do. Teaching is a labor of love and I hope to encapsulate this sentiment in my work.
Chapter 1

Introduction

My first year teaching was a baptism by fire. I have a strong memory from the fall of my first year teaching, where I sat at a table of my favorite coffee shop in Washington, DC on a weekday evening staring at the Houghton Mifflin teacher guide, overwhelmed by the suggestions of what to teach. My eyes glossed over all of the suggestions of phonemic word work, strategy modeling, whole group discussion, independent practice and extension activities available through the textbook. Despite the suggested time frames and “teacher talk” suggestions, I knew this would not fit my classroom needs, interest, or time frame. I was a third grade classroom teacher at Cesar Chavez Bilingual school\(^1\), where I was given free rein to create my own curriculum that blended English language instruction with content, and there was no way Houghton Mifflin’s well laid out plans meet the needs of my heterogeneous classroom of native English and native Spanish speakers. How was I to know how to create a curriculum from scratch that would meet my individual students’ needs, all within an environment of high-stakes standardized testing?

The truth was I was unprepared as a new teacher to create curriculum that fit the needs of my students while simultaneously learning the ropes of teaching. I became a D.C. public schools (DCPS) teacher through the DC Teaching Fellows, a program that provides an alternative pathway to become a teacher. I was handed a provisionary teaching license and entered the classroom with only a summer’s worth of education courses and Teaching Fellows “boot camp” to draw from for planning and instructional

\(^1\) A pseudonym
ideas. I didn’t realize that when I walked into the classroom, I had to create an entire curriculum out of a classroom library, a set of Houghton Mifflin reading textbooks and a standards document. During my courses and boot camp, no one explained how to take a language arts standards document and plan a yearlong curriculum, or even a week long one.

Thanks to my first year Spanish language teaching partner, Nora, I learned how to create weekly plans based on the standards, to teach thematically with music and drama, and most importantly, to teach with heart. With her, I moved from using the textbook to creating my own materials that reflected my reasons for entering education, such as engaging in critical literacy read alouds and discussions (Vasquez, 2003), making zines, and co-planning with Nora to create a class play on being bilingual and a class blog that students used to document their fieldtrips that ranged from neighborhood walks, to meeting the founder of La Clinica del Pueblo to learn about his experience escaping the Salvadorian Civil War, to meeting Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi to present our thoughts on the genocide in Sudan. There were times that year when I felt so overwhelmed, I cried to my mom on the phone. But at the class celebration at the end of my first year, I cried in front of Nora and the families of our students, overwhelmed with gratitude for their support and trust.

It took time for me to develop my identity as a teacher and each year I created a new curriculum to fit with the students. My second year teaching, we engaged in inquiry-based learning in science, continued with blogs and fieldtrips to visit representatives, created videos and a recycling campaign, and of course, danced, sang, and acted (thanks to Nora!). By the end of my fifth year teaching, I was teaching fifth grade and developed
a history-centered language arts program with my colleagues, Anne and Carrie, and collaborated with my Spanish language partner, Eugenia, to teach language across content using arts, literature circles, centers, and research. I collaborated with Ford’s Theatre to bring oratory to the classroom and our students onto their historic stage, and I even picked up a consulting gig writing English as a second language (ESL) curriculum for the Department of Education of Puerto Rico.

Teaching within a school atmosphere of a flexible curriculum allowed me to be creative and grow as a professional. The trust and freedom I received from the administration supported collaboration with my language partner and my grade-level team to co-create project-based units that engaged students regarding content as well as language skills. We were curriculum writers and teachers. Our level of collaborative curriculum writing, however, was unique and some teachers made use of the flexible curriculum differently. Across the hallway, for example, students had different experiences of rote learning activities and authoritarian relationships.

From the perspective of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, on paper you could say that my students and the students across the hall were both receiving “standards-based instruction” from “highly qualified teachers,” but in reality, they were experiencing two different realities. This was due to the flexible curriculum atmosphere at Cesar Chavez, where teachers have complete freedom in deciding how to meet the learning standards by creating their own curriculum. The difference in student experience and teacher priorities when working with linguistically and culturally diverse learners troubled me and this dissonance (Pincus, 2001) lead me to pursue an M.A. in curriculum to understand the role of teachers and students in the curriculum writing process.
Past research has focused on teacher agency within schools with mandated curricula (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Craig, 2009; Esposito, Davis, & Swain 2012; Pease-Alvarez, Davies Samway, & Cifka-Herrera, 2010; Stillman, 2011) or viewed teachers as adaptors of curriculum (e.g. Maniates & Mahiri, 2011) rather than creators. Craig and Ross (2008) call for teacher narratives regarding their practices as curriculum makers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1992). There is a need to understand the ways in which teachers exercise agency vis-à-vis their “pedagogies of choice” (Cummins, 2011b) within a flexible curriculum to promote socio-emotional growth and academic achievement of linguistically and culturally diverse learners. How can teachers create new definitions of accountability to students rather than to external policies of testing and evaluation (Campano, 2007)?

Therefore, I am investigating how teachers’ beliefs and relationships with students shape and define priorities in a flexible curriculum serving diverse students within a high-stakes testing atmosphere. Taking an “inquiry as stance” (Cochran-Smith, 2008) as a practitioner researcher, I look to my work and the work of four successful colleagues from Cesar Chavez to create “knowledge-of-practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Lytle, 2000) regarding how teachers create curriculum to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students in a high-stakes testing atmosphere. My research question is especially pertinent insofar as it contributes teachers’ perspectives in a political milieu (Schwab, 1973) of increased nationalization of standards through the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and accountability of teachers through high-stakes testing (National Governor’s Association, 2009; US Department of Education, 2013). This case study provides a counter-narrative regarding what data matters to
teachers who find success through curriculum that prioritizes students over standardized-testing.

In this next section I will provide the context of this case study. Because national policies in the US such as NCLB and CCSS are embedded in teachers’ everyday lives, I intertwine national context within my description of District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) as a site of educational reform. I then provide a description of my site of research, Cesar Chavez Bilingual and its flexible curriculum. Lastly, I lay out my theoretical framework. Through the lens of Schwab’s (1983) “commonplaces of education” (p. 241) in curriculum development, New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee 2001, 2008; Street, 1993) feminist standpoint theory (Harding 2004; Haraway, 2007; hooks, 2004), and Chicana/Latina epistemologies (Anzaldúa, 1987; Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, & Villenas, 2006), I define the importance of relationships in knowledge construction and I define literacy as a social practice.

**Context: District of Columbia Public Schools**

**Student demographics.** DCPS serves the residents of Washington, DC, a federal city that is 100 square miles. Historically DC has been a racially divided city, with Rock Creek Park as a de-facto dividing line between wealthier white residents to the west and lower income residents of color to the east. Since 1960, blacks were the majority in DC, but within the past 15 years of gentrification, the city that coined the “chocolate city with its vanilla suburbs” by Parliament Funkadelic, has seen shifts in demographics (Morello & Keating, 2011). DC is now 50.1% black, 35.5% white, 9.9% Latino, and 3.8% Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), however, continues to represent the demographic make up of Washington DC, pre-gentrification.
The majority of DCPS students are economically disadvantaged students of color. Of its total population of 45,557 students, DCPS has a majority black student population (69%). Latinos are the second largest group (16%), and white students make up 11%, and “other ethnicity” is 4% (DCPS, 2013). In terms of its subgroup population, DCPS is comprised of majority economically disadvantaged students (77%), 10% English language learners (ELL), and 17% special education students (DCPS, 2013a).

When it comes to academic achievement documented by standardized testing, DCPS students have a long way to go. DCPS students average 47.4% proficiency in reading. Despite the recent growth in the 2013 DC-CAS results, the achievement gap between black and white students is huge. White students are 92.1% proficient in reading and 38.6% of black students are proficient, making the achievement gap 53.5% (DCPS, 2013). Latino students are 51.2% proficient in reading, while English language learners are 36.9% proficient in reading. The large achievement gaps in regards to language learners and minoritized youth make Washington, DC a city of educational inequality, but due to its relative small size and unique circumstance as being a federal city, it acts as a laboratory of school reform to tackle these inequalities in education.

**Ground zero for school reform.** DCPS is “ground zero” in the United States for urban school reform and has received a lot of national attention for its take-charge style. Due its unique situation of being a school district that is controlled by a mayor-appointed chancellor, experimental educational policy can rapidly be put to action. In 2008, Mayor Adrian Fenty dissolved the elected school board and appointed Chancellor Michelle

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2 Although the DC-CAS score defines literacy as a skills-based achievement on standardized tests, I cite this data to give background of the case study. Within my thesis, however, I use New Literacy Studies to define literacy as situated (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) and ideological (Street, 1993).
Rhee, who shook up “downtown” (what DCPS teachers call the administrative offices) with massive firings of staff. Her take-charge style was captured in the December 2008 Time Magazine cover, where Michelle Rhee stood holding a broom in the front of an empty classroom with the caption “How to Fix America’s Schools.” The sentiment of the time was, who will be swept away next? During her three and a half years as chancellor, Michelle Rhee demonstrated her take-charge attitude with school closings, the hiring and firing of principals (including the principal that hired me), and created a system of bonuses for schools that increased tests scores for the high-stakes standardized test, DC-Comprehensive Assessment System (DC-CAS) which is used to measure adequately yearly progress (AYP) for NCLB.

**Teacher evaluation.** One of the most controversial reform measures put into place under Michelle Rhee was the IMPACT teacher evaluation system that linked students’ standardized test scores with teacher pay and tenure. Since 2009, DCPS teachers are observed five times a year: twice by an administrator and three times by outside evaluators known as “master educators” (DCPS, 2012a). According to the IMPACT teacher evaluation system, if you are teacher in a testing grade (3-10), 35% of a teacher’s evaluation is based on a student’s value-added growth in the DC-CAS, 15% on student growth in teacher-assessed class assessments, 40% from classroom evaluations, 10% on commitment to school community (DCPS, 2012a). Based on these factors, teachers receive a rating of ineffective, minimally effective, developing, effective, and

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3. The 15% value based on teacher-assessed classroom assessments began in 2012, and requires teachers to receive administrator approval regarding what assessments he/she will use to assess student growth. From 2009-2011, 50% of a teacher’s value was based on standardized test results.
Beginning in 2012, under the leadership of Chancellor Kaya Henderson, DCPS has implemented LIFT (Leadership Initiative for Teachers); a program intended to retain strong teachers (DCPS, 2012b). Under LIFT, teachers receive larger bonuses for effective and highly effective teachers in high-poverty schools. It also decreases the amount of teacher observations (from five to twice a year) and creates a career ladder for teachers to become expert teachers and move into leadership roles at the school or to district level policy fellowships or positions (DCPS, 2012b).

**High-Stakes Testing Accountability.** According to NCLB, if schools did not make AYP or “safe harbor” a demonstration of increased scores for subgroup populations (Special Education, English Language Learners, Economically disadvantaged students, and minority groups) for four years, the principal and staff would be fired and the school would be restructured or could open up as a charter school. In 2012, DCPS received a waiver from NCLB’s accountability system. To receive the waiver, DCPS had to set up its own system of high-stakes testing accountability. Rather than the NCLB categories of “met AYP” and “not met AYP” levels of accountability to reach 100% proficiency for all subgroups, DCPS has five designations for schools: priority, developing, rising, and reward and has created separate interim targets for subgroup populations (Office of State Superintendent of Education, 2012, p. 64).

**Common Core State Standards.** In 2010, DCPS adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) developed in 2010 by National Governors Association Center for

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4 During my time teaching according to IMPACT, I received the rating of highly effective (2009-2010) and effective (2010-2011).
Best Practices (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The CCSS are “research-based” reading and math standards that are internationally benchmarked to prepare “college and career ready students” for a “twenty-first-century, globally competitive society” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 3). The CCSS has become de-facto national standards, since 45 states, the District of Columbia, and four US territories have replaced their state standards with the CCSS (CCSS Initiative, 2012).

For reading and math, the CCSS “define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6), thus it focuses on goals rather than what cognitive skills or strategies teachers should employ to support students in attaining the goals. The reading components of the CCSS have a strong focus on all students being able to use evidence from the text to support their opinions in discussion and in writing, and to engage in “close reading” of “complex” grade level text.5

Curriculum and support for language learners. In terms of curriculum, the CCSS refers to itself as the “fundamentals” and does not define content but suggests that teaching the standards should be “complemented by a well-developed content-rich curriculum” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6). The CCSS explicitly leaves space for teachers to exercise their “professional judgment” and experience to have all students reach the standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6). In regards to the needs of language learners, the Standards abnegate responsibility, stating that “it is beyond the scope of the standards to define the full range of supports appropriate for English language learners”

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5 Text complexity is determined by a qualitative (theme), quantitative (lexile scores) and reader task (motivation and purpose) measures. For more information on text complexity see Appendix A of CCSS reading: http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf
while asking teachers to make sure these students “meet the same high standards” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6). As an addendum to the CCSS, the NGA & CCSSO (2010a) published a three-page document entitled “Application of Common Core State Standards for English Language Learners” where teachers are asked to provide “instruction that develops foundational skills in English and enables ELLs to participate fully in grade-level coursework” (NGA & CCSS, 2010a, p.2). This is a weighty task that requires support beyond suggestion. Ultimately, it is up to the state, district, and school to provide teachers with the resources and pedagogical tools needed to reach grade-level expectations.

**DCPS: A case of quick curriculum turnover.** An example of how DCPS quickly rolls out educational policy is demonstrated by the curricular changes that have occurred since the adoption of the CCSS. Prior to 2010, DCPS implemented the DC learning standards for reading and had a contract with Houghton-Mifflin to provide textbooks and student workbooks. School leadership decided the level of “fidelity” regarding how teachers were to use these resources, and no district reading curriculum was in place. To provide “data” for teachers to create instructional plans, DCPS had a contract with Discovery Education from 2007-2011 to create the DC-BAS (DC Benchmark assessment system) standardized test, which assessed all DC language arts standards four times a year.

In 2011, the same year of CCSS adoption, DCPS rolled out its Paced Interim Assessments (PIA), benchmark standardized tests created by mClass, a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. Rather than assess all standards at once, the PIAs are administered five times a school year and assess a selection of standards at a time. This
creates a de-facto scope and sequence, where teachers could create units based off of the CCSS that are assessed. It was not until 2012, however, that DCPS decided to focus on creating a language arts curriculum and abandoned the “textbooks as curriculum” route. DCPS created a scope and sequence document based on the standards assessed in the PIAs and with the help of curriculum specialists, instructional coaches, and teachers created language arts units (DCPS, 2012c). According to one teacher I interviewed, the units were available for teachers right before their intended sequence, which did not leave adequate time for planning.

**Cesar Chavez Bilingual**

Cesar Chavez Bilingual is known for its diversity due to its 50% native Spanish speaker and 50% native English speaker enrolment policy. Cesar Chavez Bilingual was traditionally a PK-6 school, but in 2008 it grew to Pre-K-8 and now is a two-campus school. Cesar Chavez straddles two neighborhoods, with Pre-K to third grade in the more affluent Cleveland Park neighborhood to the west of Rock Creek Park and the fourth through eighth grade campus a mile away in the more diverse Adams Morgan area to the east of Rock Creek Park. With gentrification, the Latino population within the neighborhood boundaries of Cesar Chavez has been decreasing. In response, Cesar Chavez became a magnet school for DC students whose home language is Spanish to keep the model of 50% native Spanish speaking students. For example, some of my former students commuted 40 minutes in traffic from one end of DC to the other to attend Cesar Chavez. This study takes place at the fourth through eighth grade campus, where the Latino population makes up over half of the student demographics (OSSE, 2013).
**Dual language model.** Cesar Chavez Bilingual’s dual language model has changed over the last few years, from two-teachers (Spanish and English) in one classroom to Spanish and English teachers in separate classrooms with the students spending half the day in each classroom. Despite the changes in the bilingual staffing model, 50% of content is delivered in English and 50% of content is delivered in Spanish. Students receive language arts in both English and Spanish from native language teachers. Since 2010, for Kindergarten to fifth grade, content subjects such as Science and Social studies are taught in English and math is taught solely in Spanish. In addition, some specials (such as gym or art) are taught in Spanish to further reinforce Spanish acquisition.

**Student Population.** In 2011-2012, Cesar Chavez Bilingual served 676 students, from Pre K to 8th grade. 58% of the students are identified as Hispanic/Latino, 28% white (non-Hispanic), 8% black (non-Hispanic), 3% Asian, and 3% multiple races (DCPS, 2012d). Of this population, 46% are labeled English language learner, 28% are economically disadvantaged, and 11% of the student population receives special education services (DCPS, 2012d). In terms of class, at Cesar Chavez, you will find students whose parents work on Capitol Hill and vacation in Europe sitting next to a student whose mother sells homemade tamales at construction sites. From my experience teaching fifth grade, students reading ability ranged from third grade to seventh grade. This sizable difference in English literacy and also life experience requires a teacher to be well versed in differentiated instruction and ESL strategies, and to create a language arts curriculum to meet these diverse needs.
**Teacher population.** This being said, teachers at Cesar Chavez Bilingual have a range of experience. According to a 2011 staff stakeholder survey (DCPS, 2011a), 52% of teachers have taught at Cesar Chavez for three or less years, 20% four to five years, and 20% for six or more years. This means that over half of the teachers are new to Cesar Chavez, some being Teach for America or DC Teaching Fellows graduates who are working towards certification as they teach. Like the students, the ethnic background at Cesar Chavez is diverse, with teachers self-identifying as 45% White, 33% Latino, 11% Black, 7% Asian, 7% other (DCPS, 2011a). Although the school has a majority of white teachers, over half of the teaching staff is fluent in Spanish (either as a first or second language), therefore enabling communication with monolingual Spanish speaking parents.

**Flexible curriculum.** Teachers at Cesar Chavez Bilingual have pedagogical freedom to create their own curriculum to teach the standards. Teachers have weekly grade-level meetings to support planning as a team, and time during daylong professional development days for curriculum planning. For language arts, there is a range of resources available for English teachers, such as a book room of guided reading texts, Houghton Mifflin textbooks, and teachers have classroom libraries. This does not mean that teachers are completely free, because all teachers have to adhere to all of the district requirements for testing and teacher evaluation. For example, teachers are required to write the lesson’s objective on the board for every lesson and display the standards the student achieved on student work.

**Language learners.** Despite the 46% English language learner population, there is no set ESL program for K-5. Language learners are mainstreamed into the classrooms
and if the student is a newcomer, the classroom teachers work with resource teachers to support the student. For grades 6-8, there are resource teachers to support ESL students and work either by providing support in the classroom or pull out of students. Students who are behind in reading can also be pulled out for the Read 180 program.

In the last three years, Cesar Chavez has implemented the Read 180 program for fourth through eight grade, which pulls out students who are two or more grade levels behind in English reading to receive 80 minutes of literacy a day, at the expense of students missing specials (e.g. P.E., Art, Music). Many of these students are English language learners. This curriculum is scripted and has a set guided reading list of texts, but it also allows for students to engage in independent reading. Read 180 impacts classroom culture because these students are pulled out of the English classroom everyday for 80 minutes a day. These teachers have to work around Read 180 and tailor their curriculum to make sure these students are engaged and meeting the standards in the little time they have with them.

Assessments. Teachers also have to follow the DCPS assessment schedule, which requires the following in school year: five Paced Interim Assessments (PIAs) (grades 3-8), three reading assessments for fluency (Dynamic indicators of early literacy skills, or DIBLES) and reading level (mClass Reading 3D assessment) (K-5), four Read-180 Scholastic Inventory (for students who are below reading level and are pulled out for Read 180 program in grades 4-8), and the DC Comprehensive Assessment System (DC-CAS) (grades 3-8) (DCPS, 2012e). If you are a language learner, you also have to take the week long assessment for speaking, listening, reading, and writing known as the
Assessing comprehension and communication in English state-to-state for English language learners (ACCESS).

From this long list of assessments, one can see the district-level constraints on teacher planning and instruction time. Counting the PIA and DC-CAS days alone, students are in standardized tests for 18 days out of the 180-day school year. Teachers as Cesar Chavez Bilingual have relative agency within their day-to-day curricular choices, but are constrained by district and federal policies regarding standards, testing and teacher evaluation.

**Standardized test inequalities.** The data indicates that at Cesar Chavez Bilingual there is a gap in achievement with racial, ethnic, and linguistic subgroups. With 46% of the student population labeled “Limited English Proficiency” (DCPS, 2012), despite the dual language model, only 53.6% of language learners are proficient in reading (OSSE, 2013). Even though standardized testing cannot accurately account for language learners’ proficiency when tests are norm-referenced to native English speakers (Abedi, 2004), efforts can be made to successfully support English language learners’ achievement (Nesselrodt, 2007). Compared to the 100% proficiency of white students at Cesar Chavez (OSSE, 2013), there is an achievement gap of language learners and of minority students (see Table 1). There is variability within grade levels regarding the reading proficiency of white and Latino students (see Figure 1). What accounts for these differences? What do teachers prioritize when developing a flexible curriculum serving culturally and linguistically diverse students within a high-stakes testing atmosphere?

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6 For a visual example of the testing culture at DCPS see the 2012-2013 assessment calendar: [http://dc.gov/DCPS/Files/downloads/In-the-Classroom/How-Students-Are-Assessed/Assessment_Calendar_2012-2013.pdf](http://dc.gov/DCPS/Files/downloads/In-the-Classroom/How-Students-Are-Assessed/Assessment_Calendar_2012-2013.pdf)
Table 1.

*Cesar Chavez’ DC-CAS Reading Proficiency by Race and Sub-group*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entire Population</strong></td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>83.50%</td>
<td>81.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>By Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>88.17%</td>
<td>93.26%</td>
<td>98.90%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>69.58%</td>
<td>76.88%</td>
<td>78.20%</td>
<td>74.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>73.33%</td>
<td>77.50%</td>
<td>77.80%</td>
<td>81.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>By Subgroup</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>60.43%</td>
<td>67.80%</td>
<td>72.20%</td>
<td>66.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>38.55%</td>
<td>46.27%</td>
<td>64.30%</td>
<td>53.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPED</td>
<td>33.34%</td>
<td>47.37%</td>
<td>61.40%</td>
<td>65.30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


![Figure 1: Cesar Chavez’ DC-CAS Reading Proficiency of White and Latino students](image)


*Note:* For this study, I interviewed two fifth grade teachers, one fourth grade teacher, and the seventh and eighth grade teacher.
Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

For this practitioner research case study (Cochran-smith & Lytle, 2001; 2009), I bring together seemingly disparate theories related to: Schwab’s (1983) “commonplaces of education” (p. 241) in curriculum development, New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee 2001, 2008; Street, 1993) feminist standpoint theory (Harding 2004; Haraway, 2007; hooks, 2004), and Chicana/Latina epistemologies (Anzaldúa, 1987; Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, & Villenas, 2006). I selected these theories because they each speak to the socio-cultural significance of relationship and personal experience in meaning making. Sociocultural perspectives in education recognize that “learning emerges from the social, cultural, and political spaces in which it takes place, and through the interactions and relationships that occur between learners and teachers” (Nieto, 2002, p. 5). I specifically include feminist standpoint theory and Chicana/Latina epistemologies because it is how I see and make meaning in the world. I am particularly interested as a Latina practitioner researcher how a Chicana/Latina epistemological framework acts as a lens to understand teacher decisions in a school that serves majority Latino students.

In terms of theoretical frameworks to analyze instruction and teacher decisions, I am using Schwab’s (1983) commonplaces of curriculum because it recognizes the role of teachers in curriculum development. I am also framing my work through the lens of New Literacy Studies (NLS) because it recognizes the social aspects of literacy. NLS allows me to analyze not only the instructional decisions of the teachers, but the spaces and relationships in which they are embodied.
Commonplaces of Education in Curriculum Development

Schwab’s (1973, 1983) writing on curriculum has been fundamental to theorists and practitioners who want to center “teachers as curriculum makers” (Claninin & Connelly, 1992; Craig & Ross, 2008). Schwab (1983) gives equal weight and importance to teachers, students, subject matter, and the milieu (local, social, and political context) in the process of curriculum development, and names them the “commonplaces of education.” (p. 241). According to Schwab, (1983), “Teachers must be in involved in debate, deliberation, and decision about what and how to teach” (p. 245). Therefore, Schwab’s (1983) commonplaces of education will contextualize the various factors (students, teachers, subject matter, and milieu) that come into play when teachers create their own curriculum.

New Literacy Studies

Because my work aims to understand how teachers create their own language arts curriculum when working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners, questions of what constitutes literacy need to be addressed. Historically in educational research, literacy is viewed as a set of decontextualized skills (see Snow, 2000; Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1993). Within NLS, however, there is an understanding that this “autonomous model” (Street, 1993) of literacy, reflected in the current standards movement, ignores the situated realities of how meaning and identity is constructed socially through what Gee (2001; 2008) calls Discourses. Gee (2001) describes the language and literacy practices that we are socialized in since birth as our “primary Discourse” and school literacy as mastering a “secondary Discourse.” The seemingly neutral “autonomous model” of literacy does not take into account how ideology, through hegemonic power,
reproduces privilege through literacy practices of certain Discourses over others (Street, 1993). Thus Street (1993) differentiates between the “autonomous model” of literacy and the “ideological model” to make visible how definitions of literacy and literacy skills cannot be separated from ideology.

Within NLS, literacy is understood as a social practice that occurs in various locations in our lives (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Through the work of ethnography (see Heath, 1983), literacy is “understood as existing in the relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8). Barton and Hamilton (2000) describe this socialization process as literacy practices. Each person, depending on their home Discourses, engages in literacy practices. By framing literacy through the lens of New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 2008), it allows us to understand why gaps in education continue to persist when there is a mismatch between students’ home Discourses and school Discourses (see Heath, 1982, 1983; Ballenger, 1999). To address this, Delpit (1992) and Christensen (2011) suggest critical discussions of language, power and socialization need to be addressed in the classroom to allow for a meta-level critique of Discourses (Gee, 2001).

**Multiliteracies.** According to the New London Group (1996) literacy is constantly changing and needs to be viewed as multiliteracies to encompass digital communications and multilingualism born from the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of students. Therefore, educators need to expand their understandings of what constitutes as “literacy” to engage students through digital means and through home languages. Cummins (2009) argues that engaging in transformative multiliteracies in the classroom can create space for student identities, experiences, and literacy development
by using home languages alongside the official language of the classroom/state.
Ultimately, “the challenge is to make space available so that different lifeworlds- spaces for community life where local and specific meanings can be made—can flourish” (New London Group, 1996, p. 70). By framing my research within the field of NLS and Multiliteracies, I am investigating how teachers engage in literacy practices with their students through their curriculum and how teacher-student relationships are locations of epistemological and ontological significance in the field of literacy.

**Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Feminist standpoint theory actively questions objectivity within research and investigates the “relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power” (Harding, 2004, p. 1). Standpoint theory was my first understanding that knowledge can never be “neutral” and is always situated, cultural, and historical (Harding 2004; Haraway, 2007). Feminism asks us to question our locations as students, teachers, and how they impact how we come to know. “What teachers experience expands the knowledge they offer” (Simpson, 2003, p.66), thus, the standpoint of educators impacts how we relate to our students and how/what we teach. Epistemologies inform our agendas and priorities and by recognizing the primacy of experience as a location of knowledge production, Feminist standpoint theory actively questioning any knowledge or epistemology that claims authority and legitimacy for all (Simpson, 2003).

bell hooks (2004) recognizes the need for knowledge production from “the margins” and defines how marginality, due to race, class, gender, or sexuality can be a “location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse” (p. 157). Where one is located in relation to the hegemonic “center” determines how one experiences and thus
understands the relationship between power and language. This begets the need to speak for oneself. Thus, speaking from the margins recognizes that multiple realities and interpretations can exist in one space. Using standpoint theory within my thesis recognizes that “the appropriation and use of space are political acts” (Pratibha Parma in hooks, 2004, p. 159), and teachers’ experiences within curriculum need to be heard within the discourse of educational reform through national standards and testing.

**Chicana/Latina epistemologies**

As a Bolivian/white undergraduate student in women’s studies, reading Anzaldúa’s (1987) concept of a “*meztiza* consciousness—a consciousness of the borderlands” (p. 77) fit my personal confusion of being bicultural, of never feeling comfortable in all white spaces (despite my whiteness) but also never feeling fully Bolivian in Latino spaces, except when I am with my family, because I am accepted for who I am, my mother’s daughter. Anzaldúa’s (1987) description of living on the borderlands of cultures reflects my own experience of growing up in a Bolivian matriarchal, strict household while juggling the values of individualism and independence given to me by my father and by the dominant white middle class culture of the United States. Anzaldúa allows me to recognize that this liminal positionality is a space within itself, and I do not need to feel a strict authenticity within one culture.

Rather, I can see my *biculturalness* as a location of strength, where I can “be a crossroads” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 195). I can use my white privilege to my advantage in speaking up when I found examples of inequity in my school, and where my *latinidad* allows me to see the “funds of knowledge” (González et al., 1995) of my Latino students and “view children differently [by] understanding their mothers’ living pedagogies”
(Villenas, Godinez, Delgado Bernal, & Elenes, 2006, p. 5). My standpoint as a feminist second-generation Bolivian immigrant informs my ways of knowing, my concern for language learners, and my desire to work towards humanizing pedagogies within the classroom through a “conocimiento con cariño,” or consciousness with care (Jackson, Bernal Guzman, and Ramos, 2010, p. 33).

To summarize, by locating myself within Chicana/Latina epistemologies, I use this knowledge generated through my standpoint (Haraway, 2004; Harding, 2007; hooks, 2004) as a Latina, teacher, and practitioner researcher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001) to understand how our work as teachers with Latino students allows for success by creating curriculum that center the situated literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) within teacher-student relationships while navigating top-down policies and definitions of priorities. In the next chapter, I define how two conflicting definitions of curriculum co-exist simultaneously; where teachers receive “top-down” definitions of curriculum from policymakers while concurrently creating their own curriculum from the “bottom-up” through their “knowledge-of-practice” (Lytle, 2000) derived from their relationships with their students.
Chapter 3

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to define curriculum and what knowledges are privileged in the creation of curriculum. To do so, I distinguish between a top-down curriculum that is derived outside of the classroom by politicians and academics, and a bottom-up curriculum, which is created inside the classroom by teachers in relationship with their students. In each case, I define what epistemologies determine the curriculum and how teachers and teacher agency is located within that process. Lastly, I define practitioner research as a method of recognizing teachers as generators of knowledge, and how taking an “inquiry as stance” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) can support culturally and linguistically diverse learners as a counter-discourse to educational policy.

Defining the Spectrum of Curricular Control and Resources

Curriculum takes on various meanings within academia, from an objective-based model (Tyler, 1975), to the “hidden curriculum” of “official knowledges” (Apple, 1990, 2000), to a “curriculum-as-lived” (Aoki, 2005) that is embodied in teacher-student relationships. Therefore, within my literature review, I make a distinction between what I call “top-down curriculum,” enacted by educational policy and a “bottom-up curriculum” built by the daily lives of teachers and students in the classroom.

