REWIRITING WRITING: CLASSROOMS AS THE CONSTRUCTION SITE FOR LITERACY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Schooling in these contemporary times is a highly contested issue, launching many reform efforts aimed at improving the state of schools. Amidst growing concerns over the quality of schools, there have been numerous efforts to standardize teaching and learning through the implementation of scripted curricula, increased attention towards testing data, and a focus on decontextualized basic skills. More specifically, these efforts at standardizing the practice of teaching work to narrow conceptions and ideologies related to language development and literacy practices, especially marginalizing children from diverse, cultural communities.

This dissertation raises questions about scripting teacher practice through curricular and assessment tools. This project investigates the negotiation that takes place as teachers and students interact with each other, using curriculum as a mediating tool. In this 4-month ethnographic study of a group of kindergarten teachers, the interpretation of curriculum and the agency of teachers and students is examined within two spaces: teacher collaboration meetings and writing events in the classroom. Specifically, the project seeks to answer the following research questions: How do teachers construct their beliefs about literacy in collaborative spaces? How do teachers interpret and enact the mandated, literacy curriculum (the official curriculum)? How do teachers and students construct the enacted literacy curriculum together? Thus, by analyzing the interactions inside and outside of the classroom, this work describes the ways that curriculum is translated and transformed.

Data for this study centers around three kindergarten teachers as they worked through the goals and ideologies of curriculum as well as those tools used to assess the
development of children. Additionally, this study features a kindergarten classroom where literacy practices were interpreted and re-interpreted as children interacted with their teacher, their peers, and the curricular materials. By describing these interactions, the project sought to illustrate the agency of teachers and students as they opened up narrow ideologies of language development. By observing and highlighting the writing possibilities of children, this study shows the need to challenge assessments used to define children’s literacy potential, the need to open up the bounded literacy curriculum, and the need to broaden the definitions of literacy attributed to children. Ultimately, this study advocates for flexible and “permeable” (Dyson, 1993) curriculum, allowing teachers to make space for children’s literacy practices, which are situated and contextual. Thus, instead of looking to outsiders and non-practitioners in the development of standardized, literacy curriculum and its corresponding professional development, teachers need space to make decisions on instruction, grounded in the work of the children in their classrooms.
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Preface

I started my teaching career as a 4th grade teacher – wide-eyed, overzealous, and still under the assumption that children didn’t know anything, that they were sponges that soaked up all the knowledge that I was going to give them. My first year of teaching and the 6 years that followed became more of an education for me than it was for my students as I began an ongoing process of dispelling this “banking” (Freire, 1970) notion of learning. As I was trying to navigate my way around school, I quickly learned that teaching required much more than having the right methods. Teaching was more complicated than simply making lesson plans with a hook, objectives, resources, and assessments. Furthermore, I was in a classroom where, arguably, the children knew more about certain things than I did. They came with experiences that were so different from my own – children of divorce trying to navigate the idea of two homes, homeless children who were trying to deal with having no home, families with incarcerated or absent fathers, students stuck in the middle of bitter custody battles—and the list went on and on. Consequently, some of these children were much more wise and versed in the ways of the world than I ever was or could be in my first year out of school. The realization that teaching children, learning content, and simply living in this world was a socially, culturally, and historically situated process became apparent to me; the classroom was a microcosm of the larger world.

I was not the only one who felt the weight of my inadequacies. Within the first month of my teaching experience, my principal sent me on a tour of other people’s classrooms. She arranged to get a substitute teacher for me so that I could spend the day looking at what more experienced teachers were doing. I was excited by this idea and
welcomed the help. However, when the day came, she advised me to notice the physical environment: colorful posters on the wall, the bean bags on the carpet, the decorations that filled other teachers’ rooms. One teacher even had a tent where kids could hang out and read. When she took me back to my own classroom, she asked me what I could do to make my room better. It was obvious what was expected - I had a carpet that I got from Carpet World (it was undeniably gross by anyone’s standards), I had a set of posters on the wall that said what a noun and other parts of speech were, and I had a corny poster that said, “Light up your life with learning,” with two light bulbs gracing each side of the poster. Although I knew that aesthetics was important (I will be the first to advocate for the arts in schools), I realized that my principal, as well as many others who judged teachers from the outside, were using superficial measures to rate the quality of teachers. Instead of delving deeply into the particular lives of teachers and students, their stories were being simplified by surface-level exteriors that do not begin to tell the whole story.

I share this story not to point blame on the school, the principal, or even my shortcomings as a teacher. I share this story because this is the lens I use to view schooling and teachers as I approach my own research – it is complex and situated. Any discerning teacher knows that a masterful classroom interior does not ensure masterful teaching. Additionally, there are social, cultural, and political constraints that are a part of an educator’s story that range from national to local issues; it is a complicated mix of various factors, raising suspicion on anyone who claims to have a simple answer. My fear is that schools are being judged by these external measures cloaked in numbers and data-gathering rather than being studied in-depth as teachers and students interact with both the curriculum and the sociocultural landscape of their time and place. As attested by our
nation’s growing emphasis on standardized tests, the quality of schools, teachers, curriculum, and student learning are being measured by data points, progress monitoring documents, and high-stakes tests that offer only a de-contextualized glance at deeper, local issues. My research takes a different path, turning attention instead towards teachers and students who are caught in these political crossfires. Through this dissertation, I present the voices of teachers and students as they attempt to reclaim their practice.
Chapter 1

Introduction

Background and Purpose

The cover of the March 2010 issue of *Newsweek* magazine showed a picture of a chalkboard, and on the chalkboard was a very straightforward message: “The Key to Saving American Education: We Must Fire Bad Teachers.” Clearly, the declining state of the American education system has caught national attention, with “failing” teachers being the focus of interest. Scholars (Cohen & Barnes, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Garcia Coll & Marks, 2009) agree that high quality teachers can be crucial agents of change in education reform, and more importantly, student success. Similarly, new models, new curriculum, new policies mean nothing without good teachers. However, by placing the blame for the woes of contemporary schools on teachers alone, we ignore the pervasive problems associated with other social issues such as poverty, hunger, homelessness, violence, racism, and other inequalities. Firing bad teachers, then, becomes a very simplistic solution to a very complicated issue. As Pedro Noguera (2003) articulates, this simplistic solution ignores the fact that children come to classrooms with a myriad of social dilemmas as well as a depth of cultural practices from diverse cultural communities (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Heath, 1983; Li, 2008; Moll & Gonzales, 1994). The common space of the classroom, then, becomes the place where identities are practiced, negotiated, constructed, and reimagined for both students and teachers (who all come with personal ideologies, beliefs, and experiences). Thus, it is impossible to ignore that these unique interactions between students and teachers are particularized, making classrooms unique places that are worthy of deep exploration rather than broad,
generalized descriptions, such as “above average, average, below average, and well below average.”

As teaching becomes more regulated, curriculum becomes more scripted, and children continue to be diverse in their social and cultural experiences, it is necessary to examine how teachers and children negotiate current school literacy practices with their own identities in the classroom. Therefore, the aim of my research is to investigate the ways that teachers interpret literacy curriculum through their interactions with each other, how they enact literacy instruction in their classroom through interactions with students, and how their practices are interpreted by the children themselves. I hope to highlight the conflict and negotiation that occurs between teachers and children as they come to understand competency in literacy, school curriculum and its practices, and, most importantly, each other. In doing so, I aim to contribute to the professional discussion concerning this growing standardization of teaching (the effort to deliver the same instruction to all children), specifically in the practice of literacy in schools.

**Standardization: Regulating Literacy, Teaching, and Learning**

While the public discourse around education focuses on high-stakes tests, teacher quality, and curricular standards, the reality is that schools are complex spaces where individuals (teachers and students) with different cultural backgrounds, languages, families, ethnicities, and social practices come together (Moll, 2001; Nieto, Bode, Kang, & Raible, 2008). “Standardization” has become the buzzword, attempting to provide a simple solution to a rather complex issue by making sure that all teachers deliver universally prescribed instruction to all children. With scripted and paced curriculum, literacy goals are more constrained, narrow, and regulated in reaction to the need to
adhere to common standards. In response, I examine classroom interactions where teachers, curriculum, and children overlap and conflict. By examining these interactions, I intend to reveal that teaching and learning are complex webs of irreducible parts that work together in dynamic ways, making the standardization of teaching undesirable and impossible.