Defining curriculum. Before I get into these distinctions, when it comes to defining curriculum in general, I quite enjoy the simple definition of curriculum as “what and how teachers are expected to teach” (Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002, p. 274). As a teacher and curriculum writer, this is how I viewed curriculum before I read all the theory. Curriculum at a surface level, is the what (skills, content) and the
how (instructional strategies, methods, modalities) teachers are expected to teach, determined by the implicit and explicit values held by the curriculum writers and teachers themselves. Therefore, I am altering Kauffman et al.’s (2002) definition of curriculum to include the how, what, and why teachers teach in the classroom. The why is critical to the definition of curriculum because it asks curriculum writers and teachers to make transparent their values, beliefs, and assumptions regarding knowledge production, and their role, or identity as a teacher.

**Defining curriculum documents.** In terms of materials, curriculum documents range from top-down mandates such as state or national standards of academic expectations, to teacher-created resources. Grossman & Thompson (2008) refer to standards documents tied to high-stakes testing as *curriculum frameworks*. The 2010 Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for reading and math would be defined as a curriculum framework because it sets the learning expectations that are tested to determine adequately yearly progress (AYP) to receive federal funding.

Teachers also use *curriculum programs* given to them by the district, such as scope and sequence documents that offer a timeline of what content to cover when. Curriculum programs also include state or district mandated textbooks and units of study. Other curricular materials can be *teacher-created materials* such as graphic organizers, lessons or units, or *outside resources* such as units or lessons from outside organizations or books and websites on teaching strategies or methods, such as 6+1 Writing Traits (Culham, 2003) or Guided Reading and Writing (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Grossman and Thompson (2008) conceptualize curriculum resources as tools where “embedded within these materials are conceptions of what it means to teach reading and writing” (p.
2016). Teachers therefore should have discussions regarding how curriculum documents and materials shape their understandings of reading and writing (Grossman & Thompson, 2008). With the variety of materials available regarding curriculum, it is the level of control regarding teacher’s work that determines what resources are available and used by teachers in their everyday work.

**Spectrum of curricular control.** Curriculum is highly context-dependent, due to the varying degrees of control public teachers experience regarding federal, state, district, and school-based policy. Curriculum that is highly controlled can be known as prescriptive curriculum, scripted curriculum, paced curriculum, rigid or inflexible curriculum (see Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Cummins 2007; Craig 2009), typified by textbook reading programs. Here, teachers are viewed as only implementers of content and skills and are expected to demonstrate “fidelity” to the prescriptive curriculum.

The opposite is also possible, where teachers are given complete autonomy to create their own curriculum based on the state standards (see Kauffman, et al., 2002). I call this a flexible curriculum because teachers are free to work autonomously, in grade-level or school-based teams to create local curriculum. Here, teachers are not the implementers, but the creators, the writers, or the “curriculum makers” (Candinin & Connelly, 1992). Lastly, there is also curriculum that is in-between inflexible and flexible, as documented by Maniates and Mahiri (2011), where teachers work in schools where prescriptive curriculum and textbooks systems have been normalized, but teachers can demonstrate agency by tailoring and adapting these materials to students’ needs.

Now that I have defined the range of curricular control and range of documents that are used in curriculum, I will now discuss the types of knowledges that are privileged
in the development of curriculum. Within a top-down curriculum the “what and how” are defined from educational policymakers and academics. Within a bottom-up curriculum, the “what and how” is shaped by teacher-student relationships and experience in the classroom. Central to this difference is whose knowledge is considered valid and how knowledge is constructed.

**Top-Down Curriculum: Technical Rationalism and “teacher-proof” curriculum**

Ralph Tyler’s model of an objective-based curriculum has driven curriculum framework development since the 1950s. Originally, Tyler (1975) proposed a needs analysis of the students, local community, and society to determine the school’s curricular objectives. The objective-driven model ushered in the movement of learning standards across the United States and allowed for a shift in the definition of education away from process to outcome (Finn, 1990). After the Russian space launch of Sputnik, a "discipline-centered curriculum" emerged, sparking a desire by academics and the government for core knowledge to penetrate all schools and replace teacher-created curriculum. Teachers were viewed as implementers of curriculum rather than creators. This fueled the notion of "teacher-proof" curriculum and led to the de-skilling of teaching profession (Apple, 2008).

**Defining content priorities: Political determinations of official knowledge.**

The school within society function as a site of cultural reproduction, one that replicates hegemony in order to “enable social control to be maintained without the necessity of dominant groups having to resort to overt mechanisms of domination” (Apple, 1993, p.3). The reason for the Tylerian Model’s continued popularity is because it allows for cultural reproduction of “official knowledge” (Apple, 2000) through the standardization of
knowledge and assessment. This is because the Tylerian model of curriculum does not require policy makers or curriculum writers to have a critical understanding of how the dominant culture legitimizes certain knowledges, epistemologies, and experiences as “official knowledge,” to the silencing of others. These values are embedded as a “hidden curriculum” (Apple, 1990) within the national standards and testing movement that whitewashes difference regarding race, culture, language and literacy practices (Apple, 1999). The focus on outcome standards and the “red flagging” of content by conservatives is well documented in the discourse analysis of the negotiation and creation of state standards in Missouri (Placier, Walker, & Foster, 2002).

**Racism and the standardization movement.** One does not need to look far beyond the latest drop out reports to see which racial, ethnic, or linguistic group the schools are serving, and which they are not. Apple (1990) argues this is not a coincidence because “both poverty and curricular problems such as low achievement are integral products of the organization of economic, social, cultural life as we know it” (p. 33). Critical Race Theory (CRT) aims to expose systemic racism within education “because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.11). Since curriculum documents are cultural artifacts of our society, they replicate the belief in meritocracy, equating student failure with a lack of work ethic rather than taking into consideration how systemic racism and inequality alienate certain knowledges and experiences. Dixson

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7 The CCSS suggestions of texts overwhelmingly reinforce the western cannon of writers, embed standards for understanding biblical idioms in grades 7-8, biblical references in 9-10 and feature Shakespeare in grades 9-12. Even though the authors claim they do not “enumerate all or even most of the content that students could learn” (NGA, 2010, p. 6), by having Shakespeare and the bible written into the curriculum, they have legitimized these as centerpieces of developing a “literate” human being.
and Rousseau (2005) assert “CRT questions mainstream discourse centered on neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness and merit. It insists on historical and contextual analyses” (p. 12). Knowledge in curriculum is “accepted as a given, as neutral” allowing for comparisons of students success in schools regardless of their background and relationship to the school curriculum or to the teacher (Apple, 1990, p. 30). Therefore, curriculum reinforces the silence of societal inequality regarding racism, gender, and language because the achievement gap is constructed as the failure of the individual, not of society.

Because hegemonic systems of control are subtle and normalized in society, curriculum writers and educational policymakers take their work for granted as a culturally “neutral” document. In support of the standards movement, Schmocker and Marzano (1999) write, “The success of any organization is contingent upon clear, commonly defined goals. A well-articulated focus unleashes individual and collective energy… This is the stuff of improvement” (p. 17). In their eyes, by developing Tylerian curricula with “clear commonly defined goals,” all students will succeed, regardless of that these goals are replicating a cultural hegemony that alienates any students who are “othered” by white middle class values. Kliebard (1970) critiques the Tylerian model by noting that when curriculum is based on objectives that are value-laden, they are “virtually meaningless” (p. 80) due to their subjectivity. Interestingly, Tyler (1975) originally called for students’ lives and the local community to inform curricular objectives, but current curriculum models, such as the CCSS, do not take social realities and local context into account, but allow for space of teacher decisions regarding how to
implement the curriculum. The CCSS, however, determines the end goal, which is based on economic and political priorities.

**Defining priorities: Curriculum for economic growth.** Despite the call for a critical race curriculum (Yosso, 2002) and a deconstruction and reconstruction of the curriculum to center student experience and challenge systemic inequity, in a top-down curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2011), politicians and policymakers develop curricular objectives using the social efficiency model, where technical knowledge, such as math and science, is a priority for the development of human capital (Deng & Luke, 2008). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2013), teaching is linked to improving the economy and the nation by preparing students for college and careers as well as citizenship. By acknowledging the falling status of the U.S. in international assessments and college graduation rates (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011), the pressure on teachers to bear the burden of the country’s economic future is ever increasing. For example, the CCSS was developed using “research-based” methods and neoliberal demands to develop standards whose ultimate goal is to create college and career-ready students for “a twenty-first-century, globally competitive society” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 3). The use of developing curriculum as an economic panacea has its history going back to the call for increase of math and science after Sputnik, and increased curriculum standardization in *A Nation at Risk*.

**Defining knowledge: The rise of technical rationalism.** The de-skilling of teachers through technical rationalism (Schön, 1983) came into full swing during the 1980s era of reform, promulgated by the US Department of Education report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Teacher knowledge was viewed as “highly
situation-specific” (Kliebard, 1983, p. 391) and it was assumed that generalizable knowledge based on empirical data was superior to knowledge derived by teachers from practice. According to Kliebard (1983), “It is a failure on the part of the research establishment generally to take seriously enough the conditions of teaching as well as the perspective of teaching professionals” (p. 301). Yet, technical rationalism continues to dominate educational policy through the increased standardization and testing of the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Top-down definitions of “what works” in the classroom is reified through the support of “scientifically based” scripted curriculum in the Reading First program (Cummins, 2007), the definition of highly-qualified teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006), and the National Research Council’s Scientific Research in Education (Ryan & Hood, 2004) and Preventing reading difficulties in young children (Gee, 1999; 2000).

Technical rationality asks teachers to engage in a “methods fetish” of “best practices” rather than examine the ways deficit thinking regarding minoritized youth, language learners, and students labeled “special needs” is reinforced in the classroom (Bartolomé, 1994). This over reliance on methods-based teaching ignores the importance of relationships and “absolves [the] additional responsibility or deeper inquiry into what it means to teach better…and create alternatives to the normal curve paradigm” (Bartolomé, 1994, p. 226). With the increase of technical rationalism, teacher knowledge is deemed unfit and teacher agency is challenged. In this next section, I delineate examples of how teacher agency is impacted by curricular decisions following NCLB.

**Impact of top-down curriculum on teacher agency.** During the 1980s, teachers in the United States were viewed as an active participant in the curriculum writing
process, and key players in educational reform (Paris, 1993). Teachers are still considered lynchpins to educational success; however, their role has shifted from curriculum designers to implementers of instructional strategies and content (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). Although teachers are still viewed as key to educational reform, the discourses of teacher effectiveness center on teacher evaluation through student performance on standardized tests, in both state education policy (National Governor’s Association, 2009) and federal policy (Department of Education, 2013).

Federal policy has a tremendous impact regarding the role of teacher knowledge in decision-making and teacher agency. For example, NCLB promotes a one-dimensional view of teachers by removing individual agency by labeling local knowledge as “anecdote or fad” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006, p. 676). Knowledge exists out of the teachers’ and students’ experiences, thereby removing agency of both teachers and students. Further, “highly qualified” teachers are defined as having subject knowledge and a toolbox of scientifically-based instructional strategies. This is problematic because “back-mapping the curriculum from high-stakes tests and using frequent benchmark assessments to maintain control and surveillance over teachers’ instruction dramatically narrows the purposes of education and advances an impoverished view of teaching, learning, curriculum, and schooling” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006, p. 689). Consequently, this narrows the discourse regarding what values keep excellent teachers in urban schools, such as hope, love, anger, and the ability to shape students’ lives (Nieto, 2003a).

**Teacher as purveyor of knowledge.** Craig and Ross (2008) argue the image of a teacher as “purveyor of codified content knowledge” (p. 296) continues to plague
academia and educational policy. The decrease of teacher agency is chronicled in Craig’s (2009) meta-analysis of a decade of research in diverse schools in the greater Houston area. Texas was an experimental ground for educational policies that eventually became NCLB. Craig’s research demonstrates how the classroom space became a contested location that moved away from teacher and student interaction and negotiation of curriculum towards scripted curricula, “one-size-fits-all” professional development, and increased evaluations. This led to teachers losing their sense of agency due to a lack of respect for their experiences and knowledge, which ultimately resulted in teachers and administrators leaving the district.

**Top down curriculum on professional development.** Due to NCLB and the era of accountability, more and more professional development (PD) comes from the district level and does not account for the knowledge base and specific necessities of each school. This leads to “one size fits all PD” and low engagement of teachers, leading them to feel underutilized in their professional practice (Little, 2012). Further, stressful situations such as school failure or not meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) regarding high-stakes testing can lead to “one size fits all” PD and to detrimental effects such as: forced implementation of scripted curriculum of “unsound pedagogical practices” for language learners (Harper, Platt, Narajo, & Boyton, 2007, p. 649), marginalization and devaluation of professional knowledge (Harper, de Jong, & Platt, 2008), and a decrease of teacher agency (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). When teachers feel silenced and have a lack of professional decision-making power, they demonstrate their agency by leaving the workforce (Ingersoll, 2004; TNTP, 2012) or switching schools (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).
**NCLB impact on teacher-student relationships.** With the increase of standardized testing and curriculum, teachers found that they had less time to cultivate relationships with their students (Craig, 2009). Further, the limited definition of “highly qualified” teachers as one who has subject knowledge, silences the voices of English language learners who know through experience what a “highly qualified” teacher is (Fernández 2002; Garcia, 2006). Both Fernández (2002) and Garcia (2006) found that being a highly qualified teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse students means having high standards, a connection to the students and their families, and cultural competence, yet these are absent from NCLB discourse.

The impact of scripted curricula and testing on teachers and students is further documented in Au’s (2007) meta-analysis of 49 qualitative studies on the effect of high-stakes testing on curriculum. The majority (70%) of the studies demonstrated that high-stakes testing narrows curriculum to focus on tested subjects (math and reading) to the detriment of non-tested subjects (Au, 2007, p. 262). Au (2007) refers to this phenomenon as “content control” (p. 262). In addition, high-stakes testing has an effect on practices in the classroom by exercising “pedagogical control” through the increase of teacher-centered practices and whole group teaching and the decrease of student-centered pedagogy and small group work.

**Locating teacher agency in top-down curriculum.** In spite of NCLB’s devaluation of teacher knowledge and experience, teachers continue to find ways of demonstrating agency through support networks and resistance. Anderson (2010) defines teacher agency as “teachers’ capacity to make choices, take principled action, and enact change” (p. 541). Anderson’s (2010) multiyear case study of a teacher leader in a high-
needs urban school demonstrated how teachers develop support networks within and outside the school to counteract forces that would lead the teacher to leave, such as disagreements with colleagues or to search out locations that reflect their teaching values (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). The support network of colleagues, the principal, and community members allows teachers to push for school reforms, bring in needed resources to the classrooms, and increase career opportunities.

Not all examples of teacher agency, however, end in success. As Achinstein and Ogawa (2006) note, teacher agency is described as teacher resistance, “rooted in professional principles” (p. 31). Professionalism is a means for resistance because it allows teachers to “employ repertoires of instructional strategies to meet the individual needs of diverse students” while “hold[ing] high expectations for themselves and students” (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006, p. 32) in the face of state-mandated scripted curriculum. This concept of “principled resistance,” has consequences for teachers like myself, my colleagues, and the two new teachers featured in their case study. When the teachers in the case study were fired or transferred from their jobs, they did not feel like a professional. One teacher shared, “I think I am an incredibly professional person [but]… I think my principal would disagree. My superintendent would disagree that I am a professional. I don’t really know what being a professional means” (p. 43). When school districts increase control over teachers and the curriculum, there is a “loss of professional control by teachers who seek to improve practice and thus improve educational achievement” (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006, p. 57). For teachers to demonstrate agency in a top-down environment requires “creative maladjustment” (Kohl, 1994), where teachers
must remain “maladjusted” to detrimental policies by working around them to support their students.

In this next section, I summarize research regarding curriculum that centers teacher knowledge and experience, how it allows for teacher agency by viewing curriculum as the lives lived within the classroom and teachers as curriculum makers (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992).

**Curriculum from the Bottom up: The Lived Curriculum through teacher-student relationships**

In traditional, top-down curriculum, there is “no demand that the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc., in order to utilize them as educational resources” (Dewey, 1938, p. 40). Educators such as Dewey (1938) and Eisner (1988), however, recognize the importance of the classroom as site of knowledge construction in education. From a bottom-up perspective, curriculum is not just content and skills, but it encompasses the environment and relationships teachers foster with their students. It includes “how we think about the social contexts, about the students, about the curriculum, about the instruction” (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p. 34), which is the *why* in my definition of curriculum as the how, what, and why teachers teach in the classroom. Knowledge is embodied in the relationships teachers share with their students and can drive the content and skills featured in a bottom-up curriculum.

**Locating curricular knowledge in the classroom.** Within curriculum development, Schwab (1973; 1983) gives an equal measure of importance to the knowledges of the subject matter, the students’ lives, the teacher, and the milieu (from
the classroom context to local ethnic, racial, and religious communities to national cultural climates). Schwab (1973) recognizes that teachers themselves contain a “body of experience” that constitutes knowledges “of what these teachers are likely to know and how flexible and ready they are likely to be to learn new material and new ways of teaching” (p. 504). Inherent in Schwab’s location of teachers within the curriculum development process is how teachers bring with them experiences that are of equal importance to scholarship. Further, knowledge of the students includes their “present state of ‘mind and heart’” (Schwab, 1973, p. 503), which opens us up to the humanity of teaching.

In their historical account of the role of teachers in curriculum inquiry, Clandinin & Connelly (1992) found a paucity of literature that characterized “teachers as curriculum makers” (p. 363). As educators, they called for an increase in teacher narratives to document the experience of teachers as curriculum makers. Clandinin and Connelly (1992) suggest,

Curriculum might be viewed as an account of teachers’ and students’ lives together in schools and classrooms. We came to this view by erasing the distinction between curriculum and instruction, between ends and means. It is a view in which the teacher is seen as an integral part of the curricular process and in which teacher, learners, subject matter, and milieu are in dynamic interaction. (p. 365)

Thus, curriculum is not only a document of objectives of academic content and skills, but it is formed through relationships and being in dialogue with students. Knowledge that informs curriculum “ha[s] epistemic significance because it is a way in which we both
socially and cognitively contextualize our work” (Campano, 2007, p. 117). To contextualize one’s work requires teachers to step outside of one’s self to analyze how relationships shape our reality and ways of knowing- within and beyond the classroom.

**Curriculum as lived: centering teacher-student relationships.** The concept of “curriculum-as-lived” is furthered by the work of Ted Aoki. Aoki (2005) classifies curricular documents that were created outside of the classroom as “curriculum-as-plan” (p. 202). These documents contain the values, assumptions, and ways of knowing of the curriculum writers and are embedded as the goals and objectives (Aoki, 2005). Further, the curriculum as plan renders individual students invisible to “disappear into the shadows when they are spoken of in the prosaically abstract language of the external curriculum planners who are, in a sense, condemned to plan for faceless people” (Aoki, 2005, p. 203). 8 “Curriculum-as-lived,” on the other hand, is a “multiplicity of lived curricula” experienced by the teacher and the students through face-to-face interactions, struggles, and interests, where identities are in production (Aoki, 2005, p. 205).

**Teacher Agency as relational.** Because curriculum from a bottom-up perspective is created within the classroom, teachers are viewed as knowledge creators, where “knowledge-in-practice” becomes “knowledge-of-practice” (Lytle, 2000). Lytle (2000) recognizes that teachers possess a privileged “emic” stance (p. 696), whereby teachers create knowledge regarding teaching practices based on their experiences, and apply

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8 Aoki’s description of the “curriculum-as-plan” reflects my personal experience as a curriculum writer consultant. The curriculum standards were the only thing that I had to define these students I never met, but who were subject to my curricular edicts. It was a lonely process. In contrast, I felt the most emotionally and personally fulfilled when working in the classroom, developing relationships with my students, colleagues, and families where the “language of the lived curriculum, the more poetic, phenomenological and hermeneutic discourse in which life is embodied in the very stories and languages people speak and live” (Aoki, 2005, p. 207).
them beyond local contexts to produce “knowledge-of-practice.” Thus, teacher agency within a bottom-up curriculum is embodied in the relationships teachers have with their students and how these relationships manifest in our daily practices. Viewing curriculum from a relational perspective, it “is everything experienced and learned inside and outside school… [including] the complex intersections of the common places of teacher and learner experiences” (Ayers, Quinn, Stovall, & Scheier, 2008, p. 309). Not surprisingly, many educational practitioners view their work and their identity as teachers to be relational in nature (Campano, 2007; see Ayers, 2010; hooks, 1994; Kohl, 1994; Paley, 2000). Campano (2007) characterizes the curriculum he developed with his students as the “second classroom” as “an alternative pedagogical space… develop[ed] organically by following the students’ leads, interests, desires, forms of cultural expression, and especially stories” (p. 40). Implicit in recognizing that teachers and students can construct knowledge as a method of “living” the curriculum are the values teachers’ hold regarding their role within the classroom.

Teacher agency and values. Campbell (2012) argues that teacher agency is driven by teachers’ morals and ethics regarding their “commitment to governing his or her professional practice according to deeply held values, convictions, and beliefs about teaching, learning, and epistemology” (p. 184). Further, Campbell (2012) notes the daily decisions teachers make in their classrooms can be used to engage students and promote their own agency.

Therefore, teachers need to be cognizant of what values, ethics, and morals guide their work with students. Through an inquiry-group with veteran teachers, Nieto (2003) came to realize,
Teachers do not leave their values at the door when they enter their classrooms. On the contrary, as much as they might want to hide or avoid them, their values and beliefs slip in the door with them. In fact, teachers ring their entire autobiographies with them: their experiences, identities, values, beliefs, attitudes, hangups, biases, wishes, dreams, and hopes. It is useless for them to deny this; the most they can do is acknowledge how these may either get in the way of, or enhance, their work with students. (p. 24 emphasis added)

Teachers need to be cognizant of their intentions because they can have positive or negative consequences regarding student learning and self-concept. Nieto (2002) connects the importance of viewing language learners and minoritized youth as agents of meaning and constructors of knowledge, and that the classroom is a political space where identities can be reaffirmed or denied. Thus, teachers need to reflect on their own identities and become “students of their students” (Nieto, 2002, p. 217) to prevent “diversity as deficit” thinking.

**Humanization of curriculum.** Being in relationship is seeing the other person for who they are- to be present and honor his/her history, reality, hopes, passions, and dreams. To have relationships of reciprocity rather than rejection, teachers need to see their students in their entirety – as an act of humanization. Sepulveda (2011) asks, “What types of relationships and community promote the emotional, cultural and intellectual health of our students?” (p. 568). Within the classroom, teachers can include students’ worldview, and life experiences to allow for spaces of shared meaning.

To move towards a curriculum of humanization, as educators, we need to ask what defines our relationship with our students and how that shapes our “ever-evolving
conceptual understandings” (Campano, 2009, p. 331) of our role as teachers in the classroom. One critical aspect of what defines teachers’ work is the personal, social, and political identities of teachers inside and outside the classroom (Nieto, 2003). Teachers can engage in “invisible political work” (Campano, 2009, p. 334) through their everyday advocacy in response to policies that frame their students through a deficit “at-risk” lens. Thus, teacher identity can determine practice because “valuing one’s autobiography must be at the heart of teaching because knowing themselves helps teachers know their students” (Nieto, 2003, p. 391). A teacher’s identity shapes how power is manifested in the classroom, and whether teacher-student interactions replicate coercive or collaborative power relationships (Cummins, 1996).

Healthy relationships are built on a mutual understanding of one self and each other— not on projections or assumptions. Cummins (2009) suggests, “Within the interpersonal spaces where identities are negotiated, students and educators together can generate power that challenges structures of inequity in small but significant ways” (p. 15). Being present to the other allows for shared knowledge to take place. We can be held accountable to each other. “Education can be a process in which teacher and students mutually participate in the intellectually exciting undertaking we call learning” (Bartolomé, 1994, p. 183). Thus, teacher-student relationships are central to the construction of knowledge in a bottom-up curriculum model. Relationships, like knowledge, are never neutral, and are defined by the values, ethics, and intentions held by teachers.

Power relations in the classroom. Educational reform cannot occur without “personal redefinitions of the ways in which individual educators interact with the
students and communities they serve” (Cummins, 1996, p. 136). Even despite “good intentions,” teachers can replicate coercive power relations. An example of how teacher-student relationships can have negative consequences is through re-enacting paternalistic relationships within the classroom based societal expectations of respect through authoritarian means. According to Kohl (1994),

Many teachers become socialized to taking power away from students, to judging, stigmatizing, and failing young people. These modes of thinking and functioning are learned in teacher-education schools, from colleagues and supervisors. They become habitual in schools predicated on the success of a few and the failure or marginalization of the majority. But they can be unlearned through a return to the original sources of one’s love of learning and of teaching. (p. 77)

Thus, teachers need to be aware of how their relationships with students can replicate unequal power relations. Through developing relationships with respect and trust, teachers can actively work towards building collaborative power relations within the classroom. Cummins (1996) suggests that teacher-student “micro-interactions” be analyzed through how teachers include students’ home languages and culture in the classroom, how the community participates in the school, the teacher’s own pedagogical orientation or philosophy, and assessment practices.

**Teacher as curriculum maker and the milieu.** Teacher-student relationships do not operate within a vacuum. The milieu (Schwab, 1973) of the school environment also has an effect on teachers’ relationships with their students, colleagues, and the curriculum they create. Teacher agency can be constructed as relational, depending on ecological conditions such as school climate, collegial relationships, and the identities of teachers
(Priestley, Edwards, & Priestley, 2012). If teachers do not feel supported by their colleagues or by the school, teaching can be an isolating activity.

School support is needed when teachers are also creating their own curriculum (Kauffman et al., 2002). Kauffman and colleagues (2002) note that new teachers lose confidence in themselves when faced with having to create curriculum on top of teaching and daily lesson planning. To keep teachers feeling self-assured and supported, they need access to example lessons and units, instructional strategies, content resources, and importantly, collegial support from veterans and other staff regarding curriculum development.

By focusing on building a community of learners amongst staff “to foster a culture of collegiality and continuous improvement,” (Little, 2012, p. 25) schools have higher levels of teacher retention, teacher professional engagement, and effective problem solving. Rather than working in isolation, teachers flourish when they can share and collaborate with colleagues within departments or school communities. This engenders improved teaching practices through “artisan communities,” (Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002) where teachers share materials, evaluate each other’s work, and create shared instructional practices.

If schools allow teachers to act completely autonomously, whereby teacher agency is an individual rather than collective endeavor, Richardson (1998) cautions it can lead to a lack of cohesion in vision and a lack of effectiveness in supporting all students. This is reflected in Pendlebury’s (1990) position that within communities of practice, a teacher’s independence must include respect and concern for a shared telos, or end goal, which recognizes the specific context of their student population. Otherwise, having
“liberty as license” can lead to individualism amongst teachers regarding their practice, to the detriment of students. Therefore, schools should develop a shared vision of goals and purpose, with ongoing critical dialogue and reflection (Richardson, 1998). This fosters a healthy school community by engaging teachers, promoting teacher agency, and by prioritizing mutual concern over individual liberty. In this time of increased federal and local oversight of public education, more than ever is practitioner research needed to support teacher agency through communities of practice and curriculum development from a relational perspective.

**Spaces for further research in teacher agency: A call for teacher narratives at the intersection of curriculum development.** Within this literature review, I laid the foundation of how knowledge of content and skills is constructed and conceptualized within an authoritarian top-down curriculum as well as a bottom-up teacher-created curriculum. In both, I discussed how the model of curriculum can empower teacher and student agency, in the case of a bottom-up curriculum, or subjugate teachers and students, in top-down curriculum.

Previous research has focused on teacher agency within schools with culturally and linguistically diverse learners and mandated curricula (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Esposito, Davis, & Swain 2012; Pease-Alvarez, Davies Samway & Cifka-Herrera, 2010; Stillman, 2011). Achinstein & Ogawa (2006) call for “investigation of the interplay between resistant teachers (and their agency) within policy environments of varying degrees of control” (p. 59). Based on understandings of open and flexible curricula, my case study of four teachers, interwoven with my own experiences as a practitioner
researcher, is meant to provide a window into teacher agency in a top-down district environment, but where local school policy regarding curriculum is flexible.

Clandinin and Connelly (1992) and Craig and Ross (2008) note the need for teacher narratives in documenting their processes as teachers as curriculum makers. Craig and Ross (2008) posit,

In order to capture the nuances of the particular— the essences of the practical, future inquiries at the intersection of curriculum and teaching will need to unfold with researchers working alongside teachers, honoring practice, awake to diversity, and inviting participation and insights. p. 296.

As a teacher and curriculum maker, I am standing on that intersection. For my research, rather than engaging in narrative inquiry, I am taking the position of practitioner-researcher because it locates knowledge construction within a relational framework, and it allows my colleagues and I to “talk back” to the technical rationalism pervading the current educational discourse. In this next section, I provide a background of practitioner research and how it supports teachers working with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

**Practitioner Research**

For this literature review, I use the term practitioner research from Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) when discussing teacher research or teacher inquiry because it encompasses that various actors within education (e.g. teacher, professor, community educator, service provider, administrator, student-teacher) that take an “inquiry stance” approach regarding their practices. Taking an “inquiry stance” through practitioner research bridges epistemology with theory and practice because it locates teachers as
meaning-makers, wherein knowledge is constructed through practice and reflection. Therefore, practitioner research, through an “inquiry stance” recognizes the power within teachers to question and theorize their own work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2009). “Teachers and student teachers who take an inquiry stance work within inquiry communities to general local knowledge, envision and theorize their practice, and interpret and interrogate the theory and research of others” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 289). Practitioner research is at once a methodology, a theoretical framework, and an epistemology that connects local knowledges with larger social movements (Campano, 2009; Simon, Campano, Broderick & Pantoja, 2012).

**Background.** Experience as a location for developing educational philosophy and practice was first emphasized by John Dewey (1938). The concept of taking an “inquiry stance” was developed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2001) work with teachers and student teachers in urban communities of over twenty years, regarding how “inquiry produces knowledge [and]…relates to practice” (p. 48). Hollingsworth and Sockett (1994) traced one of the roots of practitioner research to action research and the work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin and other social reconstructionists who view action research as a method to improve curriculum, teachers’ practices, while contributing to theoretical knowledge. Since the 1950s, practitioner research has evolved to include postmodern feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004; Haraway, 2007; hooks, 2004), where knowledge is neither objective nor positivist. Practitioner research was further influenced by the conceptual framework of “knowledge-in-action” through the reflective practice described by Donald Schön (Hollingsworth and Sockett, 1994, p. 7).
An example of practitioner research is Pincus’ (2001) circle of inquiry, where as a teacher, Pincus “look[s] closely” at moments of “dissonance” in order to “simultaneously ask questions, make sense, make decisions, and take action that will have further impact” on students and one’s teaching practices. Like Pincus (2001), teachers can generate knowledge from their own classrooms, and engage in real time inquiry to support their students’ academic and social growth. After twenty years of research on professional development, Richardson (2003) states that a teacher who engage in inquiry “continually examines practices, student learning, goals, and achievements … that allow us to adjust practices to more closely meet our goals” (p. 404). Thus, practitioner research views teachers as professionals engaging in intellectual inquiry to lead towards equity and excellence for all students (Nieto, 2003).

**Practitioner research: Focus on culturally and linguistically diverse learners.**

Practitioner research is a powerful method of inquiry for teachers who want to improve their teaching methods when working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Ballenger, 1999; Campano & Simon, 2010; Pincus, 2001; Pransky & Bailey, 2003; Sepúlveda, 2011; Simon, 2012; Simon, Campano, Broderick & Pantoja, 2012; Stokes, 2001). A common thread found between practitioner research and new literacy studies is how practitioner research has been used to bridge disjunctures in the Discourse communities (Gee, 2008) of school and home. This is evident in the work of Heath (1982; 1983) in comparing literacy practices at home and school for rural working class white and black students, in Pranksy & Bailey (2003) work with Cambodian first graders, and Ballenger (1999) work with Haitian Pre-Kindergarten students who relate to literacy as a social process.
Further, practitioner research within schools allows practitioners to use critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987) as a tool to bridge the home-school divide by creating a third space (Gutiérrez, 2008) “in which students begin to reconceive who they are and what they might be able to accomplish academically and beyond” (p.148). This third space allows for home languages, personal stories, and student identity to shape the classroom Discourse. To connect with migrant Mexican high school students, Sepúlveda (2011) developed a pedagogy of acompañamiento through creating strong relationships and engaging in storytelling and critical literacy. Campano (2007) also tapped into students’ lived experiences and immigration stories as locations of literacy development through writing, art, and theatre. Cummins (2009, 2011) working with classroom teachers in the multiliteracies project demonstrated how language learners increase engagement and collaboration through developing “identity texts,” using home languages and English. Christensen (2011) used critical literacy to investigate power dynamics, comparing Standard English with the home languages of her students. Similarly, Davis, Bazzi, and Cho (2005) use critical literacy as “third space activities” with speakers of Hawaiian pidgin to widen the classroom Discourses by deconstructing the features of standard English and the students’ home languages while garnering academic language skills.

Along with critical literacy, practitioner research demonstrates how teachers can tap into student interest as a method of literacy engagement. Simon (2012) illustrates how student teachers become “connoisseurs” engaging students in literacy though their personal interests, such as comic books or internet chat. Broderick uses multimodal literacy to create a classroom journal of music, poetry, and art to engage her students (Simon, Campano, Broderick & Pantoja, 2012), while Morrell and Duncan-Andrade
(2004) pair “canonical poetry” to hip-hop to assist students in transferring literary analysis skills between the two genres.

Lastly, practitioner research increases teacher collaboration and ability to create “knowledge of practice” (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 1999) at various levels, when working with culturally and linguistically diverse students. During a five-year district-wide inquiry effort, McLaughlin & Zarrow (2001) note increase of teacher expectations, accountability, and collaboration regarding school reform. At a school level, Stokes (2001) documents the five-year process within one school to address inequities through inquiry. Teachers moved from whole-school longitudinal data analysis to taking a critical stance in small groups on the role personal histories and values play in teacher expectations of minoritized youth. The latter form of inquiry emerged when it was realized “that the problem of inequitable achievement might be rooted in beliefs about students more than in teaching per se. They thus grew more acutely aware that change strongly implicated individual practice in a way that was primarily personal” (Stokes, 2001, p. 147, emphasis added). This connects to Cummins (1996) suggestion of how micro-interactions mirror and reinforce the macro-levels of hegemonic power imbalance, and it is through taking “inquiry as stance” regarding teacher and student relationships and power relations that can lead towards reversing the trend of inequality for racialized groups and language minorities in education.

Inquiry as a counter-hegemonic discourse. Lytle (2000) notes the primary purpose named by teachers engaged in practitioner research regarding literacy is “to teach better” rather than to connect one’s practice to broader social change movements within education (pp. 702-703). In a literature review of practitioner research, Lytle (2000)
notes that literature regarding teacher research focuses more on the process of change enacted by teachers at an individual, institutional, or societal level. Thus, naming one’s orientation to audience and purpose is critical within practitioner research. Lytle (2000) argues that practitioners’ knowledge should move beyond the local, towards a redefinition of knowledge construction within larger societal discourses, as a method of breaking down the binary between school-based and academic-based knowledge (p. 709). This is demonstrated by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), who locate practitioner research and taking an “inquiry stance” as a “counterhegemonic notion [that] challenges the ideas about teaching, learning, learners, diversity, knowledge, practice, expertise, evidence, school organizations, and educational reform that are implicit or explicit in the dominant educational regime” (p. 3, emphasis original). Thus, local knowledge that is generated by practitioner researchers must be contextualized within larger social movements with implications regarding educational policy. Practitioner research creates space for teachers like myself and my colleagues to share how we are living within these trying times and how we making sense of top-down decisions by defining what matters to us from the bottom-up.
Chapter 4
Methodology

Within this section, I contextualize my reasons for selecting a qualitative case study method for a practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) study to theorize our work through reflection to create “knowledge-of-practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Lytle, 2000). “knowledge-of-practice” acts as a framework to understanding how teachers generated local knowledge. I first describe the case method, participants, data collection, and the ways in which I build credibility through internal validity and the centering of reciprocity. Afterwards, I describe my reasons for engaging in research. I explain why I choose to take an “inquiry stance” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) as a practitioner researcher, my location within this research, and the ways in which Indigenous Methodologies has shaped the trajectory of my research through personal reflection and questioning of motives.

Case Study

This research was conducted as a qualitative case study, using a practitioner research methodology. The purpose of my study is to understand how teachers’ beliefs and relationships with students shape and define priorities in a flexible curriculum serving diverse students within a high-stakes testing atmosphere. My research question came from a desire to reflect on my practice and to create “knowledge-of-practice” (Lytle, 2000) of teachers who are as Carrie, my colleague put it, “full-time curriculum writers.” I selected a bounded single-case embedded design (Yin, 2009) of four teachers at my former school because of my insider knowledge as a former teacher allowed my study to be a “revelatory case” (Yin, 2009, p. 49). My insider knowledge allowed for
access to classroom observations and immediate trust with my colleagues to voice their concerns during interviews and the focus group. Because I am a teacher and curriculum writer, it is my lived experience and interests that led me to this research.

By conducting a case study at my former school, Cesar Chavez Bilingual, I can provide an insider’s view to the process of curriculum writing in a diverse, urban school, and within the context of working in a school system that is constantly on the edge of reform. The qualitative method of a case study allows for an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Because the boundaries between the context of federal policy and its impact on teachers’ curriculum are porous, a case study approach for an investigation regarding how teachers balance external mandates with internal factors, such as teacher-student relationships. By creating two embedded units of analysis (Yin, 2009) based on internal and external factors of influence, I can understand how teachers respond to these competing influences when creating a language arts curriculum for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Participant. Four teachers from my former school, Cesar Chavez, were selected through purposeful sampling as well as criterion-based methods. The criterion-based requirement is to be an English language teacher in a testing grade (3 to 8). In terms of purposeful sampling, I selected four English teachers with whom I had a strong working

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9 Due to the focus of my study regarding pedagogical priorities when working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners, I was interested in how teachers differentiated instruction for and developed relationships with English language learners. Therefore, interviewing Spanish language teachers at my school was beyond the scope of the study. Another study regarding flexible curricular choices in a bilingual school, comparing the two languages would be recommended. DCPS rolled out the new teacher evaluation program, IMPACT, that bases teacher performance on students’ standardized test scores and outside evaluations by “master educators” without a pilot period.
relationship and whom I consider to be dedicated, successful teachers who make a great effort to create engaging curriculum.

Two of the participants, Anne and Carrie, teach fifth grade. We worked together as the fifth English language grade team for three years, two of which we collaborated intensively to create a scope and sequence document. Anne is a Caucasian mid-forties woman who joined teaching through the DC Teaching Fellows, an alternative pathway to teacher licensure through a two-year provisional license while coursework is being completed. Previous to teaching, Anne worked on a civics education project in Bosnia and designed civics standards in the United States and Bosnia. Anne began her teaching career at Cesar Chavez and has taught fifth grade for five years. She is certified to teach elementary education and has recently completed coursework for a certification in TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages), and maintains. Carrie is a Caucasian woman in her early forties who has taught for 12 years in DCPS. She also began as a DC Teaching Fellow and has taught fifth grade at Cesar Chavez for six years and is certified in TESOL, elementary education and English secondary. Carrie writes poetry and speaks fluent Spanish.

Giovanni (Gio) is a colleague who I got to know through working on curriculum for Cesar Chavez. His teaching background is in early education and this was his first year teaching fourth grade. He is a second generation Dominican male in his late-twenties. Gio graduated with a bachelor’s in elementary education and has taught for nine years, in public and charter schools. He has worked in Philadelphia and Washington, DC, teaching first through fourth grade. He is also certified in TESOL and taught ESL in
Barcelona for a year. Gio is the recipient of the 2011 Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher award for Washington, DC.

Katie is a colleague I took note of at a staff meeting when I saw the gains her Latino students made in the DC-CAS. We collaborated to have her eighth grade students read with my fifth grade students, and our friendship blossomed because we shared a passion for working with the Latino families of the school. Katie is Korean-American woman in her late-twenties. She entered teaching as a DC Teaching Fellow and has taught seventh and eighth grade for five years, all at Cesar Chavez. She has a background in English Literature and is certified to teach Secondary English. All four teachers volunteered to be part of the study.

**Data collection.** For this study, I chose to collect multiple sources of evidence to allow for triangulation of data (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). My data collection included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, a focus group with all participants (see Appendix C), a survey of materials and resources used for curriculum (see Appendix D), and lesson plans and materials voluntarily shared by the participants. With each participant I conducted two semi-structured interviews. I made sure that the second interview occurred after a classroom visit so I could share feedback from the observation, which allowed for the second interview to be more open-ended, with a fewer follow-up questions, and more time spent reflecting and discussing their lesson. If I made any suggestions to resources or texts that would be of interest, I shared them through email. Each interview and the focus group was audio recorded and transcribed. During the classroom observations I took notes using a computer and wrote field notes in a journal.

During the data collection, I employed the systematic method suggested by
Huberman & Miles (1994; in Creswell, 2007), where I compiled field notes and memos during data collection, and I followed hunches and insights during and after the data collection process, as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2007). During the data analysis, I identified patterns and themes into the two separate categories of internal and external influences as embedded units of analysis (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). In addition to these etic themes, developed during pre-data analysis, I looked for emic themes that emerged from the data, based on reoccurring topics. I used selected quotes to code such data (such as “data that matters”). Based on these emic themes, I revised some of my original etic themes to reflect my fellow colleagues words or ideas.

**Internal validity.** In regards to building credibility and authenticity within my case study, I used member checking of transcribed interviews, clarification questions in follow up interviews, and used the focus group at the end of the year as a method of validating emerging themes from interviews. After the first interview, I wrote a two-page summarizing each teacher’s practice and shared it during the second interview as a method of member checking. During the second interview, I also asked each teacher if they wanted to add or comment on a topic from the focus group discussion they felt was missing. This allowed for what Lincoln and Guba (1985; cited in Creswell, 2007) described as “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 208). Furthermore, I used triangulation of data (interviews, focus groups, observations, and artifacts) as a method of cross checking the emergence of themes or perspectives (Creswell, 2007).

In this current era of “top-down” educational policy in the United States, engaging teachers in self-reflection and critical discussions can be seen as active resistance and has
consequences (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). Therefore, I only interviewed and observed teachers who volunteered for the study after email contact (see Appendix A) and who signed consent forms (see Appendix B). To build internal validity (Yin, 2009), I shared my results with the participants and used member checking, where each participant received the transcript of both interviews as well as the focus group so they could revise or edit their words. They also received a draft of the results to edit or revise their words and to offer feedback. Each teacher was given the choice to use a pseudonym and the principal of the school decided whether or not to use the real name or a pseudonym for the school. Because of DCPS-specific assessments and teacher evaluation system, I kept the city as the location of the study, and received ethics approval from the University of Toronto and DCPS Office of Data and Accountability.

**Inquiry as Stance**

This research came out of a desire to document the practices and tensions that arise when teachers are tasked to write their own curriculum at a school with a diverse student population, in a district that is a laboratory for new educational reform policies.\(^{10}\) Taking on the role of a practitioner researcher, I place myself on *terra firma* of taking an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) to engage in dialogue with colleagues to construct local knowledge regarding the role teacher-student relationships play in curriculum design. By creating local knowledge as practitioner researchers, we are talking back to district and federal policies of standardized testing definition of objective “data” to inform instruction.

\(^{10}\) For example, DCPS rolled out the new teacher evaluation program, IMPACT, that bases teacher performance on students’ standardized test scores and outside evaluations by “master educators” without a pilot period.
Taking an inquiry stance regarding our process of creating curriculum in relationship with our students and colleagues places our work in direct contrast to the current standardization movement that ties teacher evaluation to high-stakes test performances and allies our “work with others as part of a larger social and intellectual movements for social change and social justice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009 p. viii). The process of conversation with my colleagues, along with observations and personal reflection allowed for “joint construction of local knowledge” (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 2) to demonstrate how teachers define what matters and how they exercise agency during a time of increasing nationalization of standards and testing.

**Locating myself as a practitioner researcher.** My location as a practitioner researcher is based on my personal investment in the students and families of Cesar Chavez, a school where I taught for five years (2006-2011) and taught as an English language content teacher for third and fifth grade. I entered the teaching field through the DC Teaching Fellows at the age of 24 and received an M.A. in TESOL and a certification in elementary education so I could work with the South and Central American immigrant population in Washington, DC. The students I taught in third and fifth grade became Katie’s kids who recently graduated from eighth grade. I continue to visit the school when I come home and ask about how my former students and their families are doing. Even though I am no longer physically at the school, the curriculum I co-developed with Anne and Carrie, and my relationship to my colleague and students continues to exist.

I came into teaching because I am an immigrant’s daughter. Despite having white privilege due to my father’s side and American accent having been raised in the United States, I grew up with my mother’s story of being forced to read *Hamlet* and not
understanding a word, of feeling stupid in English even though she was a successful student back home in Bolivia. My mother, Emma, immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 15 and went through the school system before an English as a second language (ESL) program existed. It was this lived experience that made her create an ESL program in Virginia because she did not want other immigrants to experience what she did.

I locate myself as a teacher who firmly believes in the importance of developing relationships with students and their families as a method of supporting students socially and academically through high expectations. I credit this to my mother’s dedication to supporting immigrant access to education in my hometown of Arlington, VA. From her, I developed my identity within a matriarchy of strong women who raised their children as single mothers. I also inherited my mother’s passion and open heart. She is the lighthouse I turn to, who leads the way in my own development as a compassionate educator who strives to live and work from a love ethic. My values are shaped by my mother’s consejos (advice) and can be described as a “Latina womanist-oriented knowledge…[where] a pedagogy of convivencia (a praxis of relating and living together)” (Villenas, Godinez, Delgado Bernal and Elenes, 2006, p. 5) is shared with the students and families I work with.

**Practitioner research as methodology.** Practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; 2009) is my selected epistemology and methodology for this research. Practitioner research methodology blurs the lines between the positionality of insider and outsider and allows myself, as researcher, to reflect with my colleagues about our teaching practices to create “knowledge-of-practice” (Lytle, 2000). We become “the topics of study” rather than “the objects of someone else’s inquiry” (Cochran-Smith &
Lytle, 2009, p. 41). This allows for collaboration to “generate local knowledge,” which recognizes that educators “have significant knowledge” about their own practice, allowing them to be “knowers, learners, and researchers” simultaneously (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 42).

Another important feature of practitioner research congruent with my study is how the context and site of research generates its own problems to then research. My interest in teacher decisions within a flexible curriculum arose out of my own experiences of trying to support and challenge all learners, and having difficulties in meeting the needs of language learners while concurrently having high achieving students feel engaged. I knew I was not the only teacher struggling with this situation, because of the nature of our student population. Further, as a teacher, I was frustrated with the litany of standardized testing and its impact on teacher evaluations and definitions of student ability, and I wanted to know how other teachers dealt with similar issues of juggling student needs within a high-stakes testing atmosphere. Thus, my question was born out of a lived experience and professional context, “emanat[ing] from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersections of the two” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 42).

Finally, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) note that practitioner research has a different conception of validity and generalizability as compared to traditional empirical research. Rather than claiming validity based on whether or not this research can be replicated or generalizable to other contexts, practitioner research centers validity around trustworthiness and how the knowledge generated through the process can lead to “catalytic validity” (Lather, 1986) which “deepens understanding of participants” along
with “democratic validity” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, pp. 43-44) that honors the various perspectives of the stakeholders. For my own research, I am centering reciprocity through “catalytic validity” (Lather, 1986) as well as the transparency of “democratic validity” through my process of collecting, sharing, and analyzing the data.

As a practitioner researcher, I am providing a platform to voice the realities teachers face when juggling various requirements such as planning and implementing their own language arts curriculum, meeting the academic and social needs of a diverse student body, implementing the new Common Core State Standards, and working within the context of a standardized testing regime that has come to represent the paradigm of educational reform in the United States. To do so, I include numerous quotes and extended conversation from interviews and the focus group discussion to “talk back” to educational policy decisions regarding language learners and to redefine what accountability and data means in our everyday interactions with our students. My intended audience is fellow teachers, who work with language learners and in a flexible curriculum atmosphere, as well as academics interested in practitioner research, teacher agency in urban contexts, and teachers as curriculum writers. Lastly, I am writing to local policymakers who can use this case study to inform decisions regarding supporting teachers who create their own curriculum and who work with culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

**Indigenous Methodologies: Checking my Motives**

We select our research questions for a reason. The research we do serves a purpose, as Wilson (2008) says, to build stronger relationships and “to bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves” (p. 11). I am writing this to honor the work of my
colleagues and school, to give space for teacher’s voices within academia and to “talk back” to the current politics of education that increasingly places pressures on teachers to be the tide that lifts all boats. I am also writing this to recognize the students we work with and how our relationships with them shape not only what lessons we decide to teach, but also our lives.

Prior to conducting this study, I was personally questioned whether researching my colleagues would be “biased,” an argument which can be used to critique the validity of practitioner research. Indigenous methodologies (Absolon, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008), allow me to turn the “bias” question around by asking how can we conduct research with people rather than on them? Within Indigenous methodologies, there is a focus on the importance of responsibility, respect, relationship, and reciprocity (Weber-Pillwax, 2001). “The most elegant study design in the world is only as valuable as the impact that it makes in people’s lives” (Schnarch, 2004, p. 22). Learning from Indigenous methodologies helped me recognize and speak to the role that values and emotion play within research when I found the western discourse of scientific objectivity and positivism to be antithetical to my feminist and Latina background.

As a non-Indigenous settler, I should be questioned to why I include Indigenous methodologies when doing research on non-Indigenous participants. It is because the centering of responsibility, respect, relationship and reciprocity within indigenous methodologies mirrors values I was raised in, as a Bolivian-American (Hainer-Violand, 2012) and the values I found lacking in qualitative research texts. I now see the linkages between Indigenous methodologies and practitioner research, regarding how research is a process of coming to know oneself, of shared knowledge construction with participants,
and of reciprocity when sharing knowledge generated with the participating members, to work towards equity. The connections between practitioner research and Indigenous methodologies can be considered to be “allied perspectives” (Lillian Dyck in Absolon, 2008), however, it is important to note the distinction between practitioner research which is founded under western worldview of knowledge construction and ontology, and Indigenous methodologies which are grounded in Indigenous worldviews, epistemology, and ontology.

I am not claiming this research to be representative of Indigenous research, because it is rooted in practitioner research, which comes from a western worldview. Rather, this work was conducted as a qualitative case study using practitioner research methodology, influenced by Indigenous methodologies. Indigenous methodologies were pivotal in questioning my own motivation for research.

Because I left my school angry and frustrated, I originally wanted to find fault with the system, in how language learners were ignored by the standardization movement in educational policy and in school priorities. Re-reading my first papers, I can feel the vitriol emanating from the margins. Eber Hampton (1995) writes,

One thing I want to say about research is that there is a motive. I believe the reason is emotional because we feel. We feel because we are hungry, cold, afraid, brave, loving or hateful. We do what we do for reasons, emotional reasons. That is the engine that drives us. That is the gift of the Creator of life. Life feels. We do our research, as abstract and intellectual as it may be… we do it for emotional reasons. (p. 52)
From studying Indigenous methodologies, I realized I needed to ask myself what were my motives for research. They were emotional in nature, and vengeful at that. Indigenous methodologies helped me to move away from a space of anger by checking my heart throughout the research process. Wilson (2008) writes, “The researcher insures that there are no negative or selfish motives for doing the research, because that could bring suffering upon everyone in the community. A ‘good heart’ guarantees a good motive, and good motives benefit everyone involved” (p. 60). Therefore, it is due to the priorities of reciprocity, respect, relationship, and responsibility within Indigenous methodologies that shifted my focus away from writing a critique of the educational system and towards researching, discussing, and writing in a way that honors the work of my colleagues and our attempts to center the importance of our relationships with our students in our practice. I am also writing this so I can be a better teacher and a better colleague when I return to the classroom. This reflection plays a large part of how the research came to fruition, thus it is important to name how Indigenous methodologies shaped my thinking and reasons for writing.
Chapter 5

Flexible Curriculum

The interviews, focus group, and observations allowed for thick description of the internal and external factors that impact teachers when creating curriculum for culturally and linguistically diverse learners. In these next chapters I include long quotes from individual teachers and extended conversation from the focus group. I purposefully did this because “if you are breaking things down into their smallest pieces, you are destroying all of the relationships around it” (Wilson, 2008, p. 119). I intentionally include long sections of dialogue from interviews, which Kovach (2009) refers to as “condensed conversations,” rather than splicing them apart to “staying true to each story, to the voice, as possible” (p. 52).

Our conversations reinforced our feelings of possibility when it comes to creating our own curriculum, how our relationships with students matter, and how we are rethinking the role of standardized testing in the classroom. I chose to separate the results into thematic chapters to improve readability. The first chapter describes how these teachers create a flexible curriculum. The next chapter goes in depth describing the language arts program and methods of differentiation used to reach a diverse student body. Afterwards, I delve deeper into how teacher-student relationships specifically influence the flexible curriculum through values, accountability, and reciprocity. I end with the challenges teachers experience with external policies of new reading CCSS, increased standardized testing, and how teachers are redefining “what data matters” in their classroom.
In this chapter, I begin with laying out how teachers, when given agency to create their own curriculum, go beyond the standards by engaging students, teaching to their strengths, and creating a classroom culture where students feel accepted and supported. In this chapter I also include the process of planning a flexible curriculum. This was a topic of interest for the teachers themselves because they wanted to know how their colleagues created their own curriculum. It turns out that within the same school, there were vast differences in planning, ranging from what Anne called “inspiration in collaboration” to Katie’s sense of isolation. This chapter ends with challenges faced by teachers when they are as Carrie puts it, “full-time curriculum writers,” and teachers.

**Flexible Curriculum: Going beyond the standards**

Compared to mandated or scripted curriculum, flexible curriculum allows for teacher choice in regards to how the standards are met. Teachers can select the content, texts, and pedagogical methods that are best suited for their classrooms. This freedom, however, comes with additional concerns such as finding time to be “full-time curriculum designers” while teaching and to locate suitable resources for various reading levels found within a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. That being said, teachers at Cesar Chavez found the pedagogical freedoms of a flexible curriculum outweighed the challenges.

“We are on an extreme side of the flexibility.” During our individual interviews, I described flexible curriculum as one where a teacher has the freedom to shape their own curriculum in order to meet the standards, which stands in opposition to a
mandated, or scripted curriculum. At the beginning of our focus group, the four teachers decided to explore what flexible curriculum means to them and to their specific situation at our school:

**Katie:** Our school leaves us to our own devices…. Maybe we get some coaching, but really there is no format given, no structure given. No checking in, honestly.

**Anne:** Which in some ways is good.

**Katie:** Yeah, it has its pros and cons. We are on an extreme side of the flexibility, maybe, maybe not.

**Gio:** Maybe the administration has a choice in how they want to administer that flexibility. Whereas our school, it is completely free, where it is up to us how we want to address the flexible curriculum. Whereas, I was part of a charter school where the administration, they had a flexible curriculum but then our curriculum was different from our partner charter school etc., but still we had a general idea of where we had to go, and where we were going, within even at a month at a time frame… a scope and sequence, which we have but we don’t necessarily follow or have to follow.

**Julia (myself):** Or for example, maybe a school says we are all doing guided reading. Right? I want to see these kinds of literacy strategies, I want to see a balanced reading approach, I want to see shared reading... So that can be an example of a school that has a flexible curriculum but there is some sort of structure for the look-fors.

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11 Starting in fall 2011, DCPS adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for reading and math. These standards act as the framework to which these teachers build a curriculum to teach and assess these standards. The CCSS focuses on end goals rather than specific teaching methods or literacy skills.
Anne: Right.

Julia: Like the expectations of what I see during the literacy block, but every person can do it differently in terms of the content, I guess, but they are hitting the standards.

This discussion demonstrated how within a group of teachers from the same school, there were various understandings of how flexibility is conceptualized at our school and how it flexibility can have varying degrees of support or structure. Although teachers can select how they teach the standards, there are various ways the school administration or district can mandate structure, such as a scope and sequence of units of study, types of literacy practices, and particular content, themes, or texts. At Cesar Chavez, it is what Katie referred to being on the “extreme side of the flexibility,” where teachers are left to their own devices in regards how they want to organize their teaching time.

For example, because of the dual language program, Kindergarten through fifth grade English teachers are in charge of teaching language arts, along with science and social studies in half-day blocks. The teachers I interviewed decided to integrate language arts with social studies and science content out of necessity to maximize coverage. This is demonstrated in how language arts for Cesar Chavez is taught more in the vein of the humanities, where literacy is developed through reading historical fiction, primary documents, and nonfiction. Carrie states the flexible curriculum is what allows teachers to create a humanities-based curriculum; however, it is also out of necessity due to the bilingual aspect of the program where teachers see the students in half-day increments but have to teach three subjects:
I am tremendously thankful that we have the freedom to take our kids through topics that make sense, topics that engage them, and especially as a bilingual school, we don’t have the time to do separate language arts from social studies from science, so we have to overlap everything. So all of our English language arts instruction comes through the science and social studies texts, all of it. I think that if we didn’t have that flexibility we would be screwed.

Since DCPS mandates U.S. history in fifth and eighth grade, Anne, Carrie, and Katie decided to split the content, where fifth grade teaches from Manifest Destiny to the Great Migration, and Katie picks up from where they left off and teaches Harlem Renaissance until the Civil Rights Movement. This teacher-led decision allows for greater depth and contextualization of historical content, and is possible due to the extreme flexibility regarding language arts curriculum at Cesar Chavez.

Cesar Chavez does not mandate a scope and sequence, like Gio’s former charter school, or a specific list of teaching strategies or formats. This past school year (2012-2013), DCPS released scope and sequence documents along with unit overviews that group the standards into thematic units with suggested lesson plans, teaching strategies, texts, and resources (DCPS, 2012c). These units were designed to align with the Paced Interim Assessments (PIA), standardized tests that are administered five times a year to assess the standards covered in the unit overviews. Despite the alignment of DCPS unit overviews with the PIA, Cesar Chavez teachers have the freedom to design their own units or to follow the DCPS scope and sequence and unit overviews. To facilitate

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12 At one point, while I was a teacher, we developed a scope and sequence that integrated science and social studies with language arts for grades K-5, with suggested texts and end of unit projects; however, the implementation was voluntary with no oversight or support in regards to how to implement the scope and sequence, thus it fell to the wayside.
curriculum planning, Cesar Chavez teachers meet with their grade level teams weekly; however, because Cesar Chavez is “on the extreme side of flexibility,” teachers are the ultimate decision makers when it comes to how the CCSS are addressed in their classroom.

Therefore, how do teachers take advantage of this freedom and flexibility to create their own curriculum? According to our conversations, a flexible curriculum allows teachers to go beyond the standards by integrating their personal strengths and interests into the curriculum to engage students. Teachers teach to their strengths, prioritize student engagement when selecting texts and approaches to content, and create time and space to build a supportive classroom culture.

“It’s about knowing my strengths and using it to my advantage.” When asked about the advantages of working at a school with a flexible curriculum, teachers found that it gave them the chance to integrate their own personal interests, talents, and enthusiasm into the classroom. For Gio, it was taking advantage of his artistic interests to engage his students:

- It’s about knowing my strengths and using it to my advantage in a flexible curriculum. My creativity, my like for art and manipulatives, and things like that is how I take advantage of it for sure. I mean, my love of having the students read, certain books by theme, you know, our theme that celebrates explorers is going to be adventure, so in social studies it is going to explorers but in reading we’re reading adventure books and taking advantage of it in that way.

Gio is a creative teacher, who during my observation integrated an arts lesson on color and the purpose of negative space in a collage in addition to having students write a
paragraph using description. When you walk into his classroom, you cannot help but notice the boards decorated by theme, the student work on the wall that combines art with learning prefixes. For his final project on the explorers, students used an app to design a graphic novel-style comic of a scene based on biographies of explorers. Students had to select a scene, decide on each frame, photograph the scene and add dialogue and narration using the “Comicbook!” app. Gio demonstrates how he expands his definitions of literacy to include digital and multimodal multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) where students can be designers of meaning.

This integration of art with literacy is possible within a flexible curriculum, because it allows Gio to teach to his strengths: “I can be all the things I wanted to be, an actor, a designer, a planner, all of these things, I get to be every day and I love it. It is what keeps me going.” Rather than being overwhelmed by the planning and procurement of materials to have an arts-filled literacy block, Gio found the opportunity to be creative “keeps [him] going.”

“Teach stuff that you are enthusiastic about.” In addition to teaching to one’s strengths, a flexible curriculum allows teachers to bring in engaging topics to address the standards. Carrie viewed the benefits of a flexible curriculum allowed her to:

Teach stuff that you are enthusiastic about and that you know the kids will be enthusiastic about. Because if you can find things that they are going to be enthusiastic about, teaching is not so difficult, right? Because it is natural for kids, people love to learn you know? And if you can put it out there in a way that kids can learn…you won’t have any behavior problems.
Carrie pointed out three important points that impacted her teaching: one, students’ enthusiasm drives her enthusiasm. She gauged her students to see what they get excited about and planned her lessons by finding materials and topics that will engage students. Two, she made the important point that motivation is critical to learning, and she capitalized on student motivation in her work. Three, when her students are motivated, they participated more, which led to less behavioral issues. During my observation with Carrie, as students walked in from lunch, they sat down to read the fifth-sixth grade level of *Scholastic News*, a weekly newsmagazine that covers current events. Scholastic’s *Weekly Reader*. A routine unfolded in front of me where students read the publication and then entered into an open discussion regarding what articles interested them and why. Students asked questions and responded to each other effortlessly, and there was a high level of participation. This routine demonstrates how Carrie allowed the students to determine what is important to them, and gave them the time and space to discuss topics that grabbed their attention.

“Once you have stuff you love, it is a gift.” For the teachers I interviewed, the benefit of a flexible curriculum was not to teach one’s whims, but to select texts that do justice to the content standards of science (for fourth and fifth grade) and social studies (for fourth, fifth, seventh, and eighth grade) while concurrently addressing the reading standards. Because the CCSS is considered to be only the “fundamentals” to a “well-developed content-rich curriculum” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6), it is the teachers who do the heavy lifting to create this “content-rich curriculum.” This connects to Anne’s suggestion of “letting the content drive what you do… and then figure out how you can use it to apply to the standards, but you got to have the big picture there.” The standards
alone do not paint a picture of how to develop a curriculum; they are only a list of expectations. It is the content that “drives” instruction rather than external factors such as standardized testing or checking off the CCSS. Anne felt that rather than a mandated curriculum that directly prepares students for the standardized tests, or following a textbook to make planning easier, she preferred selecting texts and materials that engage her and her students:

You sort of think you know [what the standards] are striving for when you read them, and then DC has these crazy tests on them, and you are like, what the hell was that all about because you didn’t understand what they were doing. So its kind of a frustrating time, so if we had a very explicit curriculum it might guide us down those paths, but it would be deadly dull.