What teachers are told to do via curricula, district guidelines, and staff development trainings is often trumped by what actually happens in the classroom, as intuition and insight lead successful teachers to do otherwise. Teachers are not only translating the curriculum in multiple ways, but they are also transforming curriculum and exerting agency over these scripts that attempt to constrain their instruction. In the midst of instruction, teachers continually make adjustments using a combination of professional judgment, student reactions, and common sense in order to be responsive to students. Scripted curriculum cannot account for these moments, nor can it predict how children will respond. In this sense, it seems that teachers are uniquely positioned to provide the common sense and perspective necessary to develop, implement, and improve curriculum and instruction.

Thus, it is important to study the ways that good teachers succeed and struggle in their own practice to reveal teaching as more of an on-going construction (a craft) rather than a universal set of skills (a prescription). In this dissertation, then, I examined what actually happened when prescribed curriculum was presented in the classroom, with the assumption that teachers and children inevitably veer away from the script. I challenge the notion of looking to outsiders and non-practitioners to develop curriculum and its
corresponding professional development for teachers, when a more obvious, effective practice might be to allow teachers to be in charge of their own learning.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is an ethnographic study of kindergarten teachers as they enact their district’s mandated writing curriculum. As I focus on these individuals, I hope to offer a point of view that values the particularized practices that are created in process as people negotiate their perspectives, experiences, and beliefs with each other. As I highlight the voices of teachers, I shed light on the fact that teaching and learning are complex, woven in with identities, practiced within community, and socially constructed through interaction. By highlighting these interactions, I hope to contribute to ideas about professional development and address concerns about teacher quality. I am interested in providing insights for professional development that allow teachers to respond to children within their own contexts. In contrast to recent trends that leave teachers out of the conversation, I view teachers as important agents for curricular development.

This study is grounded in the need to understand the agency of both children and teachers. Therefore, I raise questions about the validity of scripted curricula that outline “best practices” or offer a general set of lessons and strategies as a way to provide universally best methods (Clay, 1998; Hlebowitsch, 2012; Schwab, 1970). Instead, I argue that it is impossible to present generalized strategies for particularized contexts with diverse individuals with unpredictable actions. Teaching is more than just a set of proven best practices; rather, good teaching requires teachers to know their students, anticipate responses, make adjustments, and provide guidance (McLaughlin, 2003). Some of the decision-making of teaching happens in process as the unique interactions
around learning occur in different classrooms in different ways with different people. It follows, then, that superficial reporting of classroom events ultimately omits the participants and their contexts, often trivializing teaching into causal lines and claiming that prescribed strategies will lead to similar outcomes. Instead, research about teaching and learning that studies classrooms closely can illuminate the messiness of teaching. In order to promote an in-depth study of teaching and learning in schools, I ask the following questions in my analysis of curricular translations:

1. How do teachers construct their beliefs about literacy in collaborative spaces?

2. How do teachers interpret and enact the mandated, literacy curriculum (the official curriculum)?

3. How do teachers and students construct the enacted literacy curriculum together?

These questions help to answer the overarching question: How does curriculum get translated from text to teachers to students? The study shows that multiple translations occur in the process of meaning-making, problematizing the notion of universal curriculum.

It is harmful to assume that universally determined strategies are best for everyone.

Most distressing is the prospect of assuming that best teaching practices are reliable and portable enough to script instruction, which poses the harmful possibility of closing down the discretionary space teachers need to make
responsive and educationally sound judgments in the classroom. (Hlebowitsch, 2012, p.3)

I agree that best practices start with the people (teachers) rather than the ideas (lessons, strategies, timelines). This study aims to contribute to this notion of ground-up curricular reform while opening the discretionary spaces teachers need to perform their work responsibly and ethically.

Outline of the Chapters

In chapter 2, I begin by reviewing the relevant literature on the current politics of schooling, the dialectic nature of teaching practices, the construction of curriculum, the sociocultural notion of literacy, and the making of identities within communities of practice. My assumption is that in the act of engaging with curriculum in schools, teachers and children construct and reconstruct identities as agents within social worlds (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2003). In reviewing the literature widely, I construct the theoretical frameworks for setting up the context for my study. I use a sociocultural framework for understanding teaching and learning as a way to counter generalized claims propagated by popular media (e.g., Newsweek article). Instead, I emphasize the constructive nature of teaching practices, curriculum, literacy practices, and identity within classrooms and schools. The frameworks I use undergird the notion that multiple translations of curriculum are inevitable, given the agency and creativity of individuals.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology used for exploring the interpretation and enactment of curriculum in collaborative spaces and classroom spaces. I introduce the participants, the site, the procedures, and analysis for my study; I emphasize the local
practices and issues that situate the way people make meaning out of the experience of literacy at school. Chapter 3 concludes with a narrative of my own personal history and multiple roles within the local context. My own role as a researcher is not only complex because of my own empathies towards teachers and their work, but because of my own involvement in the school community. As I bring myself into this work, I hope to provide a lens by which I view teaching and learning in this particular place.

Chapter 4 details the scripts that situate the practice of teaching. These scripts are not limited to, but include assessment scripts, curricular scripts, and schools scripts that are part of the everyday life of those who participate in school. In this chapter, I document the expectations that attempt to limit the agency of teachers and students as they engage in literacy practices. Additionally, I present the cultural resources and materials (e.g., curricular documents, published texts, and assessment tests) used in schools to standardize teaching and learning. An analysis of these materials and the organization of these scripts are ideologically-laden, making problematic static notions of standards. As I define how school is scripted for individuals, it becomes clear that tensions exist around these scripts.

In chapter 5, I explore some of these tensions that arose in collaborative spaces (informal and formal meetings where teachers discuss their practice). In it, I describe how the teachers rewrote the scripts by resisting, circumventing, or simply rejecting the norms set before them. Although the political reality of regulating practice exists, I present the role of teachers in exerting power over scripts within public spaces. Many teachers subscribe to the idea of “closing their doors” and making their counter practices
private (see Connelly & Clandinin’s notion of “secret story”, 1999), but I describe the ways that teachers allow their work to be made public.

In chapter 6, I turn the attention to Tammy Green’s classroom as she and her students enact literacy. I document the literacy practices in this classroom as a co-constructed act, problematizing scripted writing curriculum. I start by providing a short narrative of Tammy Green, making visible the ways that individuals bring their own personal beliefs and experiences to the practice of teaching. I demonstrate the interplay between writing, the teacher, and the children as they make sense of the curriculum. Through examination of written products, conversations between children, and the teacher’s responses to students, I extend the idea of literacy as a social practice. As students creatively invented writing for their own purposes, this chapter brings into focus the ways that students diverged from the scripted path and improvised the curriculum. Most importantly, I highlight Tammy’s role in creating space for this divergence.

Chapter 7 summarizes the key ideas addressed in this study; it comes back to the complexities of teaching and learning. It is my intention to bring to focus the creativity and agency that teachers and children possess as they work together. Throughout this dissertation, I assert that teaching and learning are both personal and professional endeavors; it is complicated by our own storied identities that are a mix of our past, present, and future. These identities are being formed and re-formed within the contexts in which individuals live (e.g., school, communities, classrooms). I end this dissertation by offering educational implications and envisioning possibilities for further research. I start with the idea that teachers are the problem. I end with the idea that teachers, in collaboration with children, can be part of the solution.
Chapter 2

Literature Review: Building a Theoretical Framework

Without attending to what is actually going on in a school, efforts at school improvement are a sham. (Lieberman & Miller, 1984, p.34)

Strong as the above statement might be, it is no secret that sweeping, general reforms have occurred in the United States, ranging from NCLB to Race to the Top to high stakes testing for accountability. With federal mandates, privatization of education, competition amongst students and teachers to perform, and movements to replicate best practices, the work of reform is moving away from local contexts and being controlled by larger entities. Therefore, it is impossible to explain the individual work of teachers without mentioning these larger initiatives that have affected teachers, including the ones in this study. Many studies attempt to generalize schooling instead of showing the experiences of “a school.”

Educational reform and school improvement have found a place at the top of the political agenda. Government agencies, schools, private entities, and non-profit programs are all clamoring to find the best solution or the quickest fix to solving the education dilemma (Karp, 2012). While this focus on improvement has spawned multiple studies and initiatives aimed at regulating and generalizing school improvement, little attention has been focused on understanding how individual schools aim to improve teaching and learning within their individual contexts. And, ironically, teachers (the people who are charged with the implementation of these programs and ideas) are largely left out of the conversation.
The purpose of this review is to situate teaching and learning within the traditions that emphasize the on-going construction of teaching and its practices, highlighting the agency of individuals in forming and transforming contexts (Bruner, 1990; Holland et al., 2003; Miller & Goodnow, 1995). I foreground the agency of people (in this case teachers and students) as they construct practices together using curriculum as a tool. I ground my work in the idea that teaching practices, literacy practices, and curriculum are not static and easily defined. Instead, I view teaching and learning as socially and culturally constructed by people, translated in multiple ways through interactions with each other. This view problematizes narrow definitions of teaching that focus on standardization of practices. I take a sociocultural approach to teaching and learning as the framework for understanding teachers and their work, curriculum and its ideologies, and students and their literacies. With increased measures for standardization of teaching practices and student knowledge, I aim to base my own work on the premise that school is a cultural site that is reproduced, sustained, and transformed by the individuals that inhabit that space (Bruner, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Miller & Goodnow, 1995; Rogoff, 2003).