You know, one of the things I love about where we are, we don’t have to use the textbooks which are the English books, [they] are abysmal because they have got the driest, dullest, deadest readings. I mean, the social studies and science textbooks, because they are informational and you know, they are not, literary per say, that at least you can get the information from them and move on to other sources that have a little bit more glitz and glamour to them… So you can try and find things that are a little more engaging to the kids that they want to do some of the work with. Having the flexible curriculum, the benefits hugely, hugely outweigh any costs.

During my observation, Anne used resources from the science textbook, a lesson plan with graphic organizers to explain the scientific concept of density and surface area through a hands-on experiment where students create boats from aluminum foil and see
how many pennies they can hold before sinking in water. Anne also supplemented the textbook resources with outside sources like http://www.brainpop.com, which has animated short videos explaining various topics. For her curriculum, Anne went beyond the reading standards, content standards, and the textbook materials by using historical fiction, primary sources, and resources from organizations like http://www.icivics.org to engage her students. For example, Anne noticed a gap in students understanding in the U.S. Constitution a few years ago, and even though it is not a part of the fifth grade curriculum, she and Carrie taught a unit on the Constitution to provide background knowledge for their later U.S. Civil War and Reconstruction units. Anne demonstrates that as a seasoned teacher (as compared to the new teachers in the Grossman and Thompson (2008) study), she does not limit her definitions of literacy and content to what the textbooks support. Anne actively goes out of her way to fill in gaps and to bring in various outside resources to supplement the textbook.

Selecting engaging texts also relieves teachers from being overburdened. For Katie, who teaches humanities, she first felt overwhelmed by the task of teaching Social Studies and English, but once she found the right resources, and with the support of fifth grade splitting the U.S. History content for her eighth grade class, Katie felt more empowered:

I am doing everything. But once you have stuff you love, it is a gift… Finding how to draw any kid into any subject is what we try to do all the time, which is the fun part because then you find good things.

When Katie found resources, she had student interests and reading levels on her mind. She also looked for what she loved and thought would hook her students into the content:
Eighth grade, they are old enough where they are ready to take on, I mean, all age kids are, but social justice, they are ready to feel empathy and outrage for the oppressed…. With seventh grade I don’t take that angle, with seventh grade I am like, let’s get into the drama of it, because they are all about, who is fighting with who? Who is in a romance with who? Let’s get so dramatic with Cleopatra and the incest of a monarchy or the Greek Gods and the love triangles and the infidelity.

Katie took into consideration where students are developmentally and used that to frame how she teaches her humanities class, such as the individualism that comes from interpersonal drama for seventh grade to the sense of being part of a global community in eighth grade.

For Katie and the fifth grade team, a benefit of the flexible curriculum is selecting a lens or perspective, or multiple perspectives to look at an issue. Part of the fifth and eighth grade content split was to present history from the perspective of those who are marginalized. Anne shared,

With fifth graders I think of a social justice thing. We do slavery… and I think because we tend to go on the side of the underdogs, we talk about slaves not the slave owners, we talk about the immigrant kids working in the factories and not the owners of the of the factories, we talk about them, but the focus is from the underdog side. The Spanish American war, we talk about the Cubans and the Filipinos as opposed to the Americans.

Ultimately, perspective along with text selection impacts how one interprets history and it is a strategy that critically engages students to feel “empathy,” “outrage,” or “drama” in
the classroom. These teachers recognize that perspective is critical when it comes to history and how “official knowledge” (Apple, 1990) is codified in textbooks or history standards. Therefore, these teachers embed standpoint theory (Harding 2004; Haraway, 2007; Simpson, 2003) within their humanities program by looking at history from “the margins” rather than the center (hooks, 2004).

These teachers are able to engage students because they have “intimate knowledge of the children…knowledge achieved by direct involvement with them” (Schwab, 1973, p.502). By recognizing teachers as central agents to curriculum (Schwab, 1973; see Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Craig & Ross, 2008), we see how teachers can use the flexible curriculum to their advantage by teaching to their strengths, creating cross-curricular units with engaging texts and use various perspectives demonstrates the central role of teachers play within curriculum development. In this next section, I demonstrate how within a flexible curriculum, teachers create an accepting classroom culture as a way of supporting students socially and academically through “curriculum-as-lived” (Aoki, 2005).

“We are a community because we are only as strong as we allow each other to be and then we are stronger.” Within a flexible curriculum, teachers move beyond the standards by creating routines and setting aside time that develop a supportive classroom culture. These teachers make a concerned effort to create a learning space where students can take risks, support each other through collaborative learning, and develop a classroom culture of readers. For Katie, her passion for reading was infectious and one that she shared with her students. She knew there are material consequences for her minoritized students if they do not develop a habit of reading; therefore she actively
worked towards fostering a community of readers in her classroom by dedicating time for independent reading everyday, stocking her classroom library with hot young adult literature, and by having personal conversations about books with her students.

If you love to read, you got it made, you are going to be awesome, no matter what, because you want to read books…. Last year, I read so many of the young adult books. I read so many of the books that the kids were reading so I could talk about them with the kids, and they were so excited to talk about them, and then I could actually recommend [books by saying], “I read this book and I loved it.” I haven’t read as many this year, but last year when I was getting things started, I would, I read only young adult books, so that I could personally recommend and discuss the books with kids, because then they were also excited about that…. and one student last year, was like, “Ms. Bunger, everyone used to talk about movies, and now everyone talks about books.”

Katie fostered an environment where all types of literature are accepted and where it was cool to read. This task was especially impressive because many of her students did not read for fun, especially language learners.

During my observation, Katie opened her class with independent reading while she checked students’ homework and gave them individual feedback. This routine took ten minutes to complete. Every student was reading, and some of my former language learners who I taught in fifth grade hesitated to stop reading when Ms. Bunger asked for their attention. Students were reading a variety of books, from young adult literature dealing with teen drama to Maya Angelou’s memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. After independent reading time, Katie made an announcement of new books that were
gifts from a parent to the classroom library and one kid whispered to me, “I’m going to read that one next.” Katie confirmed my observation during our interview by saying,

Everybody is reading. It is awesome. Because Patricia\textsuperscript{13} in her letter to me for Christmas, wrote that she used to hate reading, she couldn’t even read three books, and now she, in just this year, since the beginning, she has read 15 books, and Janet’s mom emailed me today and was like, you have inspired her to read read, read, and I love it. And Janet’s mom bought 22 books for our classroom library.

The students themselves and their family members noticed the change in the students’ reading engagement, and it is due to Katie’s personal effort in creating an environment where reading is celebrated. Looking at Katie’s work from a New Literacy Studies lens, because literacy is a social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 2000), Katie’s use of independent reading and creating a classroom culture of readers is as central to her curriculum as her planned objectives and lessons of the day. Furthermore, Katie is creating a connection through independent reading between school and home for many language learners and students who were previously labeled “reluctant readers.” Katie demonstrates how she is a teacher that “put[s] in overtime” (Delpit, 1992, p. 299) to create a bridge between students’ primary home Discourses with secondary school Discourses (Gee, 2001).

Reading is not the only thing on Katie’s mind. She created a classroom environment where students support each other, which is critical due to the spectrum of

\footnote{13 No real student names are used. All students referenced in interviews are given pseudonyms.}
academic ability found at Cesar Chavez. Katie asked her students to help each other because,

In the classroom, more than anything, I want the kids to be like, if someone is struggling with something, you help. If someone is messy, you help. It’s like we are a community because we are only as strong as we allow each other to be and then we are stronger.

Katie fostered this behavior by using various grouping strategies, and by moving the students around to different desks to get to know one another. As the year progressed, she took note of students needs and grouped students accordingly where students can bring their different strengths to group work. From a Chicana/Latina epistemological perspective, Katie demonstrates a “pedagogy of *convivencia* (a praxis of relating and living together)” (Villenas, Godinez, Delgado Bernal and Elenes, 2006, p. 5) that expects her students to support each other as you would a family member.

*“The curriculum takes a little hold for a day.”* For Gio, his role as a teacher went beyond the standards and included helping students’ foster positive relationships with each other. To do so, he set time aside to address what occurs in his classroom.

I think that what’s been good about this year is because I have so many personalities, I have decided that every Friday is classroom time…We have no plan as far as curriculum goes and we have journal sharing, work throughout the week, they have family homework. We do conflict resolution strategies, the whole day is rebuilding and focusing on, okay four days have passed, what went on during those four days? Whether or not I am following the standards or whether or not the curriculum takes a little hold for a day, I would rather make sure these
kids feel like they have the tools to resolve conflict within themselves and with other people in a healthy way.

In addition to setting time aside on Fridays to reflect, Gio also created a trusting environment for his students by setting a tone of acceptance:

Playing music in the morning, things like that that definitely set the tone for the day, sharing… the Daily language Review, having this time to discuss it, and finding out there are different possibilities for every answer. All of these things, I think sets it for ‘I might not be wrong if I actually say this’ so I think all of those little pieces that I don’t think, that are obviously a part of a flexible curriculum because if you walked into [another classroom] you would see a totally different thing. And they are still getting… academically the same thing, but maybe behaviorally and socially not the same, because it is flexible.

Gio made a good point that it is “all of those little pieces” that add up to creating a classroom atmosphere, one that is not included in the standards, nor required by the administration.

Gio’s comment of “the curriculum takes a little hold for a day” demonstrates how he sees curriculum as Aoki’s (2005) “curriculum-as-plan” where curriculum is only described by the content and skills of standards. By reframing Gio’s development of a classroom culture as “curriculum-as-lived” (Aoki, 2005), we see how he intentionally creates spaces where students’ social and emotional needs are as much a part of his curriculum as the standards. Therefore, Gio uses his agency as a curriculum-maker (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992) to include social and emotional learning in his work through his day of reflection and conflict resolution.
Gio’s dedication to his students is reflected back by to him by his students, who during my observation, volunteered to stay and help clean the classroom during lunch and after school because they take pride in their classroom. It is through Gio’s own decision-making to include building classroom community as part of his own flexible curriculum. A large part of what gets included in a flexible curriculum is due to the levels of collaboration that occur within grade levels and individual teachers. In this next section, I will discuss the benefits and drawbacks to planning a flexible curriculum.

Planning in a Flexible Curriculum

Because of Cesar Chavez’ flexible curriculum, teachers are the ultimate decision makers in regards to what gets included in their curriculum. This is impacted by the teachers’ ability to integrate new ideas/strategies and the ability to plan together. Planning meetings can be an occasion for integrating new ideas and collaborating with colleagues, but it also can be a time consuming and isolating experience. The level of difference depends on teacher-relationships and personal teacher buy-in regarding the benefits of working with others outside their proverbial silos.

“It’s easier to put into practice… because things are so flexible.” Being the author of their own curriculum allows teachers to integrate new approaches, teaching strategies, or content. At Cesar Chavez, in the last year there was a shift away from data-driven analysis of standardized test scores and towards professional development (PD) on teaching strategies that support language learners, such as reciprocal teaching and modified guided reading. For Gio, a flexible curriculum allowed him to seamlessly integrate new teaching strategies from these PDs:
I think another benefit of having a flexible curriculum is that when something is introduced in time, kind of like our last professional development was really big on reciprocal reading, and immediately, I was like this sounds like a good practice and it’s something that’s not far off from what I am doing, it’s more focused, so it’s easier to put into practice those kinds of things because things are so flexible. Because I am the one creating it, I can just look and say I can just put this right in.

A key point Gio makes is that the professional development is “not that far off from what I am doing,” because it requires less of a re-arranging of his schedule or plans to integrate a new teaching strategy. For some teachers, integrating new ideas is more of a stretch outside their comfort zone. Gio hit some road bumps during planning because this:

In our meetings, I hear something that should be put into practice. We are being told that it should be something worth being put into practice and if someone else isn’t buying into it, it’s kind of harder to plan around. Or sometimes you think, do I go ahead with my ideas, with these kinds of practices knowing that, I am now really separating myself from the other teacher? Or the other set of fourth grades? Or do I back down and say, okay, lets just keep it the way that it is because you feel uncomfortable with switching things.

For Gio, he was aware that his own change in practice could distance him from other teachers, however, if the practice supports student learning and is easy to integrate into his lessons, he is willing to try it. Despite the school’s efforts to introduce teachers to literacy strategies that will support language learners, ultimately it is up to each teacher to put these strategies into practice. Gio’s experience in planning demonstrates there is a lack of a shared telos, or goal (Pendlebury, 1990). Because of this, teachers are operating
under the “liberty as license” model of teacher agency (Pendlebury, 1990), which can have negative consequences in terms of students’ academic growth.

Carrie is another teacher who readily changed her teaching approaches, if she learned of new strategies or theories that positively impact student learning. She recently took a reading course at a local university and integrated the new concepts she was learning into her weekly instructional plans. Likewise, Carrie incorporated new teaching strategies based on a workshop from the Center for Applied Linguistics on vocabulary instruction.

[At the PD], there was a statistic that was shared that said something like 95% of reading comprehension comes from vocabulary knowledge, and at that point forward, I really changed the way I was approaching my teaching and I really started emphasizing the vocabulary acquisition piece. Not just learning new words, but learning the prefixes, suffixes and root words. I focused a lot on that last year, and on the test scores, the kids rocked because of the vocabulary they learned. It was sort of a back-door thing. I didn’t change what I was teaching because of the test, but the way I was teaching, and what made sense to me, what I learned from the Center for Applied Linguistics ended up benefitting me on my students performance because it worked and it made sense… But the test certainly did not inspire that.

Carrie noticed a difference in her students’ reading based on her focus on vocabulary instruction – and credited the workshop and “what made sense to me” as what led to success rather than explicitly teaching to the test. Thus, Carrie is generating “knowledge-of-practice” (Lytle, 2000). The “back-door” success Carrie’s students experienced in the
end-of-year standardized tests reinforced the idea that she planned her curriculum on teaching approaches “that make sense” and academic research rather than on testing strategies.

“Our inspiration comes from being collaborative.” For Anne and Carrie, teamwork was an important influence on planning their curriculum. Over the last four years, Anne, Carrie and myself (while I still taught) worked together to create a scope and sequence for fifth grade. This included selecting texts, sharing resources, creating final projects and benchmark internal writing assessments, and planning centers together to not duplicate work effort. We could knock on each other’s door to ask for suggestions, resources, or to grab a coffee and decompress after a long day.

Our reliance on each other facilitated the curriculum creation process because we could each bring our strengths to the table to support each other and consequently, the students. I brought in project-based planning and arts-based learning because of my background in understanding by design and differentiation. I also created partnerships with outside organizations such as Ford’s Theatre and Anacostia Watershed Society. Carrie shared, “Anne is our social studies brain and I try to be the science brain… [we] try to dance with each other.” This cooperative “dance” allowed for Carrie and Anne to support each other by bringing in new strategies or ways to support language learners in accessing content. As Anne explained,

The neat thing is that we have such teamwork there, which is really nice, it lets us do what we think is the right thing to do and find the pieces of the puzzle that go together that we think we can use to make perhaps not the greatest impact, but a good solid impact on the kids across the board- that we can reach most of our
kids. That gives us flexibility to also reach our kids in a variety of different ways, Ford’s Theatre being a perfect example of taking the summer reading book and being able to make a play about it and do a playbill with the writing and have kids do biographies and do art work.

By planning a flexible curriculum collaboratively, each teacher can offer a range of options for differentiation that would otherwise require one to look for outside support. Collaboration is critical in accessing new resources or teaching strategies. Anne, Carrie, and I demonstrate the relational aspect of teacher agency, where agency can be constructed as ecology (Priestley, Edwards, & Priestley, 2012). It is through recognizing each other’s strengths, and by having a shared telos (Pendlebury, 1990), our agency works towards a shared goal of a humanities-based curriculum that is engaging, situated, and multimodal (New London Group, 1996).

Creating curriculum is a continual process that requires revisiting and reworking. During our focus group, Anne and Carrie talked about the importance of collaboration in their practice, and this conversation led to the other side of planning experience within a school of extreme flexibility, and that is isolation.

**Anne:** I have to say, and you know this from experience, but I have to say that the fifth grade team is just a great team to work with. There really are a lot of good juices going, a lot of different personalities, but we just work really well together and I think our inspiration comes from being collaborative.

**Carrie:** Actually, we do so many of the things that you have started, (laughs) we carry it forward…if you had not been on our team, Julia, I don’t think we would have had nearly the…
**Anne:** the foundation

**Carrie:** …the success, or the fun stuff, that we got.

**Julia:** I am no longer in schools. I miss it so much…

**Carrie:** But you are still in our school…

**Julia:** Yeah, it’s true.

**Carrie:** and your work is still is in our school.

**Julia:** Yeah.

**Katie:** And your kids.

**Julia:** And the students are still there.

**Anne:** But I think that collaboration is key, both in terms of getting things done, but also just to have the moral support there. I mean, when I am having a crappy day, I can go to Carrie and she knows.

**Katie:** You are lucky to have it, though. I think it’s the anomaly.

**Anne:** It’s unfortunate. We should be that way.

**Julia:** Yeah, fifth grade is a strong team.

**Carrie:** Doesn’t mean we always agree…

**Katie:** Collaborate doesn’t mean you have to agree. Though, it means you work together on stuff. Like, middle school we are completely in isolation. I mean, I don’t know if it’s everywhere. But I think that collaboration, is the right, and at our school it has to be the right mix of people, because no one necessarily forces us to sit down and do stuff together. So you guys are doing it of your own accord because it feels good…

**Julia:** And you have a good rapport and it has been part of our pattern.
\textbf{Katie:} And if not that, then it just doesn’t happen. I don’t collaborate with anyone in the entire middle school.

\textbf{Anne:} You collaborate more with us probably (laughs)!

In this conversation, Katie named various factors that come into play to support collaborative planning. For Anne, Carrie, and I, working as team was built upon an intrinsic motivation, where “inspiration comes from collaboration.” We developed a strong relationship over three years, where we could bring our interests, resources, and strengths to plan together. It did not come naturally to us at first; it took a year of working together until we decided in earnest to plan together, but that was mostly because at that time, the Cesar Chavez model had one English and one Spanish teacher in the classroom so our focus was planning with our Spanish colleague. In terms of collaborating on English language arts, our heads were down, trying to adapt to a new grade level (for myself) and it was Anne’s first year teaching.

Once the model changed and separated the English and Spanish teachers into two classrooms, Anne, Carrie, and I decided to collaborate more to develop a curriculum for fifth grade that strategically integrated social studies and science. We found as many connections as possible between topics in science and social studies, such as settlers adapting to North America during Manifest Destiny and animal adaptation in science, or the growth and impact of inventions during the second Industrial Revolution. Now that Anne and Carrie are the only English teachers in fifth grade, their collaboration grew beyond academic planning to include “moral support” in areas of growth such as teaching vocabulary acquisition for language learners.
Katie, on the other hand, experienced isolation. Because middle school has one teacher per each subject, there is a silo-effect, where each teacher focused on his/her subject. Katie’s sense of isolation stemmed from a lack of administrative support or oversight to “force us to sit down.” Beyond structural support, the lynchpin of developing a collaborative relationship, teacher buy-in, was missing for the middle school. There was no team-led effort to define what the language curriculum for middle school should look like, despite the high level of language learners, and the diverse needs present at Cesar Chavez. Katie made a strong point when she said it takes the “right mix of people” that do not have to agree per say, but have to value the importance of collaboration in a flexible curriculum to “do it of your own accord and because it feels good.” Thus, when the school has curriculum planning time during professional development days, Katie referred to it as “artificial stuff,” which Carrie instantly recognized as the “sheet of paper” that can be filled during staff development time.

This lack of teacher buy-in to collaborate is what Gio referred to as “inflexibility in the flexibility”:

For me, the planning meetings affect everything. I take them seriously. I think whatever decision we make in there is what I am walking away with, which isn’t necessarily always the case…. We go into it, we discuss it, we come up with a plan, but there is still a lot of room for flexibility, which is a big challenge because we are so used to having this flexibility, its nothing is ever set in stone, and what is set in stone isn’t even, so strict or so linear…so there is a lot of inflexibility in the flexibility.
Gio’s comment brought up salient points regarding how to support planning in a flexible curriculum. Because teachers are “so used to having this flexibility,” they have the choice to either stay within their proverbial silos, like in middle school, or they can collaborate, like the fifth grade team. Furthermore, “nothing is set in stone,” meaning that the school does not have a set requirements such as a scope and sequence or literacy practices for each grade, where teachers are expected to demonstrate follow-through of planning.

The “inflexibility in the flexibility” was from a difficulty of letting go of previous plans, or from a lack of motivation to develop engaging units. Gio remarked:

There are some teachers that take advantage of the flexible curriculum and say, I am going to print out a bunch of packets and nobody is ever going to check or ask. The days I want to get into it I can. And the days that I don’t, I can just give them this worksheet and it’s not a big deal. But for me, or Katie, or some other teachers, it’s a process. It takes hours.

This lack of accountability within the flexible curriculum can effect teacher morale when dedicated teachers see their colleagues put in minimal effort, it can make them feel unappreciated. Thus, Gio and Katie are experiencing a lack of a telos, or shared goal for fourth grade and middle school. Colleagues take what Gio referred to as “extreme flexibility” as “liberty as license” (Pendlebury, 1990), which is having detrimental effects such as feelings of isolation or frustration in a lack of shared goals. In this case, Cesar Chavez is a case where there is both a flexible curriculum within a flexible atmosphere, where it is ultimately up to the teachers to decide whether they collaborate or isolate from each other.
“Working smarter, not harder” to bridge “the chasm.” Despite fifth grade’s “inspiration in collaboration,” Anne remarked she also experiences isolation from other grades because there is no school-based vertical planning:

[But] it’s kind of working in isolation. We don’t work so much with third graders we don’t work so much with the sixth graders, isolation within our school, isolation from our schools with others schools. It would be great to work with other schools and have that time. And isolation from, in particular the mandates from on high that don’t recognize with what we deal with and with what we have to work with. It is sort of a one size fits all, but we are not a one size fits all kind of place.

School-wide vertical alignment would support Cesar Chavez because it is “not a one size fits all kind of place” as a two-campus PK-8 bilingual program. Anne and Carrie recognized the importance of team collaboration beyond the grade level to a school-wide level in creating clear goals when it especially comes to language instruction because of the high English language learner population. Anne suggested a school-based vertical alignment of language arts goals with common vocabulary and resources:

I would love to have a vertical integration for language arts so I know who is teaching what when and what texts they are using so that the vocabulary is the same, so I mean, Carrie and I stumbled across this grammar problem where kids maybe know what know what a verb and a noun is and maybe know what an adjective is, but in fifth grade they are supposed to know a lot more, we are supposed to be able to introduce more. We are doing a lot, not even re-teaching but initial teaching of things, so for things like that, that are universal, it would be
nice to have and know what other people are doing so we build and we don’t have
to feel our way and stumble upon, so be flexible how we address it within it, but
to know what it is, not just the common core standards, but [school-based
standards] of what we are doing.

Success for Carrie and Anne is having vertical alignment across various content:
language, history, science, so that they can “work smarter, not harder.” They experienced
success with the division of the history standards and Carrie noted, “I feel that we are
beginning to collaborate better and it’s not so much of a chasm between middle school
and intermediate and primary.” In Anne and Carrie’s ideal flexible curriculum, there
would more collaboration and common goals across grade levels, even collaboration with
other DCPS bilingual schools as a way to bridge “the chasm.” This reflects Richardson’s
(1998) suggestion that schools need to develop communities of practice where teachers
have a shared goal and can have critical discussions regarding their teaching practices.
Because teachers create their own curriculum, Cesar Chavez could foster “artisan
communities” (Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002) of shared resources, instructional practices
and evaluation. Anne wants a movement away from the “silo-effect”, “because working
in a vacuum is fine up to a point, but you know what? There is a real world out there and
we need to be a part of that, connected to it somehow.”

**Challenges: “Do I outsource parenting?”** Beyond a lack of vertical integration
within the school and a sense of isolation that occur when planning is the challenge of
concurrently being a teacher and a “full-time curriculum writer.” Finding adequate
resources and money to buy materials are factors each teacher described as challenges to
creating their own curriculum. Writing curriculum is a time intensive process that cannot be contained only to planning periods. Anne believed,

It is impossible to find a block of time to plan and to be strategic about it. I think our intent is to be strategic, but our effect is to be, get what you can while you can because we are always on the run and we are never able to sit down and, unless we can do it on our own like take a weekend or take a holiday …we need to have a couple hours to sit around and play and get, talk out the things we are thinking about, and massage them, or throw them out or incorporate them or throw them out.

Creating curriculum is a process and teachers require time and space to work with colleagues to tease ideas out, build on them and find the appropriate resources for their students. In addition, there are various planning meetings that teachers are pulled into during planning time, that Carrie said, “forget about looking at the students’ work, there is not a prayer of that happening during planning time.”

When teachers are dedicated to their work, it is difficult to know in Carrie’s words, “what gives?” With the various duties at school and at home, teachers have to sacrifice giving in depth feedback to students because so much time is spent planning. For Katie, because she loved teaching, she felt like her candle was burning at both ends, “I feel like teaching… at times it feels unsustainable. Only because when the stakes are so high, kids, it’s hard to say no to anything. Or de-prioritize anything or do anything at half speed.” In her opinion, her feedback to her students is what gets the short end of the stick. Carrie similarly noted,
I mean we were all stressing out about how we felt like we were spending so much time developing curriculum, that we weren’t spending adequate enough time in revising the children work and giving them feedback. So everything comes at a cost, right? Having the luxury of planning is good, but something’s got to give.

Giving students adequate feedback was a large concern of Katie and Carrie, to which Carrie stopped assigning work she could not get back to, and Katie focused on giving short feedback during independent reading, but she felt like she could improve in this area.

Overall the planning of flexible curriculum has many positive aspects such as teacher and student engagement, and the inspiration that comes from collaboration. Yet this work comes at a cost for the teachers. Carrie and I spoke at length of how dedicated teachers can easily become overwhelmed because the see their practice extending beyond the classroom walls, making it difficult to prioritize in planning and teaching: “I ask myself, am I going to outsource parenting? Do I really need to help coach the cross-country team or shall I just take a hit on the ‘Commitment to School Community’ section of my annual evaluation? I guess that it comes down to priorities and choices.” I believe the ultimate challenge as a thoughtful teacher and “full-time curriculum writer” is to set priorities (is it planning? student feedback?) and set boundaries. Like many dedicated teachers, I personally experienced teacher burnout (TNTP, 2012) and left the system after five years, and of course, I missed it come September. I missed my students and I missed the intellectual challenge and creativity that comes with creating an engaging literacy program. Within the flexible curriculum, teachers have various ways to create an
engaging and differentiated curriculum. Each teacher has a unique take on how to
differentiate and how to teach literacy. In this next section, I share how my colleagues
design their literacy program and differentiate instruction to meet their students’ needs.
Because Cesar Chavez is on what Katie calls the “extreme side of flexibility,” there are no mandated expectations of how literacy should be taught, what types of projects or engagement with literacy should occur, or what strategies should be used. Teachers design their own teaching practices by exercising choice in deciding what routines, strategies, and methods of differentiation they believe will lead to student success. Carrie referred to this as her “toolbox,” where she can add new teaching and reading strategies. This image of the “toolbox” serves as a clear analogy to frame how teachers engage with literacy instruction within a flexible curriculum.

In this next section, I explain how each teacher develops a literacy program using his/her own personal “toolbox.” For the elementary school teachers, developing cross-curricular thematic units with strong books that “drive everything” is key. For middle school, Katie finds that clear expectations, reinforcing strategies through “layering the text,” and a classroom library that creates a classroom of readers, is critical to her literacy practice (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). In this chapter I also delve into the ways teachers differentiate instruction to meet the needs of language learners. Teachers use a variety of methods, from differentiated texts, strategies, handouts, and projects to reach all of their students. This demonstrates how a flexible curriculum can be built from the “bottom-up” through teacher-student relationships.

A “Toolbox” of Literacy Instruction

Teachers build a repertoire of strategies and routines for teachers and students to create their literacy block. What goes into the toolbox? What determines what strategy or
routines the teacher will pull out to have students interact with text and with each other? As stated above, teachers in a flexible curriculum add new strategies that they value as important and that fit into their current practices. Other items in the toolbox could appear from what teachers learned in teacher’s college, from other colleagues, what they read in teacher books, what they find online, or from professional development. From our conversations, I realized that each teacher created their own routines and “toolbox” of instructional strategies to shape their language arts curriculum.

“You know what you need.” Some teachers, like Katie, preferred to create a set lesson plan to provide routine for herself and for her students. For her, it made lesson planning much easier “because once you have the format of your lesson, even though it takes a long time to plug everything in, you know what you need for each lesson.” Her routine included independent reading, a “do now” using vocabulary work or organizing concepts or content, a partner share, a reading or writing objective with a mini-lesson on reading or writing strategies and then independent practice. She organized each of her lessons on PowerPoint so she can pre-plans all of her questions, objectives, and images to engage her students. She also prepared packets with differentiated texts based on student reading level for her seventh grade class and used same-leveled texts for her eighth graders, which I will discuss further in the differentiation section. Katie is a firm believer in being as quick and clear as possible to maximize student talk and work time. This is most stemmed from her short fifty minute period for humanities, where she has to address social studies and reading standards simultaneously. Katie also noted that clear goals and routines respect her students by having minimal interruptions and meaningful work.
“These are all of the things in our toolbox.” For the elementary teachers, a central part of the “toolbox” of literacy instruction is taking a thematic approach to reading and writing through content. When I taught fifth grade, each unit culminated in a project that would integrate reading into writing, and feature art of some-sort, such as drawing, acting, or sculpture. In terms of reading, I would sometimes engage in read-aloud, guided reading with centers, or literature circles (either teacher assigned or student selected). It really depended on the topic and the resources I would find that would shape the literacy events in the classroom. During reading, I focused on highlighting vocabulary from the text using images, drawings, and use in writing. I would model reading strategies and expect student to use sticky notes or a journal to monitor their thinking. For Carrie, teaching involves drawing on a similar “toolbox” of teaching strategies:

At the intermediate campus we have in our toolbox we have guided reading, we have modified guided reading, and now we just learned about reciprocal teaching or reciprocal reading, which is much more flexible in that you have kids working in groups of four and it can be with any kind of text… So, these are all of the things in our toolbox, of course, when it comes to building up sets of guided reading books and using text, I think that we are growing and trying to get better at that every year…. I guess it’s hard to characterize exactly what we have in a phrase because the units are so different from one another.
Carrie emphasized that units throughout the year move from teacher facilitated reading events (such as guided reading) to more student-centered events, such as research for the water and poverty summit,\textsuperscript{14} or science fair projects.

\textbf{“The books really drive where we are going.”} Gio is similar to Carrie and Anne’s practice of integrating science and social studies into English language arts out of necessity to address content and reading standards in a bilingual program. For Gio, he has a clearer set of routines, centered-around thematic texts based off of social studies or science:

There is always a text that they are reading, and it is usually a chapter book and it is something related to theme…. So we are right now doing colonization. I chose \textit{Fever} and another is the \textit{True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever}. There is one fictional and one nonfictional one, so that drives a lot of what the kids are doing as far as vocabulary, what kind of questions they are answering, what the focus is in literature circles. And then there is always, there is always a reading strip, there is always a phonics or grammar throughout the week, and I try to also include social studies and science things that are related to whatever the theme in the books that we are reading are. So I guess the books really drive where we are going.

\textsuperscript{14} The Water and Poverty Summit was a project we created four years ago where students work in groups to research and come up with possible solutions to water issues around the world and the US from the perspectives of scientists, citizens, politicians, and business. For example, when I taught, we studied water issues in Palestine, Nicaragua, China, DC, and the impact of hydraulic fracturing in the US. It is a bilingual project where students research, write, and present their findings in English and Spanish.
Instructional strategies and content are selected by the teacher, but are driven by the types of books or resources that teachers find. During my observation, Gio’s classroom was a student-centered space where Gio acted more as a facilitator. His students would float between their reading or language centers that connect to the unit theme and check their work using a teacher manual while Gio concurrently conducted guided reading groups based on the theme. Gio integrated various technologies into his classroom, such as iPods with dictionary apps rather than looking up words in a traditional dictionary, or a computer center where students would read leveled books.

“It’s getting books that they love.” In addition to teacher-selected texts, teachers exercised different methods of integrating student-selected texts into the classroom to promote independent reading. In Katie’s classroom, independent reading is student-centered because her classroom library is arranged by topics and books her students wanted to read.

I think it’s making an accessible and attractive classroom library…. it’s really important to have current, hot young adult literature. Not just what the library might have, which is a lot of classics, what’s “schools appropriate”…. They love drama, they love urban conflicts, so it’s getting books that they love. So a lot of the books, I order from books they have already read and they really like, and it’s either the same author or the same series, or it’s like, you should really get this book. So it’s books they love, and because its books they love, they recommend them to each other and they can’t wait to read the next book.

For Katie, independent reading was extremely student-centered because the books in her classroom library are the ones “students love.” Katie valued independent reading time
and it was her first daily routine while she checks homework. She also created a classroom culture that is driven by a love to read. Her value of reading was important means she does not judge what is “appropriate” for school or require students to read books that are “just right book” (at their reading level). Those small decisions can kill a students’ interest in reading, which is critical during the early teenage years when students are forming their identities and refining their academic self-concept.

I just feel like in middle school when we are losing readers, let them read anything they want. As long as they are reading, let them read. Because the interesting thing is that they start with that, and okay, most of them stay in that drama juicy stuff, but other kids then start to challenge themselves. So like, my eighth graders, the twins, they all read the *Kite Runner* and a *Thousand Splendid Suns*. They get hooked into reading, because [one twin] used to only read urban dramas, where it’s shootings, gangs, teenage pregnancy, and then seeing her now as an eighth grader, she is like, I love *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, oh my god, it is so good. And then from there, they are asking for more recommendations. So then, they are reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and then they are reading *Fahrenheit 451*. Some kids always stay in the drama, but other kids, I am seeing they are trying more.

Katie’s routine of daily independent reading is supported by a classroom environment where students publically write down what books they are reading, where they review books and as a class tally how many books they have read. Her value of “as long as they are reading, let them read” creates a space where reading can be done for reading itself, rather than for an assessment or book report. Students share with her what they have read
and if they find vocabulary words while they read, and this is due to the environment
Katie creates to build a classroom of solid independent readers. Katie demonstrates how
reading engagement can be socially situated, and her independent reading program can be viewed as a literacy practice (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) that is built on the relationships
Katie has with her students, but also the relationships her students have with each other.

“They are interesting and attractive books that I don’t have to tell the kids to read it, they will just go and read it.” For Carrie, rather than having a student-centered classroom library, she began a new routine these last few years where she selects a
variety of genres that connect with the unit theme for her independent reading center:

For the reading curriculum, we used that main text as the basis for a lot of the work we did, but then we used independent reading center [where] I organized all of my books on the theme. So for whatever we were studying, I put out books of all these different levels, some of them graphic novels, some of them novels, some of them picture books…. So, we had westward expansion after a while.

Then there was a week or so where we worked on the Constitution and all kinds of things about the US government, and then once we get into slavery, we put out the books on slavery and the underground railroad and what is cool is that I just put it out there. And they are interesting and attractive books that I don’t have to tell the kids to read it, they will just go and read it. And I also got a few Nooks for the classroom. And the kids love the technology of the Nooks. So I put Which Way to the Wild West on that, and I let some of the kids pick out some of the things that they wanted to download on there.
Carrie’s classroom library used to span a whole classroom wall and was well organized by genres, but during my observation, it became a curation on a theme that fits on a shelf. Part of Carrie’s success stems from selecting interesting texts, a variety of genres, and creating a routine for a independent reading center. Her reading center is a demonstration of “knowledge-of-practice” (Lytle, 2000), where she observed what works in terms of independent reading and made it part of her practice. Carrie’s content-focused independent reading center is similar to Guthrie et al. (2004) concept oriented reading instruction, which demonstrates that reading motivation through content-driven independent reading in addition to cognitive reading strategies increases reading comprehension. Central to Guthrie’s work is the importance of reader motivation. Carrie supports reading motivation through the use of technology, where students can download books on the e-reader, the Nook.

“A good book…sells itself.” A large part of literacy events for the teachers revolves around texts. Therefore, selecting the right text is an extremely important part of how teachers approach a unit theme, and as Gio said, “the books really drive where we are going.” In text selection, Katie selected texts that connect with the theme, but also have two levels of vocabulary that she can select for her students to infer, making the text accessible for her language learners, but also engaging for her above-grade level students. For Anne, a good book can serve multiple purposes- such as modeling reading strategy, studying content, and vocabulary, and thus “you can use it for a number of aspects if you find to take time to find the right book.” Carrie echoed this sentiment during the focus group. “Like what Giovanni was saying about Fever, and Freedom Crossing that we have. The kids know the Fugitive Slave Act [which is featured in the text] frontwards,
forwards and backwards, inside out and they can connect all over the place to it…. a great book can go so far into teaching so much.” For Carrie, teachers who are expected to create their own curriculum should have access to quality resources that can be used for multiple purposes so students can build reading skills and access content because “if you get a good text or a good book, something really high interest then it sells itself.” Again, student engagement alongside quality texts that serve multiple purposes are what help these teachers build their language arts curriculum.

**Multimodal literacy with Ford’s Theatre.** An important aspect of the language arts curriculum for fifth grade is the project-based learning component where students collaborated to create multimodal representations of their learning. The fifth grade team used the summer reading book, “Which Way to the Wild West?” as the base to learn about Manifest Destiny. Then, working with educators from Ford’s Theatre, the students put on a play, acting scenes from the text and created a playbill that included biographies on their characters and a bit about themselves. This collaboration continued to the end of the year and connected with the Family History Project, where students interview family members for their immigration or background stories, which act as the basis for the students’ own “I am From” poems (Christensen, 1999). Thembi Duncan, a Ford’s Theatre actor-educator helped students transform their poetry into a performance pieces. Carrie explained,

> For the Family History Project, some of them presented experiences they had had with their family. Some of them acted out things that happened to their grandparents. I felt like it was really powerful because our families came in and they began to see the way their child was connecting with their family history on
stage and sharing it with the world. So the “I Am From Poem,” actually became quite meaningful. We actually bound those into a poetry book with some of the other poems that the kids had written and so each of my kids walked away with a collection of the poems. They put a lot of their heart and soul into those “I Am From” poems and some of the kids were really proud of it.

The multimodal aspect of these projects demonstrates to students that reading and writing can be used in various forms, from the individual to the collective poem, to dramatic interpretation, and publications such as the playbill and the poetry book. These projects demonstrate how “teachers… are designers of learning processes and environments” (New London Group, 1996, p. 73) and literacy is embodied through drama, art, poetry, and movement, with students as the “designers” and “redesigners” (New London Group, 1996, p. 78) of meaning.

“They get so much out of every text.” For seventh and eighth grade, content-based writing was also an important aspect to Katie’s literacy events. Central to Katie’s routines, however, was a focus on “layering the text” as an instructional strategy. When Katie first began as a teacher, she was a DC teaching fellow with little background training in pedagogy, beyond what she experienced as an English major in university. As her colleague and friend, I saw her shift from a whole class novel and discussion format to a more in-depth reading and re-reading of shorter texts, for different “layers” of meaning through practicing reading strategies such as “chunking the text” into one sentence summaries for each paragraph, and annotating the text with questions, inferences, and connections. Katie then added on another layer for her students to analyze
sentences and vocabulary words for meaning, and had students revisit the text for a deeper level of analysis regarding the “meteor concept or theme.”

Katie’s reasoning for her reoccurring strategy of “layering the text” was due to a realization that to build strong independent readers in her classroom, she needed to reinforce the skills she developed in university. Her reason for deeply engaging in one text per week was to build up her language learners success because “creating really strong strategies that the kids can use independently will lead them into the skills because… if you only teach a strategy for a week, they will only do that for a week.” Katie’s goal is to have students use the strategies independently and be able to apply them to other texts. This is supported by Katie giving students “time to absorb the text” through the various re-readings that “layer their intake of information.”

For example, for her Civil Rights unit, Katie had her students read articles from the Southern Poverty Law Center on racial profiling and its effects on the Latino population in the South (http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/publications/under-siege-life-for-low-income-latinos-in-the-south). For their first reading, students annotated the text with their inferences of vocabulary words, wrote one-sentence summaries for each paragraph and shared their opinions and reactions to the text. For the second day, they summarized a central idea for each article and supported it with details from the text. For the third day, students analyzed the purpose of non-fiction writing techniques (e.g. interview bystander, interview an expert, shock value, descriptions, statistics) used by the author. Throughout the three days, each “Do-now” partner share had students describing their sentiments of the readings using vocabulary words, comparing current laws treatment of Latinos to Jim Crow laws from the Civil Rights era. Overall, the students
developed an in-depth understanding of academic vocabulary words, current Civil Rights issues, and analyzed writing techniques through Katie’s technique of “layering the text.”

Katie’s experience in the classroom working with various students helped her refine her own instruction to work towards depth rather than breadth. She reflected during our second interview,

I think it was before, because I want[ed] to have that sense of the students being so engaged and so into the exploration of information and skills, I used to be like, ok, I need to have an awesome new text or task everyday. Whereas now, there are so many tasks you can do with one text. And so I have tried to slow down… I have weeklong themes or objectives within the unit, and maybe it is one text for the whole week. And then they do layers of annotations where they are looking at different facets of the text and then doing different analytical thinking from it, or reaction, reflection, analysis, inferences. Everything, which I think feels so good because they get so much out of every text. And then they are so familiar with the content and the themes.

Katie’s shift in her teaching demonstrates that a flexible curriculum allows teachers to change their instruction based on new knowledges gained not only from the outside (in PDs or coursework) but also from teacher reflection to “slow down” and focus on what works and doesn’t work with her students, similar to Pincus’ (2001) circle of inquiry that begins with locations of dissonance. Katie found “layering the text” to be a successful literacy event for both her language learners and her higher-level students, to where she no longer differentiates texts for her eighth grade classes “because they get so much out of every text.” Katie clearly demonstrates how she develops “knowledge-of-practice”
(Lytle, 2000) through reflecting on what works in her classroom, by experimenting with a variety of instructional strategies and teaching methods until she finds success. She has found a strong balance of increasing student comprehension and vocabulary through “layering the text” while hooking readers with independent reading of “books they love.” In the following section, I go into specifics of how these teachers use the flexible curriculum in order to differentiate their instruction for their diverse classrooms.

**Differentiated Instruction: “Curriculum doesn’t fit us the way it doesn’t fit the kids.”**

In addition to selecting which form of reading engagement to feature in the classroom, teachers within a flexible curriculum decide various ways to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of their diverse learners. Differentiation is a catchall term that refers to how teachers alter their instruction according to their student’s needs (e.g. reading level, language background, attention, interest, personality). For the teachers I interviewed, it was hard to imagine differentiating within a structured curriculum. For Gio, being the author of his own curriculum made it easier for differentiation to occur:

> It’s about creativity. Knowing that I make my own worksheets, and make my own lesson plans, I can alter it in anyway because it is something that I created so it’s easy for me to think about it in different levels you know. Advanced, below, ELL. Whatever it is, I think that because I created it, it gives me the ability to envision it in different ways, where as if, I am given something, it is harder to feel for it, and get a good feeling for it, because it is not something that I created.

A flexible curriculum places teachers in the driver’s seat because they can alter any materials they created to fit different students needs. This view of differentiation as
“creativity” demonstrates that teachers need to think outside the box in order to reach all of their students, and to recognize that a one-size fits all curriculum leaves out many students. This sentiment is echoed by Anne’s concern:

How do you differentiate with a structured curriculum? How can you differentiate? I mean, you can differentiate with strategies, but you also have to differentiate with materials and opportunities. I think [a flexible curriculum] just gives you more flexibility to try to reach kids where they are, with what they need and engage them in the process, you know? And it takes different kinds of kids, and different types of materials to reach different kinds of kids. And that goes for language, it goes for learning differences, it goes for cultural differences…. because we are all flexible, we are all different. Curriculum doesn’t fit us the way it doesn’t fit the kids.

By recognizing that “one size fits all” curriculum cannot work for students or teachers, teacher need opportunities within curriculum to teach to their own strengths and knowledge bases to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. For example, Anne differentiates through strategies, content, text and for language, learning, and cultural differences. The teachers I interviewed each had different methods of differentiation, to which I grouped into three categories: differentiating by grouping, differentiating by text, and differentiating by individual learning needs.

“**You are in one group because there is a certain skill you need to master.**” Each teacher interviewed discussed the ways they differentiate in the classroom. For Gio, his form of differentiation was to create different groups who are given different
activities, readings, and tasks according to their reading level. Gio explained that in creating the groups,

I try and consider everything. I try and consider their TRC [Text Reading Comprehension] scores, basically they are where their reading level is. As long as their writing level kind of matches the same, I put them in the same group. Normally if one is lower than the other, then I will move them to a similar skill group…. Really there are three main groups. They get three centers. Within the lowest group, there are three different groups in there. So, they, within that lowest group, they get three separate sets of center sheets, activities….

Within the groups, Gio differentiated the texts for the students as well and for each new unit, he moved students into different groups. He let his students know, “we just have to make sure that the reason we are in here is to learn and we are focusing on certain skills and you are in one group because there is a certain skill you need to master.” I was intrigued to know that Gio had within his three different groups, different levels of differentiation for each student. Each student received a center’s sheet for the week, which outlined what activities and readings to conduct and when guided reading occurred. For Gio, differentiation is done through centers, guided reading, and is planned in advance of the week.

“Address the kids and try to find where they are.” One of the most common methods of differentiation used by the teachers was differentiating texts. Cesar Chavez’ diverse student body and language needs requires teachers to make the content accessible. For Anne, using social studies as the thematic “guiding anchor,” she selects texts that “address the kids and try to find where they are and find materials that will still
give them the content, both the social studies content but also language arts content at a level that is appropriate for them.” Differentiation by texts is an easy way to try and make content accessible. Katie also differentiates her texts for her seventh grade classes by level of complexity but also by length. She annotates and alters the reading to have accessible vocabulary for her language learners and creates packets that include the reading and graphic organizers, and makes them look the same so students do not feel they stick out if they are pulled into a smaller group. Since Katie teaches seventh and eighth grade, she knows her students well and this year chose not to differentiate for eighth grade texts, because of her strategy of “layering the text” which she has found successful for all levels of her students. Rereading a shorter text allows her language learners to focus on acquiring and reinforcing new vocabulary while the advanced students can break down complex sentences and get more out of the content. Interestingly, for Katie to meet all of her eighth grade students, she found it is not differentiating in the texts, but it is built into her strategies of “layering the text” and addressing individual students’ needs in small groups.

“I see it benefitting everybody.” Knowing individual students specific academic and emotional needs is critical for successful teaching. A teacher who is aware to specific students’ needs can respond within a flexible curriculum by tailoring lessons, materials, and interactions with individual students. Gio, for example, had a class with a number of students with diverse needs and he reflected,

It’s been interesting because having all of these kids with such different needs I had to become so creative and so alright, you need computers, or projects or
assignments, or let you be the one who tells me what time it is on the phone because you need to touch technology because he needs to touch it.

Gio viewed his students’ individual requirements not as a burden, but a chance to grow within his practice to creatively respond to a student’s love of technology, so he included more projects that utilized computers, such as a Prezi presentation, Comicbook! app to create original comics, and the use of iPods and computers in centers. Gio also differentiated by having different expectations within unit projects, such as writing a research paper. He made sure that every student would meet the standard, however, as the project progressed he realized he could differentiate the level of complexity:

At the first steps, they were going along with everybody else just to see how far everybody could go, and then I kind of made the decision of, alright these three kids are going to write two paragraphs, one that the above-level students were doing which was compare and contrast, and one just informational, taking notes and that whole step for making a paragraph. And then, the other two, the best that you could do fill out the graphic organizer. So, that’s fine, because you did still have to find a conclusion and think of a topic sentence and find four details in it. You just had trouble putting it all together, so, you know? The expectation was that everybody was able to identify a conclusion and topic sentence and know why they are important in the paragraph.

During our conversation, I shared how as a teacher, I differentiated by level of support, and I expected all students to reach the same level of completion, such as a multi-paragraph essay. I asked Gio if differentiating by expectations was a successful strategy and he responded:
Above everything, it is less stressful for me, to not feel like, why are you writing these six paragraphs, I need you to do this. I am going to need to help you sentence by sentence, then what are they getting out of that, really? When they can independently write one paragraph that is better than having me to assist them for every sentence for six paragraphs. So I think that the way that I am approaching it now, and it is because of this class, that the way that I am approaching it now, differentiation, I see it benefiting everybody.

Gio makes a strong argument to focus on what students can do independently as a marker of success rather than heavily scaffolding for every moment of the process, which can lead to a sense of dependence.

In addition, Gio valued the importance of group work and community within the classroom, so for his end of unit projects, he included a group component. The group is heterogeneous and each group member contributed to a Prezi presentation. Gio noted the importance of each student feeling successful:

[The research project] was something that they were proud of and felt proud of, and I think that the way to have culminated the project, so that it’s at everybody’s level that they created Prezi presentations where they had complete control but it was still a streamlined activity where in the end, everybody had all of their information up there, within their group, within their level and it was something at least in passing, you would think, oh my gosh, everybody did this thing.

Everybody participated.

Gio and I agreed that differentiation for language learners and special needs students is needed but it can also lead to a form of segregation within the classroom if
these students are consistently grouped apart. From a Chicana/Latina epistemological perspective, Gio is demonstrating “conocimiento con cariño” (knowledge with care) (Jackson, Bernal Guzman, & Ramos, 2010, p. 33), where central to his teaching is the pedagogy of care. Therefore, making sure all students feel a part of the classroom community is a factor to consider when differentiating for individual students.

Language learners, especially newcomers, can feel isolated because of their individual needs. Because Cesar Chavez is a bilingual program, half of our students’ home language is Spanish and these students come to school with varying degrees of Spanish and English literacy levels and different home Discourses (Gee, 2001). This year Carrie welcomed a student into her classroom, Mariana, who despite being in the system for three years at another school, was reading at a kindergarten level in fifth grade. As a response to Mariana’s specific situation, Carrie created a completely separate curriculum for her that included newcomer English, her own vocabulary words and spelling words and books that are on her level. Carrie also collaborated with the response-to-intervention teacher who worked with Mariana for 45 minutes everyday on intensive newcomer English. It is a juggling act to make sure all students are engaged, especially a student with newcomer English skills. Carrie shared:

Whenever I am teaching a lesson that [Mariana] can reach to understand, I may partner her with another student and keep her involved in the whole group setting. Sometimes if I know that this lesson is going to go over her head, I tell her to go ahead and work on the ESL binder for a little bit, or there is a computer program that another teacher has showed her how to use, and once I get the others kids
working on their assignment, then I will work with Mariana and try to catch her up on her content and what we are doing.

Similar to Gio, Carrie made a concerted effort to include all students through “conocimiento con cariño” (knowledge with care) (Jackson, Bernal Guzman, & Ramos, 2010, p. 33) within her classroom while concurrently tailoring individual instruction for her students.

This ability to creatively interweave individual needs within a classroom, according to Carrie, was possible because of the flexible curriculum:

Thank god for the flexible curriculum, because, if I had to use a fifth grade curriculum with Mariana, it would be a disaster and that’s probably got to do with where she is right now. She was probably sitting in a classroom last year and the year before where for the majority of the day…she was probably in a regular grade level classroom… then only was pulled out for an hour or so for ESL services, which would not have been enough. I guess it depends on if how things are in other districts, but if there is a district where everything was scripted, newcomers would absolutely fall through the cracks.

Being able to craft lessons and use separate materials for her language learners is what is preventing Carrie’s students from “falling through the cracks.” Carrie valued the importance of having Mariana be part of the classroom community because she could also interact with English more frequently than if she was in a sheltered program. “I think that the mixed classroom is probably the best setting for an ELL, as long as the curriculum can be scaffolded enough. Because then I think they have the best chance to acquire the language.” A take away message from my conversation with Carrie was how
language learners cannot learn simply from exposure, but they need a curriculum that “can be scaffolded enough” in addition to authentic interaction. More importantly, it is Carrie’s recognition that she is responsible for Mariana’s language development, not just the response-to-intervention teacher, that allows for differentiation to occur. From a sociocultural perspective (Nieto, 2002), Carrie’s experiences as an ESL teacher and her values of being responsible to all her students make her accountable to Mariana.

In seventh and eighth grades, Katie differentiated her instruction on more than just language needs.

With [my language learners], Jon needs language support. Ale needs support as far as getting to abstract thinking, and so… when I work with them in a small group, they can bring different strengths and then access the texts. Or even Christian, he needs processing time, but he can access the text. Jaime is so strong when cued verbally.

She tailored her interactions with her students to bring out their strengths but also responds to their individual needs so students feel successful. For example, with students who can handle only small amounts of text, she gave them shorter texts at their reading level so they can feel success and “gather steam” before moving onto longer texts. Katie is also cognizant of the social perceptions of students who are singled out because of behavior issues:

[This student] had the perception he has always been treated differently. So it’s either teachers ignore him or give him completely different work. So it is really important for him to see that he is doing the same work. So like, he has the lowest level packet, because his reading level is elementary. But the cover is the same, so
it’s like where it works. The cover is exactly the same, so he doesn’t realize he is doing different work. Because I am like, look everyone is doing that packet.

For all students to be successful, it takes a strong awareness of where each student is academically, socially, and emotionally. Differentiation in flexible curriculum is implemented on various levels, from individual to small group, on the fly or pre-planned with packets, from pre-selected texts to knowing how to respond to a specific concern or interest. In terms of literacy, it is the teacher-student relationships that allow for differentiation to occur.

Originally I did not intend to include a separate chapter on the teacher’s language arts instruction and methods of differentiation, however, through our conversations, I was amazed at the different ways each teacher engaged in defining their language arts curriculum and what strategies they had in their “toolbox” to reach their culturally and linguistically diverse learners. This was a point of interest for teachers like Katie, who wanted the focus group to allow for more time discussing how teachers support language learners, but due to time limits, we could not address that topic as a group. Hopefully I did justice to the teachers’ diverse differentiation strategies and hope this chapter can serve Katie well.

Overall, I found that good books matter, so access to quality resources can inspire teachers when they are creating their own curriculum. Furthermore, each teacher honed their practice over the years, to develop unique language arts programs that support their language learners through socially situated practices, where meaning is constructed through multimodal projects, social interaction, and through a pedagogy of care. This chapter speaks to how teachers are reflective “curriculum makers” (Clandinin &
Connelly, 1992) and knowledge constructors. These teachers seek out resources and research to improve instruction, and they reflect and refine their practices where “Knowledge-in-practice” becomes “knowledge-of-practice” (Lytle, 2000). In the next section, I will explore the relationships my colleagues fostered with their students and how these relationships shaped the literacy practices that occur in the classroom.
Chapter 7
Teacher-Student Relationships

Previously, I discussed how a flexible curriculum allows for teachers to tailor their units and instruction to engage students through their interests, to foster a classroom community, and to address individual needs through differentiation. Teachers define their conceptions of literacy through the their teaching practices available to them in their toolbox, such as independent reading, thematic-based learning, literature circles, multimodal projects, and strategies-based instruction. The act of knowledge construction is inherently tied to the relationships teachers foster with their students, and how these relationships facilitate mutual accountability and reciprocity within and beyond the classroom. In this section, I focus on the concept of relationships as literacy practice, or what I call relational literacy. From my observations and interviews, I witnessed how my colleagues were motivated by their values to know and care for their students as individuals and to weave their students’ lives into the flexible curriculum (Christensen, 1999). Further, these teachers developed a relationship of accountability through their advocacy within and outside of the classroom. These relationships are what keep

15 “Relational Literacy” has previously been defined in Salmon and Freedman’s (2002) Facilitating Interpersonal Relationships in the Classroom: A Relational Literacy Curriculum as:

an ability to reflect upon, describe, and negotiate relationships in personally meaningful ways. This is a form of literacy that involves the ability to manipulate the symbols of relationships. A central goal of the curriculum is to support children’s evolving literacy in the domain of interpersonal relationships. Simultaneously, we adopted this term to indicate that the exploration of relationships can occur through literacy events common to the elementary classroom.

This definition defines literacy as text, and the only relationships explored are student-student relationships, and do not take into consideration the role teachers nor require teachers to reflect on the types of literacy practices they engage in, nor discuss power structures that exist within and outside of the classroom.
teachers going, and allow for mutual respect and reciprocity to flourish between teachers, students, and families.

**Naming our Values**

*“Every kid needs personalized love.”* Teachers’ intentions vary based on the personal values and experiences from working in the classroom (Nieto, 2002). Values manifest in the pedagogical decisions they make and in their everyday interactions with their students. It is important to note that these intentions have pedagogical implications because they can lead towards individual differentiation within the flexible curriculum, student engagement, and trust. For a teacher like Katie, developing a relationship with her student was central to her practice. She believed that the role of a teacher in a student’s life was:

- Making kids feel safe, confident, and supported. Every kid, I think this is something I have learned as the years go on, every kid, no matter the family, whether you are poor, or rich, or black, white, or Latino, every kid needs personalized love. They need it so much, especially at a middle school age where everything is feeling so awkward that I think that having someone that you feel comfortable going to for anything.

Working with middle school students requires the development of mutual trust and respect. Katie recognized this over time and has embodied it within her relationships with her students. Although her technical role in the school is to be the English/Humanities teacher, she centered teacher-student relationship as the pathway to support students academically because “it’s so much easier to teach them when they feel confidence.” Furthermore, working with middle school students made her she realize that
because these students receive various types of messages from teachers, Katie believed, “You can never underestimate how much personalization means to every kid. At any age, but especially middle school. It’s such high demands of them in so many kind of negative consequence kind of way; they love personalized communication.”

In the face of the current educational policy landscape where there is a focus on rigor, content knowledge, and “best practices” as the definition of a highly qualified teacher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006), Katie disregarded this discourse to place relationships with students at the center of her practice. This practice is something that Katie and I discussed when we worked together. Katie would stop by my classroom during her breaks and observed how I openly cared deeply about my students and this made an impression on her teaching. When asked what advice to give new teachers, Katie said, “Well one is, loving the kids so much. You can’t teach anyone that. I think it’s that if you love the kids you work hard.” Therefore, the value of love and caring for students not only motivates the students but it also motivates the teachers to “work hard” for the students.

It is difficult to quantify how a teacher can demonstrate the effect of Katie’s “personalized love,” but it is manifested in everyday interactions with the students. Katie discussed this at length:

It’s the small things too. In the hallway, having the kids being excited to see me, and run up and say, “Hi Ms. Bunger, want to give me a hug?” or stop by when it’s not their class, like Diana wanting to come in all the time, just looking to chat a little bit, or Luis coming in just to give me a hug, I think those things, I am just like, I love this, that they feel so connected to me….
Also I am so happy I am able to be that person for them. Those small interactions that let me know that, ok, they do feel connected to me. I love that. It makes me so happy because everyone likes to feel loved and then in the classroom to see them want to work hard. I love. To see them so engaged and just even the moments where I’m like, I want you to participate more.

For Katie, she sees a direct correlation between her “personalized love” with her students and their participation and effort in class. She knows that “those small interactions” demonstrate a students’ connection to her and that this will lead to working hard in the classroom. Within the classroom, Katie gives students direct and individual feedback during independent reading time as she checks their homework. This is especially critical for language learners or shy students who need the extra support or encouragement to participate more in class. It is a time where Katie can say a quick comment to a student and she sees the effect of this “personalized love” in her classroom:

I will be checking the homework at the beginning of class and I will say I want you to participate more today because you have such wonderful ideas, and their hand will be up all class, like Evelyn, she started to participate more…. and just that telling asking them to do it, and they are so cognizant and they are doing it.

And it makes me so happy.

It is Katie’s value of loving the students that builds the relationship and leads to the student and teacher working for each other. Katie and her students demonstrated this dedication to “work hard” in the lessons I observed, where not one minute was wasted. Her entire lesson was on a PowerPoint and moved quickly and smoothly, engaging students with critical questions about civil rights issues, where students discussed with
partners and shared out. For the whole hour, the only behavior issue was a student who wanted to keep reading her independent reading book and Katie asked her to pay attention. The students, of all language levels, were engaged for the entire lesson and participated.

“They are looking for some humility.” Developing a strong teacher-student relationship built on trust is also critical to Gio’s practice. Gio valued the importance of acceptance and he fostered this in his classroom:

I think the role of the teacher is to be someone they can trust and feel safe around, make mistakes and feel like it’s okay, and something that’s natural and a part of life, and something that they even see in their teacher. I think above all else, I don’t think the students are looking for you to be the smartest person in the world, or know every single answer. I think they are looking for some humility. They are looking for someone to trust… those are the really the biggest things the students are looking for.

Gio’s description of the student’s need for humility and “someone to trust” is in stark contrast to the images of highly qualified teachers in NCLB (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). He demonstrated this sense of acceptance and humility when working with his fourth graders. Even though the class was buzzing with nine-year old energy, Gio addressed each student calmly while navigating around to different centers and students. Students respected the guided reading time and knew not to disturb him if he was working in a small group. Students who were labeled by the school with behavior problems, such as Nathan, had their own behavior plans that allowed them to gain points
for good behavior, which sparked fellow students to share with Gio if Nathan was doing well.

For Gio, he wanted his students to find success in school and tailored his expectations to assist in this process. Gio remarked,

Will that teacher hold Nathan to the same expectations and be flexible? Because he academically struggles a bit too, so I am not going to hold him to the same standards that I do [for] some other students. Because, I want you to feel successful in the things you are doing, and feel proud of the things you are doing and not feel like you can’t do anything right.

The reason for this concern is warranted. In discussing how he finds success with Nathan, Gio was one of the few teachers to share Nathan’s success with his parents. Gio wrote a positive email about Nathan to his parents, who responded,

This is the first email, positive email, I ever gotten from any teacher since he was in Kindergarten… Can you imagine, he has two teachers along the way plus all of the special teachers at a time. He has seen quite a bit of teachers to not get one good email sent home is… it was sad. I mean, I was happy to have been the first, but gosh, fourth grade is late in life.