Since teachers are doing their work under a highly regulated and politically contested era in history, I begin my theoretical grounding with a discussion of the current efforts at school reform. More specifically, I examine the regulation of teaching practices through scripted curriculum as a major part of school improvement efforts. Next, I offer a point of view that looks at teaching practices from a constructivist approach – it is more dynamic than static. In looking at teaching practices, I highlight the idea that teaching is both a personal and professional act and is understood in socially constructed ways with
others – be it with other teachers or students. Following this view of teaching practices, the next section addresses the identities of both teachers and children. It is within these changing identities that the politics of schooling and the practices of teaching are interpreted and enacted. These identities are defined and redefined in community as teachers and students make sense of teaching and learning. Finally, I define curriculum and literacy as sociocultural terms – they are created by individuals in socially constructed ways; this problematizes notions of scripted, literacy activities and show up as key ideas undergirding this study. In so doing, I conclude this section with a review on the professional learning of teachers while proposing a direction for teacher learning that accounts for the complexities of schools and the creativity of individuals.

**The Politics of Schooling in Contemporary Times**

I begin with a brief overview of the politics of schooling that situate this study. By highlighting the larger issues that influence schools, I aim to provide the context in which teachers inevitably find themselves as they attempt to perform the work of educating children. Many scholars agree that the results of NCLB (No Child Left Behind) have proven to be more harmful than helpful, increasing segregation in schools and retention of failing students (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Kohn, 2004; Ravitch, 2010; Shirley, 2009; Sizer 2004; Wood, 2004). NCLB called for unrealistic measures of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for schools of all subgroups that were racially categorized, thus increasing focus on the “achievement gap” between students of color and their white counterparts. Originally, the law called for 100% of students to reach proficiency by 2014, as measured by standardized tests. This would have categorized
many schools as failing, including the school that was the focus of my study. As a result, efforts to regulate teaching and learning took center stage on educational reform efforts.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) assert that the original theme and motivation of the testing movement was to determine excellence and intelligence through genetic endowments (e.g., IQ tests). These tests were used to justify tracking of students by race, ethnicity, and class. They go on to argue that conflicts and issues in the educational sphere reflect conflicts and issues that are true in the economic sphere of society. Children who are less affluent find themselves in schools that are under resourced and underfunded, making U.S. education highly unequal as better schooling is offered and attained by those of a higher class and social status. In light of these economic and social inequities, the result has been to label and categorize children according to the metrics set by national and state standards. Although individual identities are complicated, these categories that people live by are simplified by race (in many cases, including the district in my study).

Although the larger educational discourse is dominated by explicit discussions about the achievement gap between blacks and whites, discussions about race in schools are often disguised by rhetoric about achievement and skills understanding (Pollock, 2004). Despite the obvious racial divisions in test-based achievement data, issues of race are often replaced by discussions about children’s lack of progress (e.g., lack of family support, attendance, behavior, processing issues, etc.). Pollock advocates for educators to problematize these race-based tensions in schools rather than ignoring them, living with them, or deleting race words from the conversation— a term she viewed as “colormutedness” (2004, p.93).
Many people resist race talk because they are unsure when talking in racial terms about school people, programs, policies and patterns would be beneficial – either for kids or for our own positions. But such resistance to race talk has consequences. Regardless of intention, people in diverse schools and districts are always struggling with the consequences of both race talk and colormuteness, whether communities struggle openly, angrily, or only subterraneously. (Pollock, 2004, p.36)

In essence, race matters. The paradox lies in the fact that children and teachers are measured by the closing of the achievement gap yet discouraged from talking about these racial disparities and inequities in earnest. Scholars (Dyson, in press; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Moll & Gonzales, 1994; Nieto et. al., 2008) have worked to uncover the homogenous curricular documents and instructional practices that are mismatched with diverse learners. Within these ideologically-laden documents are culturally marginalizing practices that teachers are expected to deliver while students are expected to follow (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Ferguson 2001; Willis, 1981).

Decisions to adopt scripted curricula likely stem from the increased pressure placed on schools to show results. In this post-NCLB era, high-stakes tests are now being used to evaluate teachers (e.g., merit-based pay, restructuring of schools by firing the entire staff) along with students and schools (Karp, 2012). Schools have often been identified as the panacea for solving social inequities; thus politicians, corporations, and communities feel the urgency to find the solution to fixing our schools. Scripted curriculum, then, is highly political as curriculum writers decide what counts as school knowledge. It can be seen as a way to control the learning and development of children,
especially those with less cultural, economic, and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Furthermore, the scripted curriculum includes behaviors, values, and cultural practices attributed to European-American or middle class values.

Students of marginalized groups might not be able to find themselves represented within the resources, goals, and materials presented in curriculum (Shannon, 2000).

Scripted curriculum came out of this effort to create a normative framework for managing and synchronizing teachers’ work as well (Doyle, 1992).

Teachers are being held more and more “accountable” for test scores and students achievement while they are being required to take less and less responsibility for their curriculum, pedagogy, and what actually happens in their classrooms…it is a system that encourages teachers’ submission instead of engagement. (Au, 2012, p.32)

Au points towards the growing number of curriculum that is scripted as well as aligned with the “common core.” These curricula are often classified as “scientifically based” – meaning that research studies have been carried out to prove its efficacy. In other words, the inflexibility and specificity of the scripts are meant to “teacher proof” the curriculum (Doyle, 1992; Levin, 2008). In this study, I define the scripts as the resources (e.g., curriculum, assessment test, etc.) and mandates that children and teachers are expected to follow. Teaching scripts are given to instructors in the form of curricula - the language, strategies, and ideologies are written down, verbatim, for teachers to say and follow.

These scripts define the ways that teaching and learning are organized into universal strategies and timelines for development; they attempt to frame teaching practices along a common trajectory, regardless of children’s capacity.
Standardization of curriculum and assessment, mainstream multicultural education, and identification of best methods and their distribution from good to failing schools divorce issues of cultural difference from social relations and social structures. (Shannon, 2000, p.102)

Standardized curriculum attempts to identify the best methods and strategies for instructing children as a generalized set of practices. This deskillling of teachers and students have been highly documented and researched (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Kliebard, 1993; Shannon, 2000), highlighting the reproduction of social orders and inequities. Generalized practices ignore cultural differences that make practice a situated, constructed event where “boundaries among teachers, students, and community members are blurred” (Shannon, 2000, p.105). In light of this, when programs are implemented (i.e. schools of choice, vouchers, charter schools, scripted curricula) that attempt to reorganize or fix the race problem, educators should be skeptical of simple examinations and solutions to tense racial dynamics (Omi & Winant, 2008). In the course of this study, I look to the interactions of individuals with curriculum as a way to disrupt standard knowledge and practice.

Reforms, even those intended to improve the lives of students who have been systematically marginalized, need to be examined and disturbed, in order to question whether or not we are reinscribing the same unjust discourses that have gotten us here in the first place. (Schmeichel, 2012, p.228)

Teaching as a Dialectic Practice

In contemporary politics of teaching, teaching practice is evaluated through measurable, standardized achievement tests that label and organize the practice into
delivering discrete strategies and skills effectively rather than pursuing acts of personal meaning and significance. Many studies are designed to come up with better ways of teaching (normative acts) rather than taking a descriptive approach that emphasizes what teachers do and why (Jackson, 1986). A descriptive approach is an essential part of the picture because, from a sociocultural perspective, teaching practice is constructed through interactions, as both teachers and students bring their own experiences to schools. These experiences are located in and out of school; for teachers this means their personal experiences are just as much a part of their professional identity as mandates and curriculum are.