The value of acceptance is apparent in Gio’s practice. It is through his ability to build trust through his relationships with his students that allows him to have success with students such as Nathan.

**Recognizing Talent.** For Anne and Carrie, the values that impact their relationships with their students center on recognizing their students’ talents and bringing
them into the classroom. Carrie, especially focused on the importance of academic empowerment as the role of a teacher in a students’ life:

If you are good at teaching them what they need to know to be successful academically and in life, then beyond that, if you can recognize some talent that they maybe have and at least encourage it or to point it out, that self-discovery, that is huge. There were a couple of teachers who did that for me over the years and I really enjoyed noticing some of my kids who are fantastic artists, or good actors, or good writers, and I love, I love just helping them to maybe recognize some of their own talents, especially if they are not recognizing it.

Carrie’s value of bringing out hidden talents was something she personally experienced as a student and one she wanted her own students to experience as well. This connects to Simon (2012) notion of “teachers as connoisseurs” of students’ interests and talents as locations of literacy engagement and practice. Anne echoed Carrie’s sentiments in discovering the talents of her students, but it was also couched under the process of assisting students in their discovery of themselves as learners and as community members:

I would like to help kids like learning and learn to love learning and just be curious and engaged and be good people, and continue to learn in ways that support them, support their community, be it, their community at home, their community at school, community at large. You know, it’s that citizen thing. Make good citizens. And just try to help kids find themselves a little bit too because I think a neat thing about fifth grade is that they are beginning to come into their
own, they are beginning to kind of find their little personality… as a learner...

And so try to create opportunities for that to take place.

Anne emphasized the importance of assisting students in finding themselves academically, as a member of a community, and through their talents. Anne’s interest in citizenship stems from her personal background in working in civics education in Bosnia and also in the United States. When we taught together, it was Anne who emphasized the importance teaching the students their responsibilities as citizens. Her civic values are apparent in her social studies-centered curriculum that offered opportunities for students to find their talents through the multimodal projects that include acting, creative writing, research, drawing, presenting Lincoln’s speeches, and debating water issues as citizens.

**Pedagogical Implications**

When teachers value factors such as trust, love, and encouragement of talent within their classrooms, there are pedagogical implications that lead to student engagement, mutual respect, and meaningful exchanges. Previously I mentioned the various tools in the teachers literacy “toolbox” that are used to engage the students in all four language modalities. It is what teachers count as text that is part of a literacy practice based on relationships. My colleagues intertwined the students’ lives into their teaching practices as a method of co-constructing knowledge.

For the fifth grade team, Anne and Carrie created a project called “my family history” that stemmed from engaging students in meaningful work over the winter break. In the science curriculum, students are expected to learn about genetics, so as a fifth grade team, they have students interview family members, build a family tree, and share stories about their families. This is also reinforced in Spanish, where during the *Café de*
Abuelos, grandparents are invited to tell stories. With the help of Ford’s Theatre, the family history project blossomed in the past two years into a poetic presentation. Carrie explained,

I try to connect to their own experiences and their own families. And now they are working during the winter break on the my life and family history project, where they interview family members and they find out their own family’s histories and that’s a great project because it gets kids talking to their parents and seeing the power of stories. That is very much student-focused and a lot of the parents give us positive feedback, about that saying, I am so glad you assigned the project because they found out about their family history and these stories get passed on. So that has positively impacted our relationship with not just with the kids but with their families too.

Having students share their family stories is a powerful experience where literacy becomes situated in the present and the past (see Campano, 2007). A few years ago, I facilitated an inquiry-led immigration unit, where students asked questions regarding the immigration experience and then interviewed an adult immigrant from their family or friends. One parent, who was a political exile from Argentina, appreciated the project because it allowed him to share his story and his country’s history to his own son. When his son visited Argentina that year, he had both context but also a newfound curiosity about his father’s story.

Using students’ lives or the lives of people similar to the students can have a profound effect on student engagement. When I observed Carrie’s class, she shared YouTube videos of a spoken word artist who shared about her multinational identity,
which is an experience of many students at Cesar Chavez. Her body, however, was white, and as the video played, I looked around and noticed which students were paying attention and which ones were tuned out. After my visit with Carrie, we talked about the importance of bringing in examples of Latino or Black poets, especially poets who can speak about the immigration experience in DC, such as the poet, Quique Aviles who created a one-person show on the changing multiethnic landscape called “Children of Latinia.” When we discussed the importance of diverse examples, I spoke of an event that occurred the day before, where after school Katie and I were discussing ideas for her civil rights project, and I shared how I found amazing articles from the Southern Poverty Law Center about Latino experiences in the South, and Mateo, a seventh grade student who was in the room turned to me and said, “you can ask me or my dad because we are Latino,” and he then launched into telling me the story of his father who had crossed the border numerous times, had difficulty with the law and is now works for the Latino Community in Washington, DC.

As he told his story, another student who was in Katie’s room turned and said, “My mom also crossed the border.” Towards the end of Mateo’s story, he sat down at a desk, crossed his arms over his stomach in contentment and said, “My dad is really great. I’m proud of being Salvadorian.” I was amazed at how quickly Mateo wanted to share his story by overhearing me say let’s study Latino examples. This is because my relationship with Mateo had always been light, since I knew him from the after school program that took place in my classroom, where he would be silly with me, and it was the first time Mateo spoke to me seriously. Thus, for teachers to create spaces within a flexible curriculum that allow for students to share their personal stories or their family stories
can be a powerful pedagogical practice that leads to not only literacy development but for a deepening of family engagement as well as students’ bonds with their own family.

**Accountability**

There is a level of mutual respect and accountability that needs to be fostered for a healthy relationship to emerge. Accountability to one’s students is manifested in different ways through the curriculum and also through the teacher-student relationship. Campano (2007) asks, “Might teachers and students, through their relationships with one another, create their own versions of accountability?” (p. 45). Campano’s (2007) writing rung true for me, and I shared two pages from his book, *Immigrant Students and Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Remembering* to spur discussion during our focus group regarding the discourse of accountability. At first it was difficult for some to understand “accountability” within schools to be outside of the discourse of standardized testing. Yet, it is obvious to me that Katie designs her curriculum around her students’ academic needs, but also their socio-emotional ones. This section is to make the invisible visible, for Katie and for other teachers who care about their students—so we can redefine accountability towards our students, and redefine curriculum to encompass our relationships, rather than be held accountable by top-down curriculum models and mandates “fallen from the policy sky” (Campano, 2007, p. 46).

During our interviews, teachers discussed various ways to be accountable to their students within and outside of the classroom. Within the classroom, teachers demonstrated accountability to their students through student engagement and their feedback. Outside of the classroom, teachers demonstrated their accountability by advocating on their students behalf to other teachers and to the district.
“Empower the student first.” For Carrie, accountability to students was based in supporting academic advancement of a student. She believed that was the primary responsibility of the teacher over the importance of building a relationship outside of the teacher-student dynamic.

A teacher should empower the student first. The first responsibility to educate the child, and give them the skills that they need to be successful in the world, so if you are not good at teaching reading or teaching writing than nothing else matters. You could be a warm fuzzy person, but it wouldn’t matter if you aren’t effective at teaching the kids.

Carrie centered student empowerment by creating spaces for students to explore and strengthen new skills and talents. For Carrie, accountability comes with giving students the skills within and outside of the classroom, and that had greater importance than being a “warm fuzzy person.” I would like to make an important distinction that teachers like Katie, Gio, and myself, who note the importance of sharing trust, acceptance and love with our students, our actions and values are intended to promote academic empowerment, not just “warm fuzzy” feelings. For example, my own personal accountability to my students was based on having high academic expectations, but also coupled with care, clear communication with students and family members as a method of engaging and motivating students to as Katie put it, work hard.

“Teach things that blow their minds.” Other methods of accountability within the classroom are demonstrated in small acts that make the work students do relevant. For Carrie, it is making decisions around what engages the students and following their interests, such as:
Bringing things to the classroom that gets them excited about writing. So when we were working on cells, one of the questions I asked was “Can you train a paramecium?” A paramecium is a single celled organism. And so after they learned about it, I said, do you think you can train one of these things? And so they were all on fire about it.... I think that the things that make learning really exciting those are the things that make the kids really appreciate and love learning and investing more and more into the work, those types of nuggets. I guess that’s the main thing, teach things that blow their minds.

Carrie believed accountability was making the work engaging, having students “on fire” to appreciate the learning process. Further, Carrie respected the students’ time by cutting out any work that she could not offer feedback. This is an important point, because it limits the amount of busy work or homework and honors the students’ efforts.

“Everything you ask the kid to do is for a reason.” Gio shared a similar sentiment of engagement, but through “keeping everything very connected, very relevant. When you are within a theme, really feeling like, at every second at every turn you are in this theme.” Thematic teaching allows students to make connections between various readings, discussions, and writing that they do. Lastly, Katie echoed the importance of relevance, but for her older students, it was,

Making sure that everything you ask the kid to do is for a reason. Because as they get older, they can identify what they think is strong and what they think is not strong about teachers, and they can, even though everyone complains about homework, but the kids could say, this was busy work and what was the point of it? So making things meaningful…. What and why am I asking them to do this is
either to get out some of themes of the content, or to hone in on a skill that we are mastering. Because then I think that the students trust you.

Katie’s last point gets back to the importance of classroom accountability. If the learning is meaningful and respectful of students’ time, then students will value the work more and begin to trust the teacher.

Advocacy outside the classroom: “If teachers don’t speak up about things, no one is speaking up for the child.” Accountability towards students stretches beyond classroom interactions and into the interactions teachers have with other adults in order to advocate for the student. Examples of this are how Katie advocates for her language learner population regarding how testing impacts their instruction and also how other adults negatively view her students. Carrie and Anne also advocate for their language learners by challenging standardized testing.

Katie’s concern for her language learners is apparent in her dedication to advocating for them outside of the classroom. Her role of teacher spread beyond her classroom into various organizations and volunteer activities. In addition to being a teacher who creates her own curriculum, she was an after-school tutor, the head of the Local School Advisory Team (LSAT), facilitator of family engagement, the coach of the cross-country team, and the director of the school musical. Katie has observed the treatment and lack of language support for her language learners, especially her newcomer students and has acted as an advocate for these students by taking them to different events outside of the class, and by working with the administration to make changes in their ESL program. Teacher advocacy is required in cases when many parents
do not know their rights to advocate for language services, or regarding the treatment of their students by other teachers.\textsuperscript{16} During our conversation, Katie shared,

You taught me this too, teachers have to be the advocate, because if teachers don’t advocate, then no one is going to be advocating. You do have some of the parents who can advocate really strongly, but the majority doesn’t know how to advocate so if teachers don’t speak up about things, no one is speaking up for the child.

Katie and I observed how some parents, of higher classes, felt comfortable making appointments with the principal or being able to chat and advocate on their child’s behalf. Other parents at our school, especially working class immigrant families, did not know or did not feel as comfortable exercising their rights to advocate for their children. During my conversation with Katie, I gave an example that occurred that day which shows how language learners can get the short shrift when it comes to instruction. In this case, the student, Diana, who is second generation Salvadorian, is a bright child whom I taught in fifth grade and whom Katie was teaching in seventh grade. Diana participated fully in class, is responsible for her homework, and is an excellent writer. When it came to standardized testing, however, her scores were not proficient, and therefore, she was placed in a reading recovery group with other Latino students. I am including the conversation I had with Katie because I feel it shows how easily students can get streamlined in remedial classes based on test scores alone, and how the parents can lack experience knowledge of how to advocate for their child:

\textsuperscript{16} The 1974 Supreme court decision of \textit{Lau v. Nichols}, affirmed that no public schools can deny proving language instruction to students, based on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which bans discrimination based “on the ground of race, color, or national origin.”
**Julia (myself):** I know, today, when I saw Diana briefly, I don’t know if you heard me, but I was like, I heard you are in this [intervention] group, and she is like, yeah. I was like, I don’t think you be in this reading group. She’s like, yeah, I know. That’s what Ms. Bunger said. I was like, yeah, you shouldn’t be in there, and your time could be better spent somewhere else.

**Katie:** I also said that at the beginning of the year.

**Julia:** She said, yeah they use me to help other people. I said, you need to talk to your mom and you need your mom to come to the school and tell them that you don’t need to be in this group.

**Katie:** I know.

**Julia:** …because I told her how she was such a strong student in grade five and it is so frustrating because in that case, for Diana, you know, just her test score is what they are valuing her ability at, but that kid has so many talents, that she’s not just this one test score.

**Katie:** But you know what? Even if she did say that to her mom, her mom is so sweet and soft spoken, she won’t be able to advocate in the way. But examples like that, where, you have to speak up as a teacher.

For Katie and I, we both experienced this frustration together. As one solution, during my time at Cesar Chavez, I co-founded a family engagement group and focused on supporting our Latino parents. Working with the counselor, we created the *reunión de padres* where Spanish-speaking parents could meet weekly at the school to discuss issues of interest. The counselor facilitated the meetings and the parents began wondering why the principal would not stop by to their meetings. They shared how they noticed different
treatment between the parents who advocated more and themselves. That discussion
would not have taken place, were it not for a concerned teachers like the counselor, Katie,
or myself who believe it is important for all parents and students to have a voice in the
school.

“The kids are so perceptive.” Another example regarding accountability towards
students through advocacy is Katie’s work counteracting the negative comments other
teachers give to Latino students. During our interview we talked at length about how
Katie has to combat the negativity encountered in the hallways or classrooms of our
school:

Katie: Or even the things we were talking about, like comments other teachers
make about students. If teachers don’t stand up for the kids, even in those
moments, the kids will never be defended.

Julia: So in that case, where you said that one teacher told Luis that…

Katie: he was going to a robber…

Julia: and then another teacher who told Jose [he was] …

Katie: …going to jail.

Julia: So, do you talk to those boys about it to try to counteract those negative
words?

Katie: Yeah.

Julia: What did you say?

Katie: So I talked to Luis a lot. We actually had a conversation right after that… I
was in the classroom. I was in the art classroom. And then she said it. And I’m
like, Luis. That is not you. And he’s like, ‘I’m a thug Ms. Bunger,’ and I’m like,
‘No you are not, why would you ever say that? You are not a thug in any way, shape or form, and then the conversation evolved into going to college.’

He said, ‘I’ll never go to college because I am poor,’ and then I said, ‘No! Being poor is not why you won’t go to college. If anything, its like, there are not enough hard working Latino men going to college. People are dying to give money to hard working Latino boys wanting to go to college. Being poor will not hold you back from it. Its not as easy, but you have to keep working so hard so that then you can do that.’ So then we had a conversation about that. But I’ve asked him before how he thinks see teachers see him. And he says, bad. Both him and Eduardo said that.

**Julia:** I mean, I see them in your classroom and I wonder how they are doing in other classrooms, where they are hearing those messages.

**Katie:** I didn’t talk to the teachers in those cases but at the one where the other teacher made a comment about Roxana not being smart, I confronted the teacher directly.

**Julia:** Because if you [as a teacher] say that, then how are you are implying that with the way you interact with that child?

**Katie:** Exactly. If you are blatantly saying that, then your subconscious already believes certain things…. Then the kids are so perceptive.

In this conversation, Katie enumerated three different examples of how the Latino, specifically Salvadorian and Dominican students, were insulted by teachers, either to their face, in two examples, or behind their back, in the example of Roxana. Even negative thoughts have repercussions because teachers can reflect their intentions through
the decisions they make when interacting with that student. When teachers say negative things to students, it can impact the student’s self-esteem, their academic self-concept, and ultimately, their relationship with that adult. In the cases that Katie mentioned, why should the students invest in their relationship with that teacher or subject matter if they are considered jail-bound rather than college-bound? Katie worked to combat these negative images and words through her own relationships with her students, however, it is the negative teachers who need to change.¹⁷

During my time as a teacher at Cesar Chavez, Katie and I shared many long and frustrating conversations regarding how to support language learners. During our interview she remarked,

I feel that sometimes in advocacy, I wonder where we have the biggest voice, because as a teacher we experienced that together so many times, am I being heard? I try so much to shout these things but nothing changes, so maybe I need to be in a different position where I can have a stronger voice, but then you think about where you have the greatest impact with the kids and it is within the classroom.

Katie brought up a pertinent issue, that as an advocate for students, moving towards positions of leadership also means moving away from the daily interactions she has as a teacher. Katie realized that her strongest impact can be felt in the classroom, where not only does she combat the negative words her students experience in other classrooms, but

¹⁷ Furthermore, an interesting point Gio brought up is the double standard we hold our students to being respectful to all teachers, even if certain teachers are disrespectful to students by yelling or treating them poorly. If students are required to attend classes and interact with these teachers daily or weekly, how can they demonstrate their autonomy or develop a mutual respecting relationship with a teacher who insults the students to their face or through their actions?
where she can also give her students the “personalized love” they deserve, the academic skills they require to become college-bound rather than jail-bound, and the critical conversations regarding their rights not to be discriminated against as language learners or as Latinos.

“We just get passed along and nobody does anything.” Another example of advocacy outside of the classroom is the work the fifth grade team is doing around standardized testing. Teachers are talking back to the versions of accountability “from above” by questioning their validity as tests, but also their validity in the classroom. Anne and Carrie have openly questioned the validity of the benchmark PIA standardized tests. The company Wireless Generation (now purchased by Audacity, a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp), created the PIA tests to align with DCPS reading and math scope and sequence of the CCSS. A number of the test items were to Anne and Carrie’s opinion to be poorly written or confusing. Thus, Anne has met a few times with the Office of Data and Accountability to advocate for the rewriting or removal of test items.

I have gone downtown a couple times to read PIAs for the [district], but the last time I went to read, I was sitting around a table with a bunch of…fairly credible, interested and engaged teachers and we got into conversations because we were reflecting, does this make sense to you? Or what are they asking here? Or which answer would you give? Or you know, things like that. Some of these people said they asked that question before and we just get passed along and nobody does anything…. you just pass along and you don’t hear anything again, and then the tests come out down the road and you go, no this isn’t supposed to be here.
The PIAs were written with a quick turnaround timeline of a year, with a number of unsuccessful attempts to capture the standard, such as theme, in a multiple-choice question. Carrie noted, “You can actually argue two or three different themes in a text and there is evidence there for each one, but of course they want the one answer.”

“We haven’t once talked about testing.” Last year, teachers advocated within Cesar Chavez that the PIA tests for reading were invalid and therefore a “waste of time” to pour over the data during PD, and this year PD has shifted towards reading strategies and does not use the PIA data as heavily to develop instructional plans, as it was originally intended to do by the district. Gio noticed a shift in the school’s focus from data-driven instruction in PD to literacy strategies. He shared,

When I was a third grade teacher I saw it more, and I saw more emphasis on [testing]. A lot of our meetings were about the scores. Make sure bring in your chart. And make sure you know this. I don’t see that much anymore. Our curriculum meetings with the fourth grade English teacher, we haven’t once talked about testing, which is impressive. And it’s been curriculum planning or talking about individual kids that we feel need whatever, like kid talk meetings…. I think that the trend now is to focus on the students that are kind of red flagged during the PIA…Whether or not it gets carried out that’s a different story.

A lack of teacher buy in to the new benchmark standardized test, the PIA in reading, has led to a shift in the school culture revolving around testing. The same cannot be said for math, to which the Spanish team uses the data to inform instruction within the classroom. When it comes to English language arts, however, all the teachers I interviewed did not buy into the tests as evidence of student achievement in reading.
“She thinks I must really be stupid if I can’t do this test.” The bias of standardized testing in describing the reading abilities of students is especially apparent when working with language learners who are below grade level. Standardized testing cannot accurately account for the abilities of these students if it is above their literacy abilities in their new language. For Carrie, she advocated for her newcomer, Mariana to not take the PIAs because of its impact on her academic self-concept and because it is not an accurate measure of her ability to read in English.

If you take a kid like Mariana, who is reading at a kindergarten level, and you give her a 5th grade test with paragraphs and paragraphs of text; if you force her to sit in front of a test like that, and take it seriously, she is going to do one of two things: she to survive. She is either got to check out mentally and be like this doesn’t matter and circle in whatever bubble she can to just finish it, or two, her self esteem takes a huge hit and she thinks I must really be stupid if I can’t do this test.

Since the PIA is not federally mandated and is only used to inform classroom instruction, Carrie tried unsuccessfully to advocate that Mariana not take the PIA her first year at Cesar Chavez. Although in the case of Mariana, the policy could not be changed, this conversation led to further conversations at the District level regarding the level of support for newcomer language learners like Mariana. In this case, Carrie attempted to be accountable to a student’s wellbeing over being accountable to the district’s policy of standardized testing as a measurement of student achievement. Carrie demonstrated that there are different forms of accountability to support students like Mariana. From a top-down curriculum and policy perspective, Mariana needs to be tested to hold the teacher
accountable to her growth. Carrie, however, holds herself accountable to Mariana through the individualized curriculum she created for her, and by caring for her self-esteem and well being through “conocimiento con cariño” (knowledge with care) (Jackson, Bernal Guzman, & Ramos, 2010, p. 33).

Reciprocity

Caring about a student’s wellbeing does not only benefit students but it also benefits teachers. Within a teacher-student relationship, reciprocity manifests through the mutual respect that emerges between students, teachers, and families. Teachers demonstrate their respect for their students through their curricular and instructional decisions. In this case study, students reciprocate care to their teachers by being engaged and pushing themselves academically, through their mutual respect, and by sharing their success with their families. Teachers respond with a sense of gratitude, which gives them hope and energy to continue the work that they do.

“They trust me, they know I’m fair.” Teachers can design curriculum to include mutual benefits. Teachers like Anne and Carrie, who use multimodal projects in their work created spaces for students to discover new talents while learning the content and reaching the standards. Anne spoke of the benefit her students experienced during the “Which Way to the Wild West” play from the beginning of the school year,

Two students wanted to give up and say I can’t do this, better get somebody else to do this, but they stuck with it and they stayed with it and when we did our little debrief afterwards, the what did you learn, they both said, I learned that I can do more than I think I can…. Giving them opportunities where they can, that maybe
is a little bit less traditional, but still let them figure out that they are, they can do
more than they think they can.

For Anne, creating learning opportunities is a chance for students to develop a stronger
relationship of trust with the teacher because they can take risks and succeed.

“The relationship is there, so we don’t waste time reprimanding kids.” Katie echoed this sentiment with her own relationships with her students. She found that
developing a mutual trusting relationship with her students facilitates the learning process
for her students. To this she said,

The relationship is there, so we don’t waste time reprimanding kids. So already
the time you have in the classroom is so maximized, so that less than two minutes
of class is spent doing whatever, or less than a minute. It’s so easy to go into
instruction.

Students demonstrate their respect for Katie by participating and staying on task in her
classroom. During her lunch period, I witnessed another teacher come in and use her
classroom and the same students that were focused in Katie’s class were talking over the
other teacher, not paying attention, and getting frustrated at the work because it felt like
busy work. These are students who I taught and know as being academically strong and
responsible students who confided that they hated that class, which was hard to believe
because the love learning. It was evident to me, however, that the teacher did not
establish a strong relationship with these students in the beginning and therefore the
students did not reciprocate the behavior the teacher would have liked to receive. Katie
also believed that students are perceptive to teacher’s behavior and decisions and thus
their behavior and engagement are contingent on the relationship they have with the teacher.

I think also, having the relationship, the kids are more open minded and ready to absorb whatever you throw at them. It’s because they trust me, they know I’m fair and I’m not just going to put shit out there to them, so they are more willing to engage…in the subject matter, when I ask them to participate more… They will be willing to work hard on it.

For Katie, mutual respect is built by having meaningful work in the classroom, and the students reciprocate with their engagement. A teacher-student relationship is not just the “warm fuzzy” stuff I mentioned earlier, but having a rigorous curriculum that engages students with new opportunities to discover hidden talents.

“And you do give us respect.” In addition to curricular decisions that create mutually beneficial relationships, teachers develop trust with their students based on small interactions. Gio spoke to the importance of how having a trusting relationship can help students not just academically, but socio-emotionally:

I would like to think that my relationship with the students helps them. I would like to think that students…[who] are capable of making ten to twenty mistakes in the day, and I would like to think that they know that at least when they are in my room, they are going to make those mistakes, I will get frustrated or upset with them sometimes, but they know that I will let it go, and I will forgive it as quickly as its been recognized. And I think they are comfortable with that. And because of it, their behavior has improved so much. At least in the fact that they acknowledge
and they can look at me and say “You’re right. I’ve gone too far. Or I need to stop this.”

Gio fosters a space of acceptance within his classroom, where students can make mistakes in their class work or in their interactions with others, and they can learn from these mistakes through dialogue. Within the classroom, Gio embodied this belief by holding himself to the same standard he expected from his students such as having conversations regarding how to solve conflict and what type of behavior deserves respect. As an example, Gio shared his students recognized how he modeled these expectations:

You are just being fair; you are not coming down at us and yelling at us. You legitimately have asked us to do something a few more than once, we are not doing it and we are not showing respect to you. And you do give us respect.

Gio’s work this year demonstrated how students reciprocate trust and respect to teachers. He had a large class this year that was labeled by parents, other teacher, and even the administration as the “tsunami” because of its size and the number of students with behavior issues. When I observed his classroom, it was a calm place of learning and did not reflect the reputation that these students were labeled with. To this, Gio said, “I can’t have them think they are the tsunami or the tornado. I cannot do it.” Through his relationships with his students, they know they can be accepted for their whole selves, including their mistakes, and can have new chances to begin again, which is critical for students who have already been stigmatized by other teachers.

It is evident that his students share mutual respect with Gio because he knew his students’ behavior is different in other classes, to which he responded, “If they are like this, I will get a list of complaints, and if they are the tsunami or tornado with you, there
is something that maybe you are doing, because they are not like that with me at all.”

This echoes Katie’s point that “having [established] the relationship, the kids are more open minded and ready to absorb whatever you throw at them,” which is especially true for students who are labeled as having behavioral issues. I remember in my own teaching when I worked with a certain student, an administrator congratulated me a year later for teaching him the year before because he wasn’t on her “radar” as being a problematic student until he reached sixth grade. This same student worked with Katie for the next two years and moved onto the most prestigious high schools in Washington, DC.

“They notice I care about the kids.” The work of teachers, however, at times feels like a thankless job. Students demonstrate their gratitude through their behavior, or letters, like the one Katie received from Patricia who thanked her for getting her to love reading, or another student giving Carrie a small stone that said “you rock!” These small gestures mean a lot to teachers. Katie shared that her work is affirmed by the gratitude she received from parents:

The lucky thing and this is probably not the norm, probably the anomaly, is that at our school, we get that positive reinforcement from the families…. I feel like, in addition to the students… they give the direct feedback, like you would usually would like or hope to get from your boss. I think its also they notice my involvement, they notice I care about the kids, and they notice saying, oh I can tell as a writer, he started to notice this about his writing… When it is stuff you strive to work toward and then someone is like, I’ve noticed that! You are like yes! That’s awesome!
Small recognitions of a teacher’s work went a long way for Katie. A simple note that notices a difference in a child’s academic work or behavior reinforces teachers that their effort is worth it. Katie also noted that this recognition is one you would “hope to get from your boss,” which signals the important role that administration plays in recognizing the work teachers do.

“I want to continue being here in that capacity.” Although teaching is a profession known for being energy intensive, the relationships teachers foster with their students can be energy giving. Katie is cognizant of what they students give back to her in their interactions with her inside and outside the classroom. “It’s those things, it’s seeing the kids feel confident and happy and connected that makes me feel like, I love this and I want to continue being here in that capacity.” Katie and I have spoke about burn out, and the feeling of swimming against a current when it comes to advocating for our students, but the everyday interactions Katie had with her students gives her reason to continue working at full steam.

Building the relationships with the kids and the families too, but mostly the kids, just day to day, is so fulfilling. The fact that I loop seventh and eighth grade, I know that I will get to have all of them as eighth graders so every time I want to switch grades or I’m going to leave, it’s like but there are so many seventh graders that if I can have one more year with them, its going to be so great. Looping is a strong factor for Katie to stay in her position, even though she finds creating curriculum for two subjects and two grades to be a time and energy intensive experience. Katie described the rollercoaster of teaching “where you can have the worst morning
ever… but it’s a job where you go into work and …have so much hope.” The students and families are what keep teachers like Katie going.

“Teaching has made me such a better citizen.” Katie also found that teaching makes her a better person because she wants to be a role model for her students. It is that sense of being part of a community, seeing the families and students while grocery shopping, and in the classroom that made Katie think,

Teaching has made me such a better citizen, because you want to be the strongest role model for the kids that you possibly can because anything you ask the kids to do, you want to enact yourself. So it makes you so cognizant about the things you say, the things you do because they watch everything you do.

I remember myself it wasn’t until I became a teacher that I began wearing my bike helmet, aware that students would see me leaving the school. My own personal sense of being an active and engaged citizen was inspired by my role as a teacher. This responsibility made me reflect on how to improve the world around me. As a result, I created curriculum where my students became active citizens by drafting petitions, visiting local and national government officials, and sharing their opinions on topics ranging from building bike lanes in the city to granting DC the right to vote in congress.

Teaching is a job that inspires us to be better humans because of the hope our students give us. This reinforces the values Nieto (2003a) found in a yearlong inquiry group with veteran teachers working in urban schools. It is the hope, love, the ability to shape students’ lives, as well as the frustration to work against the system that “keeps good teachers going in spite of everything” (p. 389).
Lastly, when teachers can bring their passions into the classroom and engage with students in authentic, reciprocal relationships, they can receive energy from the work they do. Gio, who has taught for over eight years, still feels the same excitement to continue teaching as his first year.

What keeps me teaching is the fact that I have the same exact energy that I did for it now as I did when I started. I still love it as much…of course there are things that can make you a bit jaded or worried, but I think the overall idea that I get to be with kids and I get to really be an impact on who they can potentially become…. Even despite it all, I think that when the door closes and it’s just me and them without interruptions, all is good.

Dedicated teachers like Gio and Katie get to embed their values of care and mutual trust and respect into their teaching. Despite all the factors that can drain teachers, such as the time-intensive act of creating curriculum, being overextended at work, or the inadequate testing policies of the district, it is the students that give these teachers the energy to keep going.

I have argued that teacher-student relationships can have a positive effect on teacher-created curriculum; where mutual trust, accountability to students’ lives and feelings are reciprocated by their engagement in the classroom. A flexible curriculum allows teachers to develop differentiated and individualized literacy goals for students because teachers know their students beyond a standardized test score or set goals beyond the curriculum framework of the CCSS.

By recognizing that literacy practices are “more usefully understood as existing in the relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of
properties residing in individuals,” New Literacy Studies sets relationships to be an ontological and epistemological foundation for literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8). Vygotsky makes a similar claim, “Any higher mental function was external (and) social before it was internal. It was once a social relationship between two people” (Vygotsky in Minick, 1996, p. 33). These teachers demonstrate how meaning is created through relationships and this has an epistemic significance in determining literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) and curriculum. By redefining literacy and curriculum development through a relational lens, the lived experience and work of my colleagues acts as a counter-discourse to the “autonomous model” (Street, 1993) of literacy in the CCSS and the technical rationalism of NCLB. In this next section, I will discuss the external factors that affect the teachers and students, namely educational policy of standards-based instruction and standardized testing.
Chapter 8

External Issues

In the previous chapters, I have described how teachers shape their curriculum vis-à-vis teacher-student relationships. We have demonstrated how when teachers are viewed as “curriculum makers” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992), teachers can create a bottom-up curriculum that integrates students lives, the teacher’s enthusiasm, and spaces for mutual respect and reciprocity. Teachers are central agents in curriculum, however, another factor, what Schwab (1973) refers to as the milieu of school, community, and educational policy, has an impact on curriculum development. In this next section, I focus on examining how external factors of the milieu, of the national standards movement through the CCSS, as well as standardized testing and its impact on teacher evaluation is negotiated in the flexible curriculum.