In my study, I do not intend to critique or evaluate teachers since I see their work as a complex. A teacher’s work is multidimensional—one’s teaching is partly organized and patterned yet individual, personal, and unique (Elbaz, 1990). It is important, then, to consider teaching as a “dialogue” (Freire, 1970) where teachers and students participate in the act of teaching as both teachers and learners. This dialectic nature means that individuals bring their own personal narratives into the existing narrative as reciprocal relationships; thus curriculum, mandates, teachers, and students are all influencing each other. Therefore, the very act of teaching itself not only involves making meaning out of the curriculum, but making personal decisions on what to teach and what is important within the given contexts.

Building on Freire’s critique of the banking concept of learning where students are “receiving, memorizing, filing, and storing the deposits” (2010, p.72), I would argue that teachers are being viewed in the same way. What teachers know can be presented to students in varied ways and forms. Instruction, then, is delivered in overlapping
frameworks that include pedagogy, facts, personal experiences, individual beliefs, and institutional ideologies (Jackson, 1986). In everyday teaching, there exists a “playing with ideas” (Woods, 1990, p.301), which occurs as teachers and students work out ideas in actual practice. Teachers make decisions daily that are personal translations of curricular ideologies about “good practice” as they actively engage in the classroom environment, using curriculum as a mediating tool. Therefore, curriculum is only one of the many frameworks that teachers bring into their instruction. Teaching practice is an on-going construction that is played out differently as the lives of teachers intersect with the lives of students.

Therefore, teaching is much more complicated than people think it to be. Jackson illustrates this by talking about the various meanings attached to what good teaching actually means.

The actions of teachers, like those of everyone else, are constantly responsive to that vast and largely unarticulated network of shared understanding that comprises much of what people mean when they talk of common sense. (Jackson, 1986, pp.11-12)

In other words, teaching practice (like common sense) is elusive, largely comprised of individual ideologies and experiences. Moreover, there is no one way to describe good teaching as it is inherently the cumulative sum of peoples’ social and cultural experiences – it is differently defined rather than singular. Thus, when we talk about teaching practice, it is vital to think about instruction as an individual translation rather than as a reproduced commodity (Dewey, 1938). Knowledge transformation is about use,
application, and the personalization of knowledge as teachers interpret curricular knowledge into the performance of teaching (Jackson, 1986).

Additionally, there are many local and contextual factors to consider: student/teacher interactions, relationships with administrators, interactions between colleagues, and the personal lives of teachers (Lieberman & Miller, 1984). This study undergirds the importance of studying the life of teachers as they participate in the practice of teaching, which is “on-going, social, and interactional” (Wenger, 1998, p.102). Given the mix of all these factors, it follows that the same teaching, resources, and methods do not yield the same results for all students, all classrooms, or all schools. Although there are cultural scripts, or “those subjectivities available to us to choose from as we play our part” (Reynolds, 1996, p. 71), I emphasize the notion that individuals exert their choices. Cultural scripts, no matter how bounded they are, are translated by people who bring their own identities into carrying out these scripts. Each individual acts within a cultural script (i.e. curriculum) that defines specific goals and outcomes, yet the ways that individuals enact these goals into practice can be “sustained, changed, or challenged” (Miller & Goodnow, 1995, p.6).

Teaching is not an isolated, discrete practice, but an interactive process that occurs as teachers engage with the curriculum, with other teachers, and with students. Therefore the practice of teaching cannot be captured by curricula that offers a script of how to conduct a lesson, especially because practice is dynamic – what is planned is not necessarily what is enacted. Connelly and Clandinin (1999), in their study of teachers enacting practice, refer to the idea of a “cover story” (p.13) to illustrate the divergence between the plans and the enactment. Teachers opt to tell superficial stories of practice
where everything works out according to plan, yet these cover stories give only a small
view that renders the classroom as a flat, mechanical space. In actuality, classrooms are
places of action – practical places where curriculum is made (Clandinin & Connelly,
1996). Classrooms can also be places where identities are constructed.

**Identity Construction Within Communities of Practice**

This dissertation focuses on teachers who occupy the current educational
landscape discussed earlier. “The landscape, situated at the interface of theory and
practice in teachers’ lives, can be understood as filled with different kinds of stories”
(Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p.140). These stories consist of the experiences that
teachers have within their school lives and their personal lives – the two spaces merge as
teachers enact practice. Through living out their personal lives, teachers build theories
and worldviews that are translated into their philosophies of education (Dewey, 1938;
Wenger, 1998). Therefore, in conducting research on teachers, it is useful to see their
personal identity and their professional identity as reciprocal – the one informs the other.
It is important to study the *life* of teachers rather than study the impact of curriculum or
methods on learning – these methods are given meaning and value by the teachers who
implement them. Despite efforts to provide the best set of universal practices, teachers
translate curriculum and instructional methods based on personal ideologies. Therefore, it
is useful for teachers to be seen holistically; they should be seen as people who have
interests, ideas, beliefs, experiences, and passions that influence their interactions with
curriculum and with students (Lieberman & Miller, 1984).

Teachers exist in this social space of school that comes with norms, ideas, and
relationships that are constructed within their school world. Yet, at the same time,
teachers are in a socially, historically, and culturally situated time that includes standardized testing, universal standards, and regulated curricula. Within this backdrop, individuals have specific narrated accounts of how they experience the educational world through “improvisation, conflict, embodiment, and dialogue” (Holland et. al., 2003, p.18) within this larger context. Teachers bring their own past histories, beliefs, and ideologies as a response to the existing framework. Although these interactions can be mediated by the larger discourse (e.g. teacher quality discussions, political policies, funding cuts, NCLB, common core standards, etc.), individuals are not controlled by the larger discourse as passive agents but are actively engaged in it as they participate in social activities or deliberately oppose them. Simply put, teachers selectively decide on what directions and specifications they will follow in curricular guides (Doyle, 1992).

If we are to view curriculum as a set of enacted events, then it is important to take into account the individuals who construct them and carry them out. Following the work of those who looked at understanding the cultural experiences of teachers as they build knowledge and practice (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Dewey, 1938; Schwab, 1970), I seek to contribute to the idea that teachers’ identities complicate standard definitions of teaching. This idea is reflected in Connelly and Clandinin’s term “personal practical knowledge:”

Personal practical knowledge is in the teacher’s past experience, in the teacher’s present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions. Personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher’s practice. It is, for any teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation. (1999, p. 1)
Curriculum and classroom practices, then, are composed with teachers’ life histories, social experiences, and lived contexts (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Cooper & Olson, 1996; Doyle & Carter, 2003; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995). The professional identity of teachers is, in essence, shaped by their personal identities – the next section helps to capture this complexity.

**Constructing the world of teachers.** Holland et. al.’s (2003) conception of “figured worlds” (p.41) asserts that the relationship between individuals and their world is reciprocal as they enter into social worlds yet recreate them through their entrance and participation. Similarly, identities are improvised – meaning they are always in process as individuals engage in activities in specific situations with the cultural materials that are available to them. Human beings are bound by the social and cultural worlds, but individuals move themselves within and around these worlds as their own human subjectivities allow them to interpret situations with varied perspectives as well as use cultural tools in unique and innovative ways.

The creation of new cultural products comes from the “meeting of persons, cultural resources, and situations in practice” (Holland et. al., 2003, p.40). Thus, teachers and students continually engage in new constructions and productions of knowledge through interactions with each other and the curriculum. Therefore, although limitations are placed on the agency of teachers, teachers still have the power to act purposively and reflectively with curriculum, often remaking it. Borrowing from Bahktin (1986), individuals author themselves and create new possibilities by appropriating and changing cultural materials (e.g., assessment tests, categorical labels for children, curricular materials, etc.) for their use. Furthermore, this agency can come from collective action as
individuals come together in socially organized ways to support one another (e.g., communities of practice). Figured worlds – or the socially constructed spaces that individuals inhabit – give meaning to people through cultural tools, activities, landscapes, and interactions with others. It is in these worlds that identities are lived, produced, and conceptualized through activities in social contexts through practice.

For teachers, “the practices of teaching and curriculum making that fill the in-classroom places are expressions of teacher’s knowledge, knowledge which we see as narrative knowledge…their way of being in the classroom is storied” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p.140). Teachers come to access knowledge through participation, active engagement, and competence, which produces meaning. As individuals engage in the practices of social communities, they construct identities within it. This participation “shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (Wenger, 1998, p.4). Learning happens in practice (doing), in community (belonging), in identity (becoming), and in meaning-making (experiencing) as an interconnected process. Given this idea, learning is situated as individuals (teachers, students, administrators, parents, etc.) improvise, coordinate, and assert agency and intentions onto everyday practices and experiences (Doyle & Carter, 2003). Communities of practice, then, have their own stories, created and re-created by the individuals within those communities. In schools, these are the stories of teachers’ experiences of classroom/school events, individual children’s stories, and other experiences that members of the community share. Additionally, teachers are involved in multiple communities that overlap, conflict, and extend their own ideas of teaching and learning: the teacher community and the classroom community.
**Teacher Communities.** Teachers have a personal world with relationships that they must navigate, a school world with structural, curricular, and administrative demands that they must negotiate, and a classroom world that is co-constructed with the unique individuals of a particular class in a particular time, creating a specific dynamic. Within a school structure, teachers not only play a significant role in their classroom community through their interaction with students, but in their school community through their interactions with other adults. Teachers do not work in isolation, nor do they always work in contexts that are desirable to them. This makes the culture of school a site of constant negotiation, as individuals who work at a school have conflicting ideologies, beliefs, and backgrounds that can make it difficult to work with each other. Furthermore, each school community has its own ideologies, shared experiences, and norms that make construction of meaning possible, regardless of whether teachers choose to participate in these communities as central or peripheral players.

Because adults are part of multiple settings and groups, teachers (and other adults) have the potential to learn throughout their lives from multiple settings, circumstances, and forms. Learning is an accumulative process of past experiences, knowledge, beliefs, etc. (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Smylie, 1995) – it is on-going and interactional. It is both professional and personal, encompassing backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences that contribute to the construction of self (Holland et. al., 2003). Teachers actually build their professional knowledge and identities with other teachers in their schools. Their experiences, conversations, and interactions contribute to the collective understanding of curriculum and instruction. School communities build around these different individuals who engage in “shared work, shared interest, and
shared struggle” (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1999, p.307), each of them contributing to the culture of the school community. Communities of practice offer a perspective of learning that is situated in lived experiences of people as they participate with materials, circumstances, and others within their contexts. Embedded in this perspective is the notion that learning is a social act and, through participation, these acts shape who we are, what we do, and how we interpret and come to understand what we do.

Teacher groups are organized in several different ways in schools, both informal and formal. At times, teachers form groups around common interests and friendships while, at other times, teachers are placed into groups by grade level and other distinct markers. Like any type of community, participation and levels of engagement among those within the groups vary (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Negotiating relationships, then, is a central part of how people get things done – they laugh, they divulge information about themselves to one another, they form friendships, they perform tasks, and they argue. Furthermore, teachers do not leave their identities at the door, but they continue to assert, construct, and reconstruct identity within different social spaces. Within teacher communities, teachers’ lives in the classroom and teachers’ lives outside of the classroom converge into a communal professional space. Within their communities, teachers exchange stories or narrative accounts of their experiences, and these stories are confirmed, rejected, or even created anew through collaborative groups (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

In sum, teachers are involved in communities of practice that develop over time in specific ways, with individuals participating in and contributing to the culture. The culture of each school, and certainly the interaction with curriculum, is co-created by the
participants inside and outside of the classroom, creating particularities that are unique to each site. “The enterprise is never fully determined by an outside mandate, by a prescription, or by any individual participant…the practice evolves into the community’s own response to that mandate” (Wenger, 1998, p.80). Thus curriculum is made within these communities rather than simply given.

Classroom communities. The classroom community is a space where identities are lived, produced, and conceptualized. The social conditions and the materials in this community are dynamic as individuals author themselves and assert agency through an amalgamation of multiple voices, actions, tools, and participation (Bahktin, 1986). In classrooms, the act of teaching combined with these curricular mandates do not automatically insure that learning will occur, as learning is an emergent, on-going, situated process. Therefore, what is being taught may not be what is actually being learned – teaching and learning are not necessarily causal (Dewey, 1938; Doyle, 1992; Freire, 1970; Hlebowitsh, 2012). In other words, because those who deliver the curriculum and those who receive it are multifaceted in their identities and understandings, the intended outcomes of curriculum are not always achieved. Failing to acquire elements of a curriculum is not simply an indicator of an inability to learn; rather, the failure can be the result of various factors (teaching, instructional materials, curricula, texts, experience, worldview, etc.).

Through interactions, children and teachers assert their identities within “figured worlds – a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (Holland et. al., 2003, p.52). These social
acts become dispositions that children take up as they respond to others. However, these identities are not static but constantly changing. Children try out and rehearse different types of identities that are continuous and reconfigured as they practice and play out their multiple identities, creating a hybridized self (Bahktin, 1981; Dyson, 1993, 2007). Even within highly regulated environments, “it is difficult to avoid unusual combinations of people and things” (Holland et. al., 2003, p. 279). Therefore, classrooms have their own narratives, which are lived out by the individuals in it, involving personal experiences that are particularly relevant to them. In Rose’s (1995) account of classrooms across the United States, he reiterates the idea that individuals in context make each classroom a bit distinct from the next, despite efforts to make them uniform. Bringing these distinctions to the surface is a way to avoid superficial reporting of classrooms that make general claims, leaving out the participants while trivializing teaching and learning along causal lines (Connelly & Clandenin, 1999; Doyle, 1992; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995).

Clearly, students and teachers come with different perspectives and identities as they enter into the classroom. At times, students and teachers understand each other’s intentions and goals, and at other times, they misunderstand them completely. Similarly, teaching and learning is more than just technicalities; it is the mix of teachers’ and students’ evolving selves and the interrelatedness of their environments – locally, nationally, and globally. All of these individuals are the social actors that make up the classroom as a cultural site. Teachers can deliver the curriculum, and students can receive that same curriculum and complete the activities, yet come to interpret the purposes of these activities in ways that were never intended. Therefore, communities of practice are important sites for “negotiation, learning, meaning, and identity—as involving complex
interactions between the local and the global” (Wenger, 1998, p.133), implying that learning and development are as much a process of “becoming” as one of acquiring skills. At the same time, we both embody identities and have identities imposed on us, depending on social positions defined by race, class, gender (Erickson, 1986; Holland et. al., 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991). To this, I would add — in school — assessments and tests. These identities are key in enacting practice.

Identity formation is an on-going process that involves interpretation and reinterpretation of our own experiences as we live through them (Cooper & Olson, 1996). Thus, our experiences take on new meanings at different points in our lives depending on when, where, and how we are situated. In the process, we piece together theories based on fragments of our experiences. Additionally, we are part of the places that we inhabit, creating particular cultures. Thus, culture is created by social agents in a particular place or system with specific people; culture is “dynamic, interactional, and emergent” (Gonzalez, 2005, p.?). School cultures, especially, represent the fusion of multiple cultural systems—a hybrid of resources, knowledge, and ideologies that teachers and children bring into a classroom space. Classrooms are places where individuals interpret knowledge and position themselves, ultimately participating in the creation of ways of “knowing” and “being” (Gonzales, 2005).

**Curriculum as a Social Construction**

It is in this complicated space called the classroom that curriculum is enacted and constructed. I define the official curriculum as the documents and texts that are related to what students are expected to know and be able to do. Additionally, it includes the “normative selection, classification, and framing of knowledge” (Deng & Luke, 2008,
p.67). It refers to the content, methods, and dispositions that order the experience of schooling (Doyle, 1992). Curriculum development is inherently a cultural and sociopolitical production as schools and society sanction what is considered valuable and appropriate for students to know and learn (Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008; Nieto et. al., 2008). Therefore, curriculum is a politically constructed process as educators are involved in a political act. Analyzing curriculum leads to questions such as: Who decides what is important? Whose knowledge is it? Why is it organized this way? Curriculum is also transformed when material is selectively taught or reinterpreted by the teachers who make decisions about what is important for children to know, based on their own political, social, and personal reasons. Teaching, instructional materials, curricula, and texts are resources that are enacted by specific individuals with varied intents. A piece of curricular text, in itself, does not have meaning. It is given meaning by the participants who interpret its linguistic features, functions, and communicative intents. Thus, any text involves language, situation, and meaning as it is interpreted and appropriated by people (Collins & Blot, 2003). Curriculum, then, is ultimately authored by students and teachers within the classroom as they struggle to define and understand its intents through practice (Doyle, 1992).

In the current state of heightened accountability, the trend has been to create “teacher-proof curricula” (Doyle, 1992; Levin, 2008) where teaching practices are highly scripted and built with a high level of specificity, attempting to standardize behavior. In reality, teachers have varied backgrounds, varied ideologies and values, and are part of varied contexts which form “enacted” curriculum (Apple, 2004; Deng & Luke, 2008; Jackson, 1986) —the ways that official curriculum is actually practiced in the classroom
with children, mediated by teachers. Furthermore, the “hidden curriculum” (Apple 2004; Jackson, 2004) reveals that norms, values, and dispositions are part of participating in school, which inadvertently affects a student’s success with official curriculum. Schools operate under a set of rules and events that are unique to the space of school. These events are usually partitioned by time (e.g., the hours in a school day, the 9-month calendar, yearly promotion to the next grade) and teachers and students learn to occupy the space of school within this landscape. Children come to understand the hidden curriculum (or the unstated rules) of school by navigating it through various acts (e.g., resistance, assuming the proper behavior, faking compliance, etc.).