Despite the local freedoms available to teachers at Cesar Chavez, outside factors such as district and federal policy enter into the classroom, thus transforming it into what Craig (2009) calls a “contested space.” District requirements, such as the CCSS, require teachers to frame their language arts curriculum around meeting the reading standards. Other factors such as the federal policy of high-stakes testing and current educational paradigms of increased assessment trickle down into the classroom. Yet, Cummins (2011b) argues, each teacher has agency to engage in “pedagogies of choice,” within this “contested space” (Craig, 2009) to exercise a level of autonomy in deciding how policy requirements shape their curriculum.

Teaching and Deconstructing the Standards
Despite its claim of objectivity, CCSS are highly subjective and lead to different expectations based on teacher interpretations. The reason for such subjective interpretation is because the standards are purposefully unclear regarding what skills need to be taught to ensure the expectations are met. The CCSS “define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6), therefore, a “common deconstruction” of the standards is needed. In the end, teachers are left to their own professional judgment to interpret the standards and “hope it’s enough.”

“Trying to deconstruct the standards.” During the focus group, the teachers all agreed that trying to understand the CCSS had repercussions in how their planning with themselves and with colleagues. Katie, Anne, and Carrie all agreed that the CCSS was vaguely worded, had too many sub-skills, and to Katie, they described “general ideas, but at the end, what strategies do we want our kids have when they tackle a text?” Katie was more concerned about giving students the skills to read rigorous text over the end goals and language used by the CCSS. For Anne, the CCSS posed a new challenge to creating a flexible curriculum because,

What is frustrating now, and I don’t think it’s the flexible curriculum it is the standards, but trying to figure out, trying to deconstruct the standards in a way that is the commonly accepted deconstruction of the standards, I don’t know if that’s the right way to put it.

Despite the fact that the school had spent time unpacking the standards in professional development, there were still questions regarding the best way to teach to the standards. Therefore, for the teachers I interviewed, a school-based or district-based “common
deconstruction of the standards” would facilitate their work as flexible curriculum writers and teachers.

“That is all you expect? That’s all you want?” The reason for this “common deconstruction” request is because different interpretations of standards lead to different expectations of student ability or demonstration of mastery. Gio and I spoke about the tedium of unpacking standards, but how they revealed teachers’ assumptions and expectations of student ability:

**Julia:** That if we were really to unpack the standard... if it were done in an interesting way, it makes apparent how every teacher has a different expectation of the level of complexity or the level where they think their students can go.

**Gio:** Right, which is why those things are so overwhelmingly exhausting (laughs)... Obviously you don’t want to insult someone by saying, “that is all you expect? That’s all you want?” and you are thinking, oh my gosh, I see this standards as being all of this, and this is how I would do it.

When teachers plan in grade level teams or individually, the ways the standards are interpreted has a vastly different effect in the classroom in quality of instruction and level of depth. This makes a difference between the “curriculum-as-plan” and the “curriculum-as-lived” (Aoki, 2005). From the discussions I had regarding the CCSS in my curriculum writing work, I was astounded how some veteran teachers would interpret the standards verbatim and interpreted the “e.g.” within a standard as the exact genres or topics that needed to be covered, while I saw a wider spectrum of skills and abilities that can be encompassed within a standard. Thus, teachers can self-limit themselves if they

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18 For example, CCSS standard, RL.5.9 says “Compare and contrast stories in the same genre (e.g., mysteries and adventure stories) on their approaches to similar themes and topics” (NGO &
interpret the standards at face value and read them without nuance, which then impacts how literacy is interpreted in the classroom.

“They lost me as a proponent of it.” A litmus test that demonstrates the subjectivity of CCSS is how they are assessed vis-à-vis standardized tests. Within DCPS, the PIA tests were created as a benchmark assessment for the CCSS scope and sequence developed by the district. The way the PIA test writers interpret the CCSS can greatly vary from how teachers interpret the standards and thus lead to teacher frustration and test invalidation. Carrie shared her exasperation about this topic:

So we spend 10 percent of our school year testing. We have 18 testing days out of 180 school days. There are 5 PIA tests, Paced Interim Assessments. Those are district tests, which purportedly measure the kids’ work on the standards we are teaching during that unit. And so we do have scope and sequence documents we can use where we are given this list of standards that we are supposed to teach that semester. One of the problems… is that there are six different skills packed into that standard and different people interpret the standard and the skills very differently.

So, I was sort of a testing nerd, and that last year when they first came out with this idea, I thought, oh great! You know, this is exactly what I am supposed to teach this six weeks, I am going to teach that and I am going to be so excited to see how my kids do on the multiple choice test. So I remember one of those standards on that list was teaching kids about different text structures, and how to recognize, you know, cause and effect, problem solution versus main idea and

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CCSSO, 2010, p. 12). During curriculum stakeholder meetings, I suggested a graphic novel study of memoirs of various gendered and racialized experiences. My colleague, however, suggested mysteries genre study because that was the “e.g.” in the standard.
details. I focused on that for the first six weeks of school and then we had the PIA test, and there was not one question on that test about that, and the one that they did have was very different in that it didn’t mention any of those four text structures, but it was a completely different text structure.

So the whole concept of the PIA testing, they lost me as a proponent of it, with their first test last year because, I was somebody who was a testing nerd and excited about how well the kids could do, with this alignment, this supposed alignment, and then the test was not very well written and… they didn’t try it out on any kids and I don’t even think they gave the test to any adults because I think if they just gave the test to an adult who didn’t make the test, they would have found a lot of the questions that didn’t make sense.

Carrie, a self-professed “testing nerd” lost her faith in the PIA as an accurate measure precisely because the CCSS can be interpreted differently. The level of variability in the interpretation of the standards cannot accurately measure if the students can meet the standard. Consequently, the standardized test cannot accurately measure if Carrie is an effective teacher or not. This is critical because not only the district, but state, and federal educational policy is moving towards increased evaluation of teachers via standardized testing data (NGA, 2009; US Department of ED, 2013). Therefore, teachers can attempt to align their curriculum to a scope and sequence document that will be assessed with a standardized test; however, the success of the alignment is dependent upon a “common deconstruction of the standards.” In the end, teachers are left to their own professional judgment, where as Gio reflected, he hoped he was “doing the right
thing” and that his curricular and instructional decisions are “enough” to have students succeed in the high-stakes standardized test.

Data: Defining “What Counts”

As seen with the PIA tests, district policy expects teachers to use standardized testing data to inform instruction; however, teachers exercise autonomy by deciding which data is considered valid to share with students and inform instruction. Teachers apply value judgments on standardized tests based on quality of items and data is considered valid if it connects to classroom. Thus, teachers exercise professional judgment to determine what data matters. Finally, teachers push back against the concept of “data-driven instruction” because of beliefs that test scores cannot define the humanity of their students.

“It’s still not perfect.” The quality of the testing items determines whether or not teachers take the test seriously to impact instruction. These value judgments were based on the experience of Anne and Carrie taking the test themselves and seeing how some questions on the PIA made no sense, even to adults. Anne and Carrie took the PIA test after the students and saw they got three to four questions wrong because some standards were difficult to frame as a multiple choice question. Carrie explained her frustration during the first year of the PIA tests,

We had several PDs last year where we were forced to pour over these statistics of these instruments and we got angrier and angrier as the year went on, because here we were wasting valuable PD day and time, going over statistics that we felt were coming from tests that were not well made. So it was a useless sort of activity. This year…I haven’t even looked at my last sets of PIA results because
first of all, it would depress the kids to see how differently we interpret the standards and some of the questions I think are ridiculous to try and measure by multiple choice.

Thus, teacher professional judgment has a large effect on whether or not the teachers find the data to be valid to inform instruction or share with the students. Carrie exercised what Herbert Kohl (1994) refers to as “creative maladjustment” where she determined what aspects of district policy to consider valid or invalid to influence her practice. The choice not to share the PIA tests demonstrated that “data-driven instruction” based on standardized testing to Carrie is not the magic bullet to student improvement.

Furthermore, during the year of intense “data-driven” professional development, Carrie chose not to focus on the “cusp kids” or the students who are close to proficiency because “if a kid who is not on the cusp has some need, when it comes to reading better or writing better, I am going to put my effort wherever the needs are.” Carrie valued helping all students rather than only focusing on the ones on the statistical edge of improvement.

“It’s achievement to a western, white, English, mainstream ideal.” The validity of standardized tests in teacher’s eyes is also determined by whether or not they are considered fair to all students. Whether or not a standardized test is norm-referenced, an issue that Anne noted is the cultural bias inherent in the content of standardized tests, which can exacerbate the achievement gap that the department of Education is trying to close through vigorous testing. Anne shared,

I think that the intent of using standardized tests to help identify the achievement gaps to try and address it has some laudable components to it, to recognize there
is an achievement gap, but at the same time…whose achievement? It’s
to a western, white, English, mainstream ideal.

Anne recognizes how standardized testing replicates cultural hegemony through the
screen of “official knowledge” (Apple, 1990). For language learners and minoritized
students, Anne sees the standardized tests as “putting them in a totally unfair situation.”

It was interesting to see how Cesar Chavez has 100% proficiency in the DC-CAS
of its white population for grades 3-8, however, Latinos are achieving at 74.8% and
blacks at 81.3% (OSSE, 2013). The achievement gap according to race and ethnicity
continues at Cesar Chavez, but the largest achievement gap at the school is the
achievement of language learners (see Table 1), who are scoring at 53.60% proficiency
(OSSE, 2013). According to Fry’s (2007) analysis of National Assessment of
Educational Progress (NAEP), or the nation’s “report card,” English language learners
are “among the most farthest behind” (p. i) in the nation. Therefore, the achievement gap
of language learners at Cesar Chavez is representative of a larger trend, but it is even
more troubling when the achievement gap exists in a dual-language school that was
originally created to support these very students.

Difference is also reinforced by testing policies of separating language learners
and special education students from the general testing population. Regarding this
practice, Gio remarked, “I don’t see how these tests are doing anything for their self-
esteeem. I don’t see how it feels good to sit in a cafeteria for hours and then coming back
to just get pulled out so that you can take this test.” He reflected on his own experiences
as a student being pulled out for speech as an embarrassing situation that made him feel
that he was missing out on class. Therefore, standardized testing itself and its policies are considered to be unfair for minoritized youth and language learners.

“It’s a double-edged sword.” Carrie, however, did not write off all standardized tests. She exercised professional judgment by determining which tests are considered valid and thus can demonstrate students’ abilities.

[Standardized tests], it’s a double-edged sword. I know that on the one hand, if you are going to do well at all on a standardized test, you have to know how to read. So if you get a good score on a standardized test, it shows, yeah, you can read. And so, my evaluation comes from my kids’ my students’ growth compared to the expected growth of kids like them, unquote. I do feel good, I got, I got an excellent, I got a 4.0 for growth on the test, and the objectivity of that made me feel good because, if the kids couldn’t read, they wouldn’t improve, so at least they are reading and even if they are, and the DC CAS is a better instrument than the PIA because it is normed and they try it out on different kids. I mean, it’s still not perfect.

The end of year high stakes test, the District of Columbia Comprehensive Assessment System (DC CAS), to Carrie is a better indicator of students’ ability to read because it is norm-referenced and considered to have gone through a more rigorous vetting process than the Paced Interim Assessment (PIA).

Furthermore, the students’ scores from the DC CAS are tied to the DCPS teacher evaluation system, IMPACT that determines a teacher’s job tenure and pay scale. For Carrie to have received a 4.0 in student improvement on the tests placed her as a highly qualified teacher, eligible for a $10,000 bonus, one that she did not take because she
found it “sleazy” that you have to give up job security provisions if you take the bonus
“in addition to the fact that other teachers are working just as hard and just as well and
not getting recognized.” This has an impact on teacher morale of “highly effective”
teachers like Carrie and myself, which this system is designed to keep. It shows that
standardized tests scores cannot be the definition of teacher effectiveness, especially
when teachers have a classroom full of language learners, the tests cannot accurately
measure their ability (Abedi, 2004) in addition to being culturally biased. Nor does
Carrie’s actions demonstrate that bonuses based on standardized test scores is what
defines her work. Carrie’s sense of agency stems from her identity as a teacher who
defines herself by her students rather than by their test scores.

For example, this year Carrie’s student Mariana will probably grow two grade
levels in reading comprehension, yet her performance on the DCCAS will likely remain
the same or even be worse since her improved reading abilities might make it more likely
she will chose the distracters. Carrie believes that despite good evaluations based on
lesson observations she will not be considered “highly effective” this year because of
Mariana’s test scores. Confident teachers like Carrie don’t worry about such labels,
though she hopes the system will improve. Carrie believed having standardized testing is
a form of measurement of student achievement, however, it is not the only measure of
student achievement. Thus, teachers exercise professional judgment in defining what data
matters and what data counts to inform instruction.

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19 Further, teacher morale is negatively impacted when colleagues try to “stack the deck,”
by selecting high achievers in their class, or who do not collaborate with the grade below
in hopes that they will do better than their colleagues to show student growth. Both of
these things, according to the teachers, have happened at Cesar Chavez.
Data that matters.” Beyond the quality of the standardized test, teachers determine whether testing data is valid if it has a direct correlation to students’ work in the classroom. Since Katie works with a number of language learners, she does not see their growth reflected on their standardized tests scores.

Kids who are far behind grade level, they work hard in class but then they take all of these tests and they don’t do well…. The way that I’ve seen it, just when [language learners] have to take the test, they work hard in class. You set them up so they can succeed, and then they take the test. Like, Jon, he is working his ass off, making huge improvements, he takes the tests and does horribly. Because his differentiated texts might be 5th grade level, and he has 8th grade level [tests]. He can’t access anything, so its like, I have worked so hard, and I thought I was successful, but I don’t know any of the answers.

Standardized tests thus do not capture the growth of students who are below grade level and thus are considered invalid in Katie’s eyes. For her, the PIA does not demonstrate student growth and is therefore not worth sharing with students, parents, or used to inform instruction. She explained,

The reason I am hesitant to do anything to do with sharing, to telling the kids the PIA or telling the parents the PIA is I cannot confidently say if you work hard in my class your PIA scores will be off the chart. Which is then, I don’t want to share it. Because unless I can share their SRI [Scholastic Reading Inventory], which is their reading level, then I can be like, I know that this is a direct attribute because you have been reading, you have been reading diverse genres, you have been staying up with everything in class, your reading level will go up. But in the
reading time, you kids who are staring at the walls, doing your homework or goofing around, all your classmates reading level is going up right now and you are staying the same or going down.

Because Katie found no correlation between the PIA scores and her students’ work, she chose not to share them. The Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI), however, in Katie’s opinion did have a correlation to student work, because it measured students’ reading levels, and thus was considered valid in her eyes.

“What is more important for them? To look at the questions they got wrong?” Further, Katie valued having students engaged in reading rather than pouring over their last standardized test data. Katie questioned the role of standardized testing in supporting language learners.

What is more important for them? To look at the questions they got wrong? The reason I don’t do that is because for them, they just need the engage with the text, reading on their level, getting more strength, stamina, and ability to do it.

Prior to graduate school, I used standardized testing data in the classroom to check student understanding. From my conversations with Katie, I realize this was disrespectful to my students’ time, because as she explained, students need more time engaging with authentic texts, “building stamina” rather than knowing what they got wrong. Part of deciding “what data matters” is asking ourselves, is if the feedback we give is respectful of the students time and needs as readers.

With 10% of the school year dedicated to testing, teachers are inundated with data they can use to inform instruction. In addition to the PIA and DC CAS tests, teachers give students a reading comprehension test three times a year (Text Reading Comprehension
(TRC) for grades 1-5, SRI for grades 6-8) and fluency check, Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). In addition there was in-house assessments for writing, which uses the 6+1 writing traits rubric. All of these assessments are in addition to unit projects, class work, and the everyday interactions teachers have with their students. Thus, teachers within a flexible curriculum can determine what is defined as “data” to inform instruction. From our focus group and interview, Carrie wondered what to do with all of this data. She even created a two-page sheet that she filled out for each of her students, but the amount of data was overwhelming. Which one mattered? After reflecting, she shared,

There are a lot of things we can use, where I can imagine setting goals in things that matter, like the writing portfolio, which is based on the six plus one traits, or reading comprehension, reading more in order to bring, ok. So I guess I am answering my own question as I am talking this out…. which is, data that matters and data that’s interesting. So that sheet that I shared on Monday which is a composition of everything, maybe what I do, I am going to honor you [the student] by sharing this stuff and now lets highlight the ones that we really care the most about….. I think that I will definitely focus on writing because that is something that we can control and that is something that is meaningful and I feel like the writing rubric is strong, so I will say look, this is what we care about.

Carrie wanted to honor the 10% of the student’s time spent testing in school student by sharing their scores, but in a way that shows that not all data “matters” or is important to their academic growth. The assessments that have a direct correlation to students’
abilities, such as the in-house writing assessment and reading level scores were considered “data that mattered.”

“Data has a place, but it shouldn’t be in the driver’s seat.” Finally, “data” derived from standardized testing is not the only definition of a student’s abilities nor the only data that teachers draw from to inform instruction. Teachers within a flexible curriculum can see their students holistically and tailor literacy goals and instruction using “data that matters” in a way that is more intimate than the data captured by standardized testing. Teacher-student relationships allow teachers to see the humanity in their work rather than to see their students as “statistics.”

“Data-driven instruction” assumes that students and teachers benefit from the practice of focusing on the students on the “cusp” of reaching proficiency. This is a statistical tactic that will demonstrate growth for the school to meet the adequately yearly progress (AYP) needed to reach testing benchmarks for NCLB. Not all teachers, however, followed these suggestions. According to Carrie,

When we hear these goals, I think that none of us really act on them because I think maybe if we were sales people, or something like that, we would be more motivated by statistics, because, I don’t know, a lot of us are just people people, and so you got a person sitting in front of you, you can’t treat them like a statistic.

Being a people person is often what brings many teachers to the profession. For Anne, she sees her role not to just increase tests scores, but “that we are responsible for creating good human beings.” This notion of “creating good human beings” moves the focus away from curriculum and instruction that are defined by testing and towards a curriculum that is defined by relationships and humanity. Anne and the other teachers
demonstrate that their teacher identity is to support the creation of “good human beings,” and how part of being a teacher is recognizing the role they play in their students’ “negotiation of identities” (Cummins, 1996, p. 4). “When students’ developing sense of self is affirmed and extended through their interactions with teachers, they are more likely to apply themselves to academic effort and participate actively in instruction (Cummins, 1996, p. 2). This is evident in the teachers’ relationships with their students, and how they define their work as creating classrooms that allow for the socio-emotional and intellectual growth of their students.

Working within a public school system with 18 days of testing, data will stream into the teacher’s lives, however, teachers have agency to decide what data matters to inform curriculum writing. Ultimately there are so many factors to take into account when planning for a classroom of students. To Anne,

Data has a place, but it shouldn’t be in the driver seat because we have little human beings who are in different places developmentally, who are not, should not be represented by a snapshot in time. I mean, we all want to be recognized for the whole of who we are, not that point in time, yet so many decisions are made on these kids based on a little point in time that is not necessarily indicative of who they are as a learner.

Differences within students regarding their own intellectual, social, and emotional development should come into consideration when developing curriculum and literacy goals. What allows teachers to take into consideration all of these factors?

Relational literacy, which is based on teachers coming to know their students in a more holistic manner, comes into play when creating a flexible curriculum from the
“bottom-up.” Accountability through instructional decisions, differentiation, and engagement is how teachers demonstrate that their students are what they hold themselves accountable to rather than the standardized tests. As seen through the work of Katie and Gio with individual literacy goals, or through the multimodal projects of Anne and Carrie, curriculum needs to be flexible enough to accommodate various students to facilitate success and self-discovery. Standardized testing data only gives a snapshot of a student’s ability and it is ultimately based on one interpretation of the standards. Validity is determined its connection to the everyday work that students do in the classroom.

Consequently, teachers need to reflect on their own values and also on their interactions with their students to determine how to create curriculum that is engaging and will allow for reciprocity to occur. Standardized testing data can only tell teachers so much. In Anne’s words,

Reflection and data to me are opposite ends of the spectrum. Data you analyze, reflection you think, you know? I think that data analysis is moving these things around a peg board and balancing out numbers, cause and effect of a little bit of what those numbers are. But reflection is how did we get to where we are and how can we make it better? And its not linear, its very holistic. It’s not black and white it is grey. It’s everything that data is not. Data can be informed, if it is data you choose to use to use for your purposes. But if you are told what data to use and how to use it, as with anything, it may not suit your purposes. And for us, I think a lot of things we are finding that the data the data, I am so tired of that phrase. No, the kids. I think it has a place, but it’s got to be countered with the human aspect of it, you know. We are not all little computers.
The human aspect of our profession is our day-to-day interactions with our students and how we build relationships with them. There is so much possibility in those moments, information as teachers we can take in rather than looking just at data to inform our practice and shape our curriculum. In those moments, teachers are knowledge makers and are researchers who reflect on their practice to support student learning. Anne demonstrates that teachers, rather than top-down systems of accountability, can redefine what data counts in the classroom through the process of reflection and inquiry.

We have the opportunity, by taking an “inquiry as stance” as practitioner researchers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; 2009) to shape the discourse when it comes to standards-based curriculum and testing, to re-conceptualize curriculum as “curriculum-as-lived” (Aoki, 2005) by including the knowledges we create with our students when we are in relationship. We as teachers can also redefine the discourse of what counts as “data” and redefine “what data matters” by allowing for spaces of reflection and humanity in our work. When as teachers, we can intentionally reflect on our individual students and on our actions, we can create spaces of engagement, reciprocity, and ultimately gratitude in our work. Schools can create spaces for systematic inquiry amongst teachers and foster collaboration by viewing teachers as knowledge producers. In the next chapter, I will summarize my findings in the discussion and share what this research can imply to teachers agency and curriculum development at an instructional, school, district, and national level.
Chapter 9
Discussion

The purpose of my research was to greater understand what teachers prioritize when developing a flexible curriculum serving culturally and linguistically diverse students within a high-stakes testing atmosphere. After interviewing, observing, and being in conversation with four successful teachers at a dual language school, I found that teachers, when given freedom to write their own curriculum, can create literacy goals and curricula that are guided by the situated knowledge that comes from being in relationship with students. Based on the findings of this research, I articulate a model for flexible curriculum design (see Figure 2) as a method of supporting culturally and linguistically diverse learners, which acts as an alternative to a top-down mandated curriculum model based solely on standards and testing.

![Diagram of flexible curriculum design](image)

Figure 2: Flexible curriculum design

This flexible curriculum design illustrates the process of how the teachers in my research study developed literacy goals that are situated within relationship and that go beyond the
standards. The teachers in this study used not only the CCSS, but also included resources focused on student engagement and personal experience, teacher interest and creativity to develop thematic literacy units anchored in content-rich instruction and project-based work. In addition to the standards, literacy goals were based on individual students’ cognitive, socio-emotional, and linguistic needs, as demonstrated by the various ways these teachers differentiated instruction through varied texts, vocabulary support, fluid groupings, and individual scaffolding. This is in line with New Literacy Studies’ understandings of how literacy is socially situated (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) rather than a set of autonomous skills (Street, 1993). Within a flexible curriculum design (see Figure 2), situated literacy goals are not static but can adjust to the student’s personal growth, as teachers learn more about their students’ academic goals. This is in contrast to goals that are pre-determined by district, state, or federal policy. A flexible curriculum design addresses the standards, but it also is a curriculum that fits the students and the teacher, as opposed to a top-down “one size fits all” curriculum.

Central to a flexible curriculum model is how knowledge is constructed in relationship with students through classroom experience, as compared to a top-down model where knowledge comes from the outside through standardized testing policy or academic “experts.” This is consistent with Lytle (2000) description of how teachers develop “knowledge-of-practice” by reflecting on their classroom experiences. Teachers in a flexible curriculum model develop their own systems of accountability, such as Carrie’s description of her authentic writing projects as data that matters, and how she and Katie decided only to share data and provide feedback that is meaningful and respectful of the students’ time and effort. Therefore, this study can inform how teachers,
administrators, school districts, educational policymakers, and academics to understand how teachers can create their own curriculum around the CCSS to successfully support culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Because the CCSS “leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 4), a flexible curriculum design that is built by teachers for their specific classroom allows for a greater depth of literacy engagement and meta-linguistic awareness when teachers can create curriculum that is tailored to their students’ needs, and allows for what (Gutiérrez, 2008) refers to the third space “in which students begin to reconceive who they are and what they might be able to accomplish academically and beyond” (p.148).

**Flexible Curriculum Model**

According to Schwab (1983), all four commonplaces of education: the students, the teachers, the subject matter, and the milieu, have equal importance in the development of curriculum. The flexible curriculum design accounts for all four of these commonplaces, however, within a flexible curriculum, these commonplaces are in relationship to each other; the teacher and the students are central to the process of how knowledge is constructed through relationships, reflection, and action. For example, the teachers I interviewed are always reevaluating and creating curriculum to fit the needs of their students. Their curriculum is never static and allows for modification for students needs. Gio adapted his projects to include more technology for a particular student, and adapted project goals for language learners, but allowed for choice and community building through group projects. Katie tailored her instruction to students’ reading levels and language needs to allow for some students to “gather steam” through her “layering of
the text” of reading strategies, vocabulary, and thematic content. Anne and Carrie worked collaboratively to develop multimodal projects to allow for students to find new talents such as acting, writing, drawing, or oration. Therefore, within a flexible curriculum model, the goals of the curriculum are never static, but adaptable to the students and to the context.

While a top-down curriculum model addresses what Kauffman et al.’s (2002) definition of curriculum to include “the how and the what” teachers teach, a flexible curriculum model includes my definition of curriculum to be the how, what, and *why teachers teach in the classroom*. Within the flexible curriculum model, there is space for teachers to reflect on their values and provides teachers the agency to create curriculum that brings out the talents of the students and the teacher. As Gio says, “It’s about knowing my strengths and using it to my advantage in a flexible curriculum.”

The agency of these four teachers to create and reflect on their flexible curricula allows for the creation of “knowledge-of-practice” (Lytle, 2000) through the process of creating *situated* literacy goals, which address the students’ academic and socio-emotional needs, interests, and experience. Carrie found that she had “backdoor success” of increased DC-CAS scores because it was based on her knowledge of instruction coupled with integrating new literacy instruction from her graduate studies. Katie has also found success in “layering the text” because it benefits all of her students. Further, a flexible curriculum can encompass multiliteracies through the integration of digital media and the arts (New London Group, 1996), as seen in the multimodal projects of all four teachers, and allows for the classroom to be a transformative space through the integration of students’ identities and lives into literacy (Cummins, 2009). Examples of
this are seen in the work Katie does around Civil Rights and Latinos, and the fifth grade’s “My Family History” project. For Anne, a flexible curriculum allowed for planning where “the content drive[s] what you do… and then figure out how you can use it to apply to the standards, but you got to have the big picture there.”

Compared to a “top-down” curriculum where the milieu is overly represented by educational policy goals for economic success, the milieu that is central to the flexible curriculum is the relationship between the teacher and the students, the classroom culture, local school and district policies, and the local community. This is demonstrated by how curriculum is made in relationship with students by the supportive classroom environment the teachers created based on mutual respect. Gio’s recognition that his own humility and respect for the students allowed for open communication and time set aside in the curriculum to reflect on the classroom dynamics. Another example of how teacher-student relationships make up a critical aspect of the flexible curriculum model is how Katie’s “personalized love” to her students through her individual feedback and her interactions with students in the hallways or before and after class led to greater student engagement and investment in their work. This is what Campano (2007) refers to the “second classroom” where relationships become a part of the shared knowledge between teacher and student. Furthermore, Katie and Gio’s investment in their students’ lives led to collaborative power relations that support academic success (Cummins, 1996).

Also accounted for in a flexible curriculum model is the commonplace of subject matter (Schwab, 1983), which includes the CCSS, but also the content standards for social studies and science. For example, the teachers in this study integrated the CCSS and content standards to develop thematic units that taught content while simultaneously
modeling and practicing reading and writing strategies. Within a flexible curriculum model, there is space for teachers to go beyond the standards by integrating the interests and identities of the students and the teacher. This was seen in how my colleagues selected texts that can “drive everything” and engage the students through subjects of interest such as social justice, and multiple perspectives. For the teachers in this study, student engagement was a key factor in deciding how to address the subject matter.

The flexible curriculum model, as seen in this study, encompasses all four commonplaces of teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu in education (Schwab, 1983); however, the flexible curriculum model goes one step further by recognizing that meaning is made through the interaction between the teacher, students, milieu, and subject matter, creating what Aoki (2005) calls a “curriculum-as-lived.” Through a flexible curriculum, these teachers were able to support culturally and linguistically diverse learners by getting to know their students, creating a caring environment, and pushing for high expectations using strategies and literacy goals that have been proven successful with these students.

In comparison, a traditional “top-down” curriculum model (see Figure 2) that is determined by state standards, does not necessarily take into account the local context or support teachers in creating curriculum that fits the needs of their students, beyond suggestions of “best practices.” In a “top-down” curriculum model, teachers are viewed as implementers rather than agents of curriculum (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). Furthermore, the only milieu that is taken into consideration in a top-down curriculum is the federal, state, or district policy on standards-based instruction, which makes teachers accountable only to what is “fallen from the policy sky” (Campano, 2007, p. 46), rather
than to the students themselves. The students’ lives, the teacher’s interests, knowledge, and values are absent from “top-down” curriculum, and are rendered “faceless” (Aoki, 2005). I know this from personal experience from my work as a “fly in” curriculum consultant, who only had the standards documents to create curriculum for “faceless” students and teachers, an experience I found to be alienating to my former work as a classroom teacher at Cesar Chavez. As Cora Weber-Pillwax (in Wilson, 2008) elegantly states,

Teaching is a sacred responsibility. That’s all, and if my soul is not in there and I’m not establishing relationships, I’m not teaching. I’m giving information or setting curriculum or doing something outside of myself. I am outside of the whole experience. I may be unknowingly destroying myself. (p. 102, emphasis added)

It was through this experience of writing “top down” curriculum as opposed to the experience of creating a flexible curriculum in relationship to my students, that I realized my role as a teacher and curriculum writer is ultimately defined by my relationship to my students. In this next section, I share the findings of how teachers find success with language learners and diverse students through a flexible curriculum model within a school that allows for teacher agency to create their own curriculum. I divide my implications into four areas: teachers, school, district, and educational policy that suggest important implications for educators, policymakers, and researchers.