Ferguson, in her study of a group of black males in school, brings into question the idea of this “hidden curriculum” (2001, p.2). In schools, rewards and punishments are handed out in order to rank, file, and organize children into distinct—and almost impenetrable—groups, leading to the success and failure of historically and socially marginalized groups (Foucault, 1977). For example, the perception that black males should be feared and consequently isolated was further perpetuated by the school structures such as the “punishing room” where “troublemakers” were usually sent. The boys in Ferguson’s study insisted on maintaining their racial identities, using their vernacular dialect, and asserting their physical prowess as males—actions that did not follow the underlying script of how students should behave in school. This earned them the title of “bad boys” within a system that labeled them as finished before they even started. I would have to agree with Ferguson (2001) when she claims that “troublemakers are not born, they are made” (2001, p. 215) by schools that categorize
and sort children based on measurable, discrete skills. In this way, curriculum can become a socialization tool used to evaluate and order children.

Curriculum is not just limited to the texts used to teach; curriculum also includes assessments that are used to judge and evaluate learning. Thus, a broad understanding of curriculum encompasses the official, enacted, and hidden curriculum – everything that students experience and learn inside and outside of school, as an interwoven process of learning (Ayers, Quinn, Stovall, & Scheiern, 2008). Furthermore, the curriculum is actually co-constructed by teachers and students through their participation or lack thereof. It is interpreted and given meaning by students and produced within these local contexts, for better or for worse. Because curricula are “not static, neutral documents of fact but rather dynamic, ideological, cultural artifacts that do something” (Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008, p. 153), there is a need to study the ways that teachers’ and students’ everyday interactions reconstruct and transform curricular knowledge.

Inquiry into teaching and curriculum should include a close examination of how teachers and students interact with curricula to create their own meanings, construct their own identities, and build their own communities of practice. Standardization of children and the homogenization of knowledge ignore the fact that schools are part of specific and particular places that are bound by local, historical, and contextual factors that inevitably situate all experiences with curriculum.

On the surface, this problem looks easy: teachers teach and students learn. But in its enacted form a curriculum is an intricate social event shaped by the understandings, dispositions, resources, and goals of the teacher and students. (Doyle, 1992, p.509)
Furthermore, a mismatch is likely to exist between curriculum and children’s learning needs if there is a sequenced plan for instruction that does not take into account the learning that occurs in different cultures and communities before children enter school (Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2007; Brandt, 2001; Clay, 1998; Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Heath, 1983). Scripted curriculum (e.g., a curriculum that organizes the time, space, and materials, and enactment of ideas) puts a value and trajectory on what is viewed as literacy (Dyson, 1999). The next section focuses on literacy and its apparent mismatch with the official curriculum.

**Literacy as a Sociocultural Practice**

For this study, I define literacy as the social practices involving the use of reading and writing (Street, 1984). Embedded in these practices are conceptions of what it means to be a “good reader” and a “good writer.” School is one of the first experiences where children encounter formal definitions and ideas about what it means to be deemed literate. Prior to their entrance into school, children come with all kinds of experiences with language and systems in place for “learning how to mean” (Halliday, 1993). Tied to these systems are cultural conceptions of what it means to be a competent user of language. Becoming literate, then, is not simply a matter of understanding the alphabet, reciting words on a page, or stringing sounds together to make words, but it is a cultural tool used to participate at home, at school, and in the wider culture. It is important to consider the “multiple worlds” (Dyson, 1989, 1993) that children are a part of, recognizing their communicative competencies as resources for academic participation (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). Thus, teachers must act as brokers in building a bridge
between out-of-school literacy practices and in-school literacy practices, especially for linguistically and ethnically diverse students (Hull & Schultz, 2002).

Chomsky (1968) believed that infants were born with innate, universal linguistic structures. Through watching, noticing patterns, and interacting, infants attempt to figure out how the language of their community puts together these basic structures and relationships to convey meaning to one another. Therefore, young children are competent users of language before they enter the classroom doors, and scholars (Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Hymes, 1972/2001) advocate for widening the lens of literate practices to homes, workplaces, and communities as sites for literacy production. The development of literacy is “intricately linked to the construction of social roles, cultural affiliations, beliefs, values, and behavioral practices” (Li, 2008, p.14). Contrary to this view, scripted curricula only serves to narrow this lens. Language, from a child’s perspective is “meaningful, contextualized, and in the broadest sense, social” (Halliday, 1969, p.280). At times, a dichotomy is created between home and school by “accepting, promoting, rejecting, and transforming the sense of self and social belonging that children bring to and take from this institutional encounter” (Collins & Blot, 2003, p.106). Thus, reductionist theories of language may not account for children’s existing linguistic and cultural competencies (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Goodman, 1984). Valuing multiple forms and modes of literacy—including the practices entailing the resources of popular culture and environmental print, as well as the cultural tools of dialects and vernaculars—requires that children are part of the construction of literacy.

Building upon this view of language, Heath’s (1983) examination of the literacy practices in Trackton reveals how culturally-based forms of literacy may not match the
school-based forms of literacy. In Trackton, oral and literate traditions were interwoven to create a literacy event (a practice where written text plays a role). Many times, the printed text was only a tertiary part of the social interactions around everyday events (e.g., filling out forms, reporting information in a survey, etc.) so traditional forms of literacy (writing prose or expository texts) were neither relevant nor produced. Children in this community were not socialized to answer questions to already known facts, give out personal information, or read traditional texts. Thus, school was not a neutral place, but a powerful social institution that highlighted children’s differences and marginalized their oral traditions. Because this school served to reinforce specific cultural values, children whose home practices closely resembled those of school were better positioned to succeed.

From a sociocultural perspective, then, literacy practices involve the use of oral and written language that are organized in response to local situations. Individuals appropriate cultural resources, which are historically cumulated and internalized by people (Bahktin, 1981; Rogoff, 2003; Street, 1984). In particular, writing in school happens in the context of broader literacy practices that occur in the home, the community, and the world as an accumulation of multimodal practices that are mediated by the acts of reading, writing, and talking, as well as and by the use of materials, such as drawing. Children develop language use not by a set of rules and regulations (although they exist), but by mutual interactions, communicative processes, contexts, and non-verbal cues and gestures (Hymes, 1972).

Goodman (1984) further demonstrates the complexity of literacy development as she draws from several branches of participating in a literate society: functional,
linguistic, and relational or semiotic. Functional refers to the reasons for using language; linguistic refers to the ways that written language is organized (orthographic, graphophonic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic); relational or semiotic refers to the ways oral and written language relate to make meaning – the idea that some unit of written language connotes some unit of meaning. In essence, there are several different ways that people participate in the act of literacy, ranging from organizational to communicative. Goodman’s work illuminates the troubling notion that most of school literacy is often isolated to linguistic features. Her critique is that reading and writing competency in the early grades is moving away from reading and writing as a social, communicative practice to reading and writing as basic skills, language forms, and decontextualized rules – functional more than relational.

**Literacy in Contemporary Times**

Every child arrives at language development and literacy through unique pathways (Clay, 1998; Halliday, 1993; Lindfors, 2008; Szwed, 1981). Writing leaves visible traces of thought, language, and communication. Children’s writing, in particular, reveals the interplay between what they want to write and what actually winds up on paper. Children will vary in their development of literacy, and more importantly, come to understand its practices interchangeably instead of linearly (Clay, 1975). To master one skill before moving on to another oversimplifies the complicated nature of developing literate practices. Essentially, children have experiences with literacy in their world outside of school. Therefore, they, usually, do not wait until they begin formal schooling to explore the features of print; thus, classrooms are sites where cultural practices of children and intended requirements of the curriculum overlap as well as
conflict. This requires teachers to create a “curricular bridge” (Prior, 2006, p.305) between the curriculum and the increasingly diverse population of children in our communities.

Due to changing cultural planes and media options, there are wide-ranging forms of available texts and ways to represent meaning (visual, audio, gestural, spatial, etc.). These “New Literacies” (New London Group, 1996; Street, 1984) represent shifts in history that situate the practice of literacy, calling for multiple modes for representing and interpreting information and knowledge. Children, today, are literate in multiple contexts through the use of technology, media, computer games, and toys, which reach beyond the competencies required of traditional reading and writing tasks at school. Kirkland and Jackson (2009) highlight the ways that clothing, writing on shoes, media representations, clothing labels, slogans, and lyrics to popular rap songs act as literate tools or texts. Technology and media add another layer to the textual landscape that is available for children as they engage in literate acts (Dyson, 1999, 2003; Marsh, 2008). Clearly, these texts are performed and used by individuals in different ways through varying degrees of participation. It is difficult to define a standard literacy practice (as scripted curricula attempts to do) because attempting to determine common cultural tools and uses of literacy only further highlight the local diversity in dialects, home languages, visual meanings, symbols and codes, and communicative styles.

Towards a Theory of Professional Development: A Democratic Approach

We need a different kind of critique, one that does not minimize the inadequacies of curriculum and instruction, the rigidity of school structure, or “savage inequalities” of funding, but that simultaneously opens discursive space for
inspired teaching, for courage, for achievement against odds, for successful struggle, for insight and connection that occur continually in public school classrooms around the country. (Rose, 1995, p. 4)

The debate to fix schools continually returns to teacher quality. Most of the conversations around school reform attempt to place more demands on teachers, measure success with impossible data metrics, offer tips and tricks to ensure learning, and script practice with absolute precision. However, most of the discussion about school reform has centered on activities that are done to teachers instead of done with them.

Professional development should account for teachers’ existing knowledge and beliefs, develop reflective capacities, and emerge from the school context. These reflective capacities are built not by minimizing the agencies of teachers, but by allowing teachers the flexibility to consider and reconsider their practice (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995).

Teachers should play a role, if not the central role, in their own development and learning. This gives local districts natural advantages in planning professional development and mobilizing its members. Many scholars (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hargreaves, 1995; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 2004) advocate for professional development to move away from one-shot workshops that view teachers as passive listeners towards communities of practice where teachers are active contributors in the construction of teaching practices. If learning is to be viewed as a socially constructed event, then professional development should take into consideration adults as social beings who, also, learn and develop through interaction and participation.

Communities of practice that focus on inquiry allow teachers to explore an issue by examining their own practice and enactment of curriculum as the essential tool for
understanding the content, challenging ideologies, and transforming practices. Since teaching is situational and occurs in particulars – “particular students interacting with particular teachers over particular ideas in particular circumstances” (Ball & Cohen, 1999, p.10), the best way to improve instruction is within it.

Over time, communities that support inquiry develop their own histories and in a certain sense their own culture – a common discourse, shared experiences that function as touchstones, and a set of procedures that provide structure and form for continued experience. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p.53)

Building on the work of Dewey (1938), teachers’ own cultural communities should feel liberating in that they are able to create discourse, exchange ideas gleaned from experiences, devise new procedures, and pose alternatives to structures and forms (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995).

Wilson, Miller, and Yerkes (1993) illustrate the “living, breathing, and ever changing phenomenon” (p.121) of collaborative inquiry as a space that allowed them to try out new ideas and develop exciting approaches to their teaching. Through the Michigan Partnership for New Education, a university collaborator and two elementary school teachers were able to work together in a classroom on their instructional practice. Through observations and reflections, the teachers started to ask questions about the curricular clock: Why did we race through these ideas? What happened if we did? What happened if we didn’t? Were students actually learning less because we were covering less? (p.96). These questions served as a point of inquiry and encouraged teachers to look for evidence, giving them the confidence and the support to make changes. By looking collaboratively at student work, designing their own curriculum and assessments,
teachers “gain collective knowledge, confidence, and power to construct alternatives to standardized approaches” (Lieberman & Miller, 2004, p.11).

Lieberman and Grolnick (1999) analyzed professional development networks across the country and found that the most successful professional networks shared some common themes: flexible goals, direction that emerged from the group, and input that was valued as a professional contribution. Groups that form with a common purpose (such as teacher inquiry groups or other collaborative relationships) are, inevitably, social events where people are acting and reacting to one another simultaneously (Bloome, Power Carter, Morton Christian, Madrid, Otto, Shuart-Faris, & Smith, 2008). It is within these social events that potentially new meanings and individual agency can be recognized. In these collaborative spaces, it is possible for individuals to produce and assert new kinds of discourse (e.g., changes to teaching practices) as a challenge to dominant forms of discourse (e.g., mandated curriculum and national standards). Making subject matter accessible to students requires that teachers understand their students’ cultures, thus making teacher input a critical factor in figuring out how instructional materials connect to the students they are teaching (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1999; Dyson, 2007; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Moll, 2001; Moll & Gonzales, 1994). Furthermore, universal or common curriculum is always subject to the interpretation of individuals; teachers will inevitably interpret and understand the curriculum with their own subjectivities. In fact, it is important to recognize that people have the power to influence and remake their worlds through interactions and dialogue as they create new possibilities for cultural materials, such as curriculum.
Sahlberg (2011), in his discussion of the Finnish school system, illuminates the decentralized nature of the country’s school system and the government’s commitment to locally governed schools. Finland’s school system, recognized for its success, allows teachers the right to use their professional judgment to perform their work – they “control curriculum, student assessment, school improvement, and community involvement” (Sahlberg, 2011, p.7). Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) support this idea - valuing professionalism, trust, and shared responsibility amongst teachers. This is a far cry from the nation’s focus on standardized curriculum, high-stakes assessments, and competitive initiatives (e.g., Race to the Top, merit pay, etc.) to foster educational reform. These initiatives inevitably allow less time for teacher creativity and experimentation, while creating an environment where teachers feel pressured to strictly adhere to the curriculum (Apple, 2004; Wood, 2004).

Conclusion

By taking a sociocultural approach to teaching and learning, I define teaching practice, curriculum, and literacy as the interplay of people, contexts, and their evolving selves. In doing so, individuals are constantly imagining and re-imagining their worlds, creating avenues for new possibilities. Following this theoretical thread, I aim to challenge narrow views of literacy that are articulated by scripted curricula. At the same time, I use this theoretical lens to show teaching and learning as complex. My aim is not to offer the solution to fixing schools, but to present the story of why simple solutions only skim the surface of what is happening in schools. In this study, I seek to understand the nature of curriculum, how it is enacted, and how individuals interpret and make meaning from it. In answering these questions, I hope to shift agency away from
politicians and publishers and make a case for teacher agency. In the next chapter, I
describe the methods and design I used to conduct my study.
Chapter 3

Methods

I wish I could clone myself so that one person can be the practitioner and one person can just be the researcher and go around and take notes.

(Tammy, focal teacher)

Upon leaving my research site, Tammy acknowledged the fact that so many things were happening within a single classroom event that researching and teaching can almost be two distinct activities. Although she was an astute observer of children, she recognized the limitations of being the classroom teacher who was responsible for keeping tabs on 25 children simultaneously. She understood that spending time with a group of children meant that she was missing the exciting interactions that were happening all around her. It was impossible to catch everything since, at any point in time, children were living out their identities in varied ways throughout the classroom. Similarly, I would add that teachers are living out their identities in schools in varied ways in communities across the nation. This means that a single narrative that depicts teachers as failing and students as underachieving does not take into account the multiple narratives and variations of that story being lived out in classrooms across the United States. Statements that claim to fix the educational system with comments like, “We must fire bad teachers” (Thomas & Winger, 2010) assume that the story of teaching and learning is predictable and similar, when, in fact, it is situated, nuanced, and complicated. Meier (1995/2002), in her own experiences with school reform, warns us that “a false story produces false villains and false solutions” (p.75). My research was designed not to determine the true story (which arguably does not exist), but to “reveal the multiple truths
apparent in others’ lives” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Using ethnographic methods, my goal is to tell the story of one group of teachers engaging in their everyday teaching practices around writing instruction in an attempt to present how individuals experience school. I avoid static definitions of curriculum; rather, I view students and teachers as having the agency to construct or deconstruct the goals of literacy curricula. By describing this particular case, I hope to highlight the complexities that exist in teaching and learning by revealing the ways that teachers came to understand literacy curriculum in its current state (scripted, paced, and regulated), how they enacted literacy instruction in their classroom, and how this instruction was interpreted and practiced in the classroom by the children. The forthcoming chapters focus on how these larger curricular and instructional issues are understood and enacted by particular individuals in this school as they interact with one another. I chose an ethnographic approach for my study because on-going participation in the field over a period of time allowed me to observe the struggle, confusion, cooperation, and transformation that occurred as teachers made meaning out of curriculum, their own teaching, and children. This chapter presents the methodological design for my study using the following research questions as a guide:

1. How do teachers construct their beliefs about literacy in collaborative spaces?
   a. What is the nature of collaboration?
   b. What are teachers’ perceptions about literacy learning in school?
   c. What do teachers view as important for kindergartners as far as literacy development?
   d. What experiences, beliefs, and/or identities undergird teachers’ perspectives about literacy?
2. How do teachers interpret and enact the mandated, literacy curricula (official curriculum)?
   a. What is the nature of the mandated, writing curriculum?
   b. What are the teachers’ perceptions about this curriculum?
   c. To what extent do teachers use the curriculum to make instructional decisions? How do teachers decide on what to teach and how to teach writing?
   d. How do teachers adjust their writing instruction? How is this negotiation facilitated?