**Teachers**

**Instruction.** All four teachers found success with language learners by developing engaging cross-curricular thematic units that integrate reading and writing
through multimodality (e.g. arts, drama, technology, music) that can connect to students
lives and allow students to find their inner talents. Teachers selected texts that engaged
students and allowed for varied perspectives. There is continuity through routines and
projects so that the content, skills, and lesson in their units have unity. This creates a base
of shared vocabulary and content from readings that can be integrated into writing
projects. This method of literacy instruction where everything is integrated, builds to a
final project that supports language learners because reading and writing are not taught as
separate and isolated skills. Further, literacy engagement plays a large part in supporting
language learners who are reluctant readers. As Katie said, “I just feel like in middle
school when we are losing readers, let them read anything they want. As long as they are
reading, let them read.” Teachers can promote independent reading by giving kids access
and time to read books they love while reinforcing cognitive strategies with in-class
thematic reading.

Each teacher differentiated for their language learners, by their selection of texts,
supports in projects and writing, and by individualized attention that is based not only on
the students’ academic work, but based on what they needed socially or emotionally. As
Anne said, prescriptive “curriculum doesn’t fit us the way it doesn’t fit the kids.”
Teachers can use a repertoire of teaching practices that are a part of their personal
“toolbox” to support student learning. Included in the toolbox are the teachers’ own
values, identities, learning experiences, collaboration, and knowledge developed in
practice (Lytle, 2000). Teachers have high expectations of their students, and used data
that matters, such as in-class assessments, writing projects, or conversations to base their
instructional decisions. These teachers demonstrated that within a flexible curriculum,
teachers demonstrate agency in instructional decisions from strategies, to forms of assessment to create their own methods of accountability towards their students that go beyond mandated standardized tests, that are meaningful and respectful of the students’ work.

**Caring classrooms.** Each teacher valued their students and created spaces in their classroom that supported student learning through a “conocimiento con cariño” (Jackson, Bernal Guzman, & Ramos, 2010), congruent with Chicana/Latina epistemologies. This reflects Cepeda’s (2010) findings that a “caring classroom” will “engage, motivate, and connect with bilingual/bicultural learners” (122). For example, the teachers engaged their students by having “personalized communication,” clear behavior and learning expectations, time to discuss classroom relationships, and prioritizing student participation and collaboration. As Carrie said, “We are responsible for creating good human beings,” which is congruent with Nodding’s (2012) care ethics based in relationship, empathy, and reciprocity. This requires teachers to reflect on their values and revaluate what is their role as teachers in the students lives and how to create classroom spaces that allow for “good human beings” to flourish. For Gio, he wanted his students to “feel successful in the things you are doing, and feel proud of the things you are doing and not feel like you can’t do anything right.” By creating spaces of acceptance and collaborative relationships of power, students are more likely to find personal success and take risks (Cummins, 1996). Katie demonstrated this by creating a classroom where “we are a community because we are only as strong as we allow each other to be and then we are stronger.” Katie capitalized on the diverse strengths of her students to help each other academically and socially.
Further, a caring classroom can extend beyond the classroom walls and into the homes of the students. Gio demonstrated his care through sharing emails of success to each parent, Anne and Carrie welcomed family stories into the classrooms through their “Family History Project,” and Katie’s classroom library is a testament to how families reciprocate care and appreciation for her ability to turn her students into avid readers. This is congruent with Nodding’s (2012) care ethics where reciprocity leads to greater understanding. Families who see their students are growing in reading and writing are grateful for Katie’s work and demonstrate this through book donations, a conversation, cards, or a story shared by the student. With strong teacher-student relationships built on mutual trust, students, teachers, and families feel more invested in each other and in the school.

Advocacy. Teachers who find success with culturally and linguistically diverse learners at times have to work against the grain of policy or racism within the schools. Katz (1999) found that Latino middle school students name teacher discrimination as their major reason for disengagement with school. To support students of color, teachers therefore have to advocate when faced with colleagues who speak disparagingly about minoritized youth or advocate against unfair tracking or streaming processes based on test scores alone. This is done in the everyday “invisible political work of teaching” (Campano, 2009, p. 334). Katie shared,

Teachers have to be the advocate, because if teachers don’t advocate, then no one is going to be advocating. You do have some of the parents who can advocate really strongly, but the majority doesn’t know how to advocate so if teachers don’t speak up about things, no one is speaking up for the child.
This is a difficult task; however, teachers can build strong relations with other staff members who can act as allies and build strong relations with parents. Katie and I were allies in our advocacy, and we also had strong relationships with parents who believed in our work. If teachers want to support minoritized youth, then having a mutual respect, along with advocating when students are discriminated against is necessary to prevent students from disengaging with school.

**Collaboration.** Creating curriculum is a complex process that requires time, money, and access to resources. The teachers in my study also consider themselves to be as Carrie says, “full-time curriculum writers,” and therefore, they need school-based systems that allow for collaboration to share practices, resources, and to provide mutual support. Anne, Carrie, and I collaborated to develop the fifth grade curriculum and it took time, resources, and dialogue, where we shared our strengths and grew from each other. We removed ourselves from our silos and recognized as Anne did, that “inspiration comes from collaboration.” For collaboration to be successful however, personal investment in developing shared goals is critical. As Katie lamented, she operated in isolation because there was a lack of teacher buy-in at the middle school level to develop a unified vision for the language arts curriculum.

For teachers to collaborate, they need to step out of their comfort zones (Stokes, 2001), reflect on their values (Nieto, 2002; 2003), and be flexible themselves, willing to try something new. As Gio said there is sometimes “inflexibility in the flexibility” and teachers need support to move past their own lessons and be open to sharing and collaborating with others. Schools can have a strong influence in building communities of practice that allow for this reflection to take place (Richardson, 1998). In this next
section, I share what are some school-level implications in order to support a flexible curriculum model.

**Implications at a School Level**

**Communities of practice.** Research supports collaborative environments in school where teachers can share instructional strategies and plans, and be in an open dialogue to evaluate each other (Little, 2012; Richardson, 1998; Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002). This research demonstrates that a flexible curriculum allows teachers to be creative and to teach to their strengths. It is also an intensive process that requires time for deliberation, collaboration, and curriculum creation. In addition to planning time, teachers need resources beyond the standards documents and textbooks. This research has shown how a “good book goes a long way,” and that dedicated teachers take the time to move beyond the textbook to find readings and resources that engage the students across content and that provides multiple perspectives. Therefore, supporting teachers with funds to find resources for the classroom, and having staff such as instructional coaches and librarians supporting teachers in this endeavor is a big help.

Furthermore, teachers generate knowledge of what works with their students through experience and reflection. By creating communities of practice (Richardson, 1998) that allow for teachers to reflect on their work to create “knowledge of practice” (Lytle, 2000), teachers can share resources, strategies, and curricula that fits the local context of their particular school population. For example, because Cesar Chavez is a bilingual school, teachers would benefit from language strategies across content. As Anne noted,

I am tremendously thankful that we have the freedom to take our kids through
topics that make sense, topics that engage them, and especially as a bilingual school, we don’t have the time to do separate language arts from social studies from science, so we have to overlap everything.

Cesar Chavez can create communities of practice looking at how successful teachers, such as Anne, Carrie, Gio, and Katie address the reading standards through thematic content-based units. For example, in this study, each teacher approached differentiation and literacy strategies in different ways. As successful teachers, they can share what forms of data inform their instruction, and how they respond to their language learners through differentiation. Similarly, all teachers at the school can learn from each other sharing what works in their classroom, and where they have locations of “dissonance” (Pincus, 2001), so they can enter into a “circle of inquiry” to reflect on their practice, and share their process with their colleagues, and collaborate on possible solutions.

Teachers also need moral support in this process to prevent burn out or a loss of confidence (Kauffman et al., 2002). As Carrie recognized, being a “full-time curriculum writer” requires teachers to prioritize some tasks over others, such as, “Do I outsource parenting?” Schools can support teachers by setting up curriculum mentorships, honoring teacher’s planning time, and by creating curriculum-writing and evaluation sessions during the summer or during the school year to help facilitate this process. Further, teachers in school that has a flexible curriculum, need professional development specifically on how to create thematic project-based units such as Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), which Carrie specifically thought would be helpful in her own growth as a curriculum writer and teacher. Curriculum writing is a huge job that goes beyond lesson planning and is in a continual state of revision. By building time
and resources to allow teachers to reflect on their own curriculum and work collaboratively to create grade level thematic units would be a tremendous help in creating a shared vision of supporting language learners.

Lastly, a community of practice can also reflect on what Carrie referred to as “data that matters” to inform instruction. This is especially critical in a political milieu of “data driven instruction” where within current educational policy, data and accountability are limited to the discourse of standardized testing. Teachers can create their own systems of authentic accountability to their students through their personal interactions and classroom projects. To do so, the school can set up a yearlong systematic inquiry where teachers reflect on their practices regarding what data matters, and how they can provide feedback to each individual student. Teachers can share their practices of authentic formative and summative assessment, and discuss how feedback is integrated into the classroom, and how the process of inquiry shifts their thinking and allows them to try new approaches as the year progresses. Examples of teachers engaged in collaborative inquiry regarding student work is demonstrated in the 30 year practice of the Philadelphia Teacher Learning Cooperative (see Abu El-Haj, 2003), the work of Ballenger (1999) with the Brookline Teacher Research Seminar to understand immigrant students’ relationships to literacy, and in Simon’s (2013) collaborative inquiry with pre-service teachers to analyze their students’ writing. When teachers can enter into conversation about their processes of determining what data matters with culturally and linguistically diverse learners and how to provide feedback, the school can create shared practices that capitalizes on finding successes with language learners.
**Shared goals.** The teachers in this study recognized a need to collaborate within grades and across grades to create vertically aligned school-based goals. Anne shared, “I would love to have a vertical integration for language arts so I know who is teaching what when and what texts they are using so that the vocabulary is the same.” This vertical integration does not mean paced or inflexible school curriculum, however. There can be flexibility regarding how to address the school goals, but there is a common language and common goals to work from. Collaboration within and across the grades is needed to create school-based language goals. This suggestion from the teachers demonstrates that within a flexible curriculum, there can school-based structures that support teachers in their curricular planning. The success of language learners depends on a school-wide shared goal, or *telos* (Pendlebury, 1990).

According to the 2013 DC-CAS, there was an inconsistency across grades regarding the achievement of racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities. This was due to an “extreme flexibility” environment that allowed for collaboration but also isolation, depending on the level of individual teacher buy-in regarding collaborative planning. This isolation, such as the one Katie experienced, can be attributed to the “liberty as license” response to teacher independence that leads to some teachers exercising “inflexibility in the flexibility.” A teacher’s personal priorities, values, teaching practices, and curriculum may fit that particular teacher, but that does not mean it necessarily supports language learners. In this case, it is suggested that the school develop a shared goal to support culturally and linguistically diverse students. This requires school-based professional development such as systematic inquiry to engage teachers in reflecting on their own successes, practices, and ways of relating to minoritized students, through
ongoing dialogue, inquiry, and reflection. This can be done through a practitioner-research (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 2009) model where teachers take an “inquiry stance” to reflect on one’s teaching practices and values, as seen in Stokes (2001) work with various levels of collaborative inquiry at a diverse school in California. It was not until teachers recognized that inequity in achievement “could rooted in [teachers’] beliefs about students” (Stokes, 2001, p. 147).

Inquiry as professional development. Using an inquiry model for professional development will provide the time and space to reflect on their practices, revisit assumptions, and to share practices that work with language learners. Shared goals will fall by the wayside if teachers do not revisit their assumptions, and analyze their own practice to understand what supports language learners. With administrative support, these teachers can share their insights with the school during professional development, continue to engage in teacher inquiry and foster new teacher inquiry circles at the school.

Engaging in inquiry will increase the level of commitment to supporting English language learners, build a sense of professionalism (Nieto, 2003) where teachers can be acknowledged for the work they do and how they can develop “knowledge-of-practice” (Lytle, 2000) though examining their own practices and connecting it to the context of the school and broader educational initiatives. Further, creating communities of inquiry within the school can build community and connections amongst the participating teachers (Richardson, 1998, 2003). Within this study, having the time to converse with other teachers about our practice was beneficial. Anne said, “Reflection is how did we get to where we are and how can we make it better? And its not linear, its very holistic.” From our personal conversations, teachers shared what they wanted to improve in, but it
was also a boost to their own professionalism and reinforced their sense of what was working in their classrooms. When teachers can be in conversation and build a sense of community, there is greater teacher retention, which leads to stronger institutional knowledge and therefore, student success (Ronfeldt, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2012).

**Implications at a District Level**

According to Ingersoll (2004), one out of every two teachers in urban schools leaves voluntarily within the first five years. DCPS has a higher attrition rate than the national average, where 55% of DCPS teachers leave within two years, and 80% in six years (Simon, 2012). This revolving door of teachers not only costs the school system in hiring and recruitment ($12 million for DCPS) but it also affects student achievement (Simon, 2012). Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2012) conclude that teacher turnover, regardless of teacher quality, affects school morale, professional culture and weakens the institutional knowledge base at a school. This ultimately affects trust, support, and student achievement. Ingersoll (2004) demonstrates that urban teachers leave not because of the pay, but because of the lack of administrative support, the various intrusions on classroom teaching, and limited faculty input into school decisions (p. 2). In this section I share how DCPS and similar urban school districts with a diverse student population can support and retain successful teachers.

**Professional development for curriculum writers.** Teachers are not just implementers of curriculum, but they are curriculum developers. The flexible curriculum at Cesar Chavez allowed teachers to teach to their strengths, engage students, and use a repertoire of instructional strategies to differentiate instruction. Despite the recent developments of DCPS curriculum units aligned with the CCSS, teachers need flexibility
within these scope and sequence documents to tailor instruction to their individual students. Within the curriculum documents DCPS is developing, allow for instructional strategies and suggestions of differentiation because local context matters and cannot be accounted for in “top-down” curriculum. Therefore, DCPS should view all teachers as “curriculum makers” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992) and provide professional development at schools with local teacher leaders to support the staff in curriculum evaluation and development. This is especially needed with the new CCSS, which “define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6) and do not account for differences of special needs or language learner populations. Teacher’s personal expectations impact how standards are interpreted and implemented, especially when working with language learners and special needs students. Therefore, to support teachers in implementing the CCSS, teachers at a school level and district level can share their practices and expectations to develop what Anne calls a “common deconstruction of the standards,” that holds high expectations for language learners, but can also provide the necessary support through differentiation and engaging content.

**Redefining what data matters.** As this research demonstrates, successful teachers are already creating a rich set of data to shape their curriculum, and are not in need of standardized tests to determine their instructional paths. These successful teachers created their own systems of “data-driven” accountability though authentic assessments that are connected to their curriculum. Good teachers are constantly using data to inform instruction, but they exercise agency in determining what is meaningful data and data that matters. This includes authentic assessments such as writing, projects,
in-class work, and observations to inform instruction. The PIA tests that were administered multiple times during the school year, were viewed by the teachers in this study as hindrances to student performance because it took time away from engaging in authentic reading and writing, and because the data was viewed as flawed because of its variance in how it interprets the CCSS. DCPS can support teachers by redefining what data matters at a district level by providing professional development at local schools to develop with teachers authentic assessments that can guide instruction rather than depending on standardized testing data to define instruction. This connects with the previous suggestion to develop communities of practice by taking an “inquiry stance” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) regarding ways to develop data that matters through formative assessment, feedback, and also authentic classroom assessments that are engaging.

**Creating collaborative communities.** Successful teachers want to collaborate across schools. Anne and Carrie demonstrated they have a strong collaborative relationship, however they still feel isolated from other grades and schools:

We don’t work so much with third graders we don’t work so much with the sixth graders, isolation within our school, isolation from our schools with others schools. It would be great to work with other schools and have that time. And isolation from, in particular the mandates from on high that don’t recognize with what we deal with and with what we have to work with. It is sort of a one size fits all, but we are not a one size fits all kind of place. Therefore, DCPS and other school districts can build bridges by creating “sister schools” and offering teacher support through recognizing what works at similar schools. Bilingual
schools are “not a one size fits all kind of place,” compared to monolingual schools, however, they can learn from each other how to integrate language and content successfully in curriculum. For example, the Office of Bilingual Education (OBE) can facilitate meetings of dual-language teachers through school visits where teachers can share their successful practices with other bilingual schools in the district. Language support, however, goes beyond second language acquisition theories and is impacted by high teacher expectations, teacher-student relationships, as well as affirming student identity (Cummins, 2006, 2011; Nieto, 2003). OBE with teacher leaders can also facilitate teacher inquiry at bilingual schools in DCPS to support reflective practices that target successful academic and socio-emotional practices to create caring classrooms.

**Implications for Educational Policy**

**Redefining teacher identity.** Despite the de-facto nationalization of standards through the CCSS, the CCSS does not prescribe how teachers can reach expectations. This requires teachers to become curriculum developers who move beyond the “top-down” curriculum model and can create a curriculum that meets the standards through high expectations, but includes a space for teacher agency through a flexible curriculum model. Teachers need to be viewed as professionals (Nieto, 2003) who generate local knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Lytle, 2000) through their daily interactions with students. Carrie demonstrated how she found “backdoor success” by teaching what makes sense to her, from her personal practice and from integrating strategies from professional development from the Center for Applied Linguistics and her graduate courses. Katie developed “layering the text” through reflecting on ways to support language learners and high achieving students so they can get “so much from the text” to
the point where she no longer differentiates texts for her eighth grade class. Therefore, teachers need to be viewed by policymakers, by the public, and by each other as knowledge creators and reflective practitioners rather than implementers of “best practices” and “top-down” curriculum models.

Redefining curriculum and literacy. Curriculum is not just what (content), but the how (strategies, skills), and the why (values and beliefs). Educational policy and the standards movement have focused too much on the what, and used technical rationalism to explain the how, but have left out the most important part, which is the why. New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2001), sociocultural theories (Nieto, 2002), and feminist standpoint theory (Haraway, 2007; hooks, 2004; Simpson, 2003) recognize that knowledge construction is situated. Therefore, a shift in viewing literacy and curriculum from an “autonomous” model to an “ideological” model (Street, 1993) is needed to understand in what ways curriculum and literacy is not accounting for culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Therefore, what defines curriculum and literacy needs to include knowledge generated at a local context and the relational level of teachers and students to support language learners and minoritized students. Teachers and academics can document how teachers build curriculum and find success with culturally and linguistically diverse learners to shift definitions of curriculum, knowledge, and literacy. This practitioner research case study of four successful colleagues at Cesar Chavez Bilingual acts as an example to policymakers and academics to demonstrate how teachers can create engaging literacy curriculum based on the CCSS and teacher-student relationships that is built from the bottom up.
Further Research. Now that the era of prescriptive curriculum due to NCLB is coming to an end, more research is needed to understand how teachers create curriculum from the “bottom up” to support their local context. This case study demonstrates that teachers can support culturally and linguistically diverse students through a flexible curriculum that is built on engagement, caring relationships, high expectations, and teacher strengths. This research provides an example of how teachers are redefining accountability away from “top down” standardized testing models, and towards redefining accountability to their students.

This is critical time in education where teachers need to share their experiences of how to make CCSS work for culturally and linguistically diverse learners. More examples of how teachers are using teacher-student relationships to develop learning goals, curriculum and internal accountability systems through a flexible curriculum is needed to turn the tide away from standardized tests and top down curriculum models. Furthermore, this research demonstrates how successful teachers, even in an environment that measures accountability of teachers through high-stakes testing, create curriculum that prioritizes and values students’ lives over standardized-testing.

Policymakers, academics, and administration need to listen to the experiences of teachers as curriculum writers, so that the rush of new standardized tests as the barometer of student achievement and teacher evaluation, and the onslaught of CCSS curriculum packages do not resurface on the shores of classrooms to claim a “one-size-fits-all” curriculum that fits neither the students nor the teacher. Practitioner research, teacher narratives, and case studies allow for teachers to provide a critical perspective regarding how they go beyond the standards to create spaces in their classrooms and curriculum.
that are centered around the knowledge that is constructed when teachers and students are in relationship and learning from one another.

**Conclusion**

“Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.” (Traveler, there is no path. The path is created as we go.)” - Antonio Machado

Research was my way of “coming home” (Absolon, 2008) to myself, but also back to teaching. It is an epistemic act of coming to know oneself and others. As Stan Wilson notes, “If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you aren’t doing it right” (in Wilson, 2008, p. 83). From this process I have gained a greater appreciation for the relationships I developed with my students and their families when I was a teacher, because they are the ones that kept me going, in spite of it all. Likewise, I have a deeper understanding of the importance of my work I did as a teacher, curriculum writer, and researcher through the conversations I shared with my colleagues at Cesar Chavez. As Anne mentioned, there is “inspiration in collaboration.” From my colleagues I learned various ways to differentiate, new strategies I can add to my personal “toolbox,” and how to tailor curriculum around students. I also learned a thing or two about what data matters and what data is meaningful. From this process, I look forward to teaching again where I can center my practice around students’ lives and to define with them what counts.

By taking an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) on my own experiences as a teacher, as well as on our community at Cesar Chavez Bilingual and the practices of the teachers I studied, I have an increased awareness of my intentions, values, and identity as a teacher. A participant in the Brookline Teacher Researcher Seminar, Jim Swaim, states, “There is an emotional component to teacher research, rarely
mentioned in the burgeoning literature of the field… My journey had allowed me to listen more intently and read more carefully than ever before” (in Ballenger, 1999, p. 86, emphasis added). Flexible curriculum built in relationship asks us – what can we learn from our students if we take the time to listen?

Engaging in practitioner research acts as a counter-hegemonic stance to current discourses regarding accountability defined by high-stakes testing and more rigorous standards. When teachers exercise agency by defining what data matters, we create a counter-discourse to top-down standards-based curriculum models. At a time when politicians and policymakers only speak of accountability through numbers, teachers can speak to the importance of teacher-student relationships as an epistemic and ontological imperative in education. It is up to the teachers to remind policymakers, in Anne’s words, “that we are responsible for creating good human beings.”
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http://www.corestandards.org/assets/application-for-english-learners.pdf


Appendix A: Email to Participants

Dear ________________,

I hope this email finds you well and that things are doing well at school and in life. I am writing because I am working on my M.A. thesis and am writing to see if you are interested in participating in my research!

The title of my research is: (Re)defining Priorities: Teachers’ Perspectives on Supporting Diverse Learners within a Flexible Curriculum in a High-Stakes Testing Atmosphere

My intention in this study is to be in conversation with you regarding your practices regarding your curricular choices as well as your relationships with your students and how that shapes your teaching. I intend to use collaborative inquiry as my method of practice, meaning that through the interview process and focus group with the other participating teachers, we can be in conversation regarding how you shape your pedagogical practice. I want this research to benefit you and be a space of reflection and inquiry of your work as an educator.

Through this research, I want to understand how teachers support culturally and linguistically diverse learners with a flexible curriculum model in a high-stakes testing atmosphere. Data will be collected at two points during the school year- at the middle of the school year (December) and at the in the spring (March). Data collection will involve two semi-structured interviews, two classroom observations of one hour each, one focus group discussion as well as the collection of any artifacts regarding curriculum you wish to share (DCPS curriculum, your classroom grade-level created curriculum, lesson plans) and any reflections or ideas you want to provide me with throughout the course of the study (e.g. emails, journal reflections).

Overall, it will take 2.5 hours in December (1.5 hours of interview time, 1 hour of class observation) and 3.5 hours in March (1 hour interview, 1.5 hours of focus group discussion, and 1 hour of class observation). I’ll be sure to make sure there will be food during our interviews and focus group!

Please email me back to let me know if you want to participate in this collaborative inquiry. I really appreciate all the work you do and I look forward to being in conversation with you.

Take Care,
Julia
Appendix B: Consent Form

Dear [Name],

This letter is to inform you of the purpose, procedures, benefits of participating in this research project and your rights as a research participant.

For this study, I intend to use collaborative inquiry as my method of practice, meaning that through the interview process and focus group with the other participating teachers, we can be in conversation regarding how you shape your pedagogical practice. I want this research to benefit you and be a space of reflection and inquiry.

Through this research, I want to understand how teachers support culturally and linguistically diverse learners with a flexible curriculum model in a high-stakes testing atmosphere. Data will be collected at two points during the school year- at the middle of the school year (December) and at the in the spring (March). Data collection will involve two semi-structured interviews, two classroom observations of one hour each, one focus group discussion as well as the collection of any artifacts regarding curriculum you wish to share (DCPS curriculum, your classroom grade-level created curriculum, lesson plans) and any reflections or ideas you want to provide me with throughout the course of the study (e.g. emails, journal reflections). The interview and focus group will be recorded with a digital audio recorder and the classroom observations will be recorded as observation notes in writing.

To validate data, I will provide you with the transcripts of our interviews, observations of your classroom, and from our focus group discussion. If there is anything in the transcript you would not want to be included in the research, please let me know. During the focus group, I will share any themes from the first round of interviews and teachers will participate in analyzing these themes as well as topics that emerge from the focus group discussion. I welcome you to ask any questions about the study at any time during the research process. I am happy to share the findings with you after the research is completed.

The presumed benefits of participating in this study is the possibility of self-reflection in your own teaching practice, the chance to discuss with colleagues about curricular choices involving English language learners, and asking critical questions in regards to how teachers shape curriculum and student-teacher relationships.

You have the choice to use your name in the research. If you choose not to use your name, you will create a pseudonym. Further, if this research is deemed publishable, you will be notified and have the possibility of including your name in the byline (if you choose to forgo anonymity in publication).

You should be aware that it is your right to withdraw at any time of the study, even if you have agreed to participate in the study and have signed the consent form. If you decide to withdraw, please contact me directly (jhainervioland@gmail.com or 647-864-7262). If you withdraw, I not use any data from our interviews, observations or focus group discussion. You can contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273, if you have questions about your rights as a participant.

Please sign your name to acknowledge you have read this letter regarding purpose of the study, the procedures, as well as your rights as a participant. Thank you so much for your time!

___________________________
Signature of Participant

___________________________
Date
Appendix C: Interview Questions

**Questions for semi-structured interviews:**
Questions related to No Child Left Behind (NCLB)
• In what ways has standardized testing shape your teaching?
• In what ways has standardized testing shaped the school climate?
• In what ways has standardized testing impacted the teaching of second language learners?

Questions related to working with flexible curriculum
• What are the benefits and challenges of having a flexible curriculum?
• How do you take advantage of the flexible curriculum at this school?

Questions related to relationships
• What keeps you teaching?
• What is the role of a teacher in a student’s life?
• How does having a flexible curriculum impact your relationship with your students?
• How has standardized testing impacted your relationship with your students?

**Questions for Focus Group:**
• How do you go about creating your curriculum?
• What, in your opinion, are effective ways of supporting English language learners?
• How does having a flexible curriculum impact your relationship with your students?
• What would your ideal curriculum look like?

**Questions for Follow up Interview:**
• In what ways are you supporting English language learners in your class?
• Have your beliefs in teaching and instruction shifted? If so, how?
• In what ways have you been able to manifest your ideal curriculum?
Appendix D: Curriculum and Literacy Questionnaire

General Questions, Curriculum Resource List & Literacy Practices List

How many years have you been teaching?

What schools have you taught at? (give the name and location)

What was your educational preparation and subject matter (college and beyond)?

What are you certified to teach in?

What types of curriculum materials do you use to inform/develop your curriculum?

Look at the list below, mark off what you use (with an X) and write any comments giving examples of resources used. Also, please feel free to add what is missing!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum type</th>
<th>Curriculum Materials</th>
<th>Mark X</th>
<th>Comments (list examples, types of resources used)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Framework</td>
<td>Common Core State Standards</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framework</td>
<td>DCPS Standards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope and Sequence (guidance of what to teach and when)</td>
<td>District unit plans (decided at district level)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope and Sequence (guidance of what to teach and when)</td>
<td>School-based (decided at school level)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope and Sequence (guidance of what to teach and when)</td>
<td>Teacher-created (can be decided by grade level team or by teacher)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program (can be full year, or just a unit or lessons)</td>
<td>Houghton Mifflin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program (can be full year, or just a unit or lessons)</td>
<td>Science Textbooks (integrated into language arts)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program (can be full year, or just a unit or lessons)</td>
<td>Social Studies Textbooks (integrated into language arts)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-created (e.g. units, lessons, resources)</td>
<td>Teacher created materials (by other teachers)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-created (e.g. units, lessons, resources)</td>
<td>Teacher created materials (my own)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Resources (units, lessons)</td>
<td>Units or lessons by an organization (e.g. national geographic, Time for kids, Fords Theatre, grammar lessons)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Resources (on teaching)</td>
<td>(e.g. “strategies that work” or “six traits of writing”, SIOP)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Outside Resources (on planning)
- (e.g. understanding by design, SIOP, Readers/ Writers Workshop)

### Outside Resources (texts used by students)
- (e.g. novels, short stories, articles) – teacher-selected and grade-selected texts

### Outside Resources (websites)
- (websites for teaching, reading, videos (e.g. brainpop, youtube, documentaries), games, music)

### Other:

**Other:**

**Other (keep adding rows if needed)**

### Literacy strategies used in class?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literacy strategy</th>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Comments (can share what resources help you do this, or elaborate on description given or clarify how you use this)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent reading</strong> (student selected)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guided reading</strong> (teacher selected text, small group)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leveled reading</strong> (teacher selects different leveled texts for small groups to read)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Whole class chapter book/novel study</strong> (teacher facilitated questions)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shared reading</strong> (teacher and students can read, on either document camera, chart paper, big book)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Read aloud</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literature circles</strong> (describe if student selected or teacher selected, if you use roles or students decide discussion)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reader’s workshop</strong> (Strategies-based instruction, students select book to practice strategy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Choral reading or round-robin reading</strong> (students read aloud, same text – practicing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
fluency)

Centers (students work independently) – describe if it is student-selected centers or teacher determined centers.

Writer’s workshop (students select own topics to write about and develop)

6 traits of writing (teaching each trait with examples from books, students practice trait in writing)

Content-based writing (writing projects based on content/unit theme/topic)

Differentiated projects (students select product)

Differentiated instruction (students do different activities based on language level) – add to comments to describe

Reading response journals (students write letters with teacher about what they read, or can be to other students)

Writing Journals (students write their own self-selected topics)

Socratic seminar (student led discussion based on questions, teacher does not participate, but observes)

QAR (question answer response) strategy

Explicit vocabulary Instruction (from the text, content, or from vocabulary list – explain in comments how)

Word Work (activities focused on phonics, spelling, synonyms/antonyms, roots, affixes, etc.)

Reciprocal Teaching (students practice strategies by becoming the teacher in small groups)

Lecture-based teaching (teacher talks, students take notes)

Do-Now (short activity to start the class, set the stage for lesson)

Provide Objective for lesson (set clear learning goals for students – is it teacher created or student created? Add to comments)

Media literacy (analyze media for messages e.g. advertisements, movies, videos, music, news, social media/internet)

Visual Literacy (analyze videos/documentaries/art/photographs)

Music (analyze music – lyrics, mood, meaning, etc.)
**Grammar lessons** (teach grammar explicitly through lessons or implicitly during writing? How are language standards addressed?)

**Critical Literacy** (address issues of power and privilege due to race, class, gender, sexuality) – can be done through readings, discussions, videos etc. – give examples

**Spanish Language connections** (read bilingual texts, make connections to Spanish through cognates, grammar topics) – give examples

**Bilingual Reading/Writing** (plan bilingual projects with your Spanish partner for cross-linguistic projects- speeches, writing, performances, etc)

**Current events** (reading articles – teacher selected or student selected, discussing issues)

**Citizenship projects/activities** (students participate in volunteering (school based project or local project) or vocalizing an issue (e.g. letters to politicians, visits to politicians)

**Other:**

**Other:**