3. How do teachers and students construct the enacted literacy curriculum together?
   a. What is the nature of teacher-to-student interactions during writing events?
   b. How do students interpret the meanings assigned to writing in school? In what ways do children change or reinterpret these meanings?
   c. How do children interpret their own written attempts?
   d. How do teachers interpret children’s written attempts?

While political rhetoric simply places blame on teachers and schools for the destruction of the American public schools, my goal in carrying out this study was to complicate the ways that teachers teach and students learn. In an attempt to tell the unique story of these children and teachers as they grappled with literacy and the curriculum, I set the stage by introducing the participants, the site, data collection procedures, data analysis steps, and my own complex role as a researcher.

**Participants**

For this particular study, I focused on a group of three kindergarten teachers at Eleanore Roosevelt Elementary School. It was important to look at early writing development because of the added pressure on teachers and students to be “kindergarten-ready.” To this end, I recruited all three kindergarten teachers at this school, as it was
important to get the teachers’ perspectives on this phenomenon. These teachers represented a wide range of teaching careers. Tammy and Jessica were at the tail end of a long tenure as primary grade instructors while Tonia was at the beginning stages of teaching kindergarten after teaching intermediate grades (3-5th) for some time. Jessica and Tammy are European-American while Tonia is African-American; all are female, which is representative of the field of teaching as well as this district - 83% of teachers were classified as white and 75% were female.

**Tonia.** I first met Tonia 5 years ago when she was teaching 3rd grade. At the time, she was a fairly new teacher on a team with a particularly outspoken teacher who questioned many district policies. She often hung back as her colleague went on his usual rants about the curriculum, the district mandates, and other policies that he did not agree with. Tonia was a quiet woman who could come off as timid or even fearful, at times. For instance, she was the only teacher in the group that referred to her principal as a “supervisor” figure who had the authority to report people who were not following the guidelines. When I was reacquainted with her as a kindergarten teacher, she seemed much more confident – still soft-spoken and quiet but much more talkative than I remembered her to be. When she reflected on her early years teaching, this was what she recounted:

I know a few teachers when I first started, they were not using the curriculum.

They were using their old curriculum. They taught out of a certain social studies book that we weren't using any longer, and they were caught doing that too! And I have to say, they had a lot of good reasons for not using the curriculum. And it made a lot of sense when they were giving me pointers. It made a lot of sense
because I was saying, “Wow, these kids just don’t get it [referring to the curriculum that was mandated]. The kids are not paying attention and I’m trying this and that. They would say, “Let me tell you what I’m using.” So, it made a lot of sense.

Tonia was very quiet back then and was often overshadowed by her more vocal and older colleagues. At the time of the study, she was in her 8th year of teaching; however, it was her 3rd year teaching kindergarten with this new team of teachers that were strong-willed yet less aggressive and less confrontational. After teaching in the intermediate grades for 5 years, she joined Tammy and Jessica for what was now 3 years; her kindergarten teaching colleagues intentionally seemed to stop and ask her about her opinions and purposefully tried to include her in the conversations. Her entire teaching career was in the school district and specifically at Roosevelt School; she taught 3rd, 4th, and K in her short period of time there and worked through 3 principals – all of whom had a penchant for moving people around to different grades.

Jessica. Jessica taught kindergarten for 18 years in this school district at Roosevelt. She spent 4 years substitute teaching before arriving at Roosevelt to teach kindergarten ever since. She grew up in the area and even attended school in the district where she taught. She only left the area to go to college in a town located in the same part of the state. Jessica and Tammy were very close friends and had a ritual of going on an annual “shopping trip” to a metropolitan area 2 hours away. Jessica was chosen by the principal as one of a few teachers to attend the summer PLC (professional learning community) conference based on the work of DuFour (2004). Jessica was mild-mannered and soft-spoken; she was considered an excellent teacher by her principals,
colleagues, and parents in the school community. On occasion, she hosted teachers from other schools to observe her literacy block or her centers. She told me that her centers were non-traditional and feared that they might not have the academic punch that people might expect. She confessed that she had a “dramatic play” center, which she knew some individuals would frown upon as play was now discouraged in kindergarten. On several occasions, Jessica pointed out that kindergarteners needed to have fun and have room to play and enjoy coming to school. Even as a teacher, she spoke of the importance of enjoying what she taught and mimicked a bored voice in reference to the curricular resources, “It’s just another Words Their Way lesson or I have to read another Joy Cowley book.” When the principal joked about the fact that what she said was being recorded, she covered her mouth and started laughing saying, “I just hope they [the students] are having fun while they are learning.”

Tammy (focal teacher). I met Tammy several years ago at Roosevelt around the same time I met Jessica and Tonia. I was working on staff development for writing and worked with Roosevelt’s grade level teams to talk about instruction, student writing, and the curriculum. Tammy was always vocal about expressing her opinions, yet reflective and open to new ideas. She was not someone who accepted every idea blindly, but I was impressed by her respect and polite manner during collaborations. Tammy said of herself,

I always feel like we've had so much curriculum handed to us in the past few years, I really do try to approach it with an open mind - I will try it.
I'm honest to say that I will try it, but I will also discard it if it's not
working for my kids. I just will. But I'll meet the expectations. But I'm not going to say, no never. I'll say let's give it a try.

This was how she tried to approach programs, especially because so many “canned programs” were coming down the pipeline. She pointed out that what teachers needed was “evidence” to account for the success or failure of curricular mandates in order to gain credibility to try alternatives. At collaboration meetings, Tammy clearly did the most talking; there were segments of transcription data where the conversational exchange consisted of John (the principal) and her talking back and forth with each other while the other two teachers sat and listened. With 23 years of teaching experience, Tammy knew that she was considered a “seasoned, veteran teacher” which afforded her a great deal more flexibility in how she enacted the curriculum. She was highly regarded by the faculty at the school and sought after by the parents in the community who often requested to have their children in her classroom. Like Jessica, Tammy also started her teaching career at Roosevelt, where she taught kindergarten for 15 years and a K/1 looping configuration for 8 years. She took a break from teaching when her first child was born and resumed when her youngest child started kindergarten, making her a little bit older than Jessica who taught for 22 consecutive years. Tammy grew up on a farm (where her family still resides) on the rural outskirts of town. She grew up with all brothers and spent many summers (and still did) swimming, gardening, fishing, boating, and farming with not only her brothers but with her 5 young grandchildren who “preciously occupy” much of her time. Her kindergartners knew a great deal about Tammy’s life outside of school as she shared many stories about holidays at home, spotting deer in the woods, playing with her dog named Griz, and harvesting her
farmland and the garden. She even brought tomatoes from her garden to share with the children after they finished up a unit on different types of crops.

Over the years, Tammy and I built a friendship – first as colleagues who worked with children, then later as fellow graduate students at the university where we took a few classes together. She considered herself a “true life-long learner”, taking graduate courses even after finishing her Master’s degree to stay current with issues and ideas in education. Although she took a year off of coursework due to her mother’s illness, she still enrolled in an “Education Through Music” course offered by the district because of her commitment to play and the arts in the classroom. This was evidenced by not only her style of instruction, but the landscape of her classroom. She had blocks, a dress-up area, a kitchen, an easel for painting, Legos, play-doh, and other toys that were becoming rare in kindergarten rooms in the district and across the nation. Like Jessica, she valued children’s play and allowed them a space to talk and interact freely with each other most times of the day. It was very rare for Tammy’s room to be silent as the sound of children’s voices was a constant, steady stream throughout the school day no matter what time of day you entered. However, it was very rare to see Tammy’s room disorganized or chaotic – the children always seemed to have a sense of ownership and ease throughout the school day. In addition to her obvious dedication to her classroom, Tammy was also very involved with leadership roles in the district—from presenting at conferences to developing workshops to teaching summer classes.

I chose Tammy as the focal teacher for several reasons, both personal and professional. It was important for me to have an existing relationship with the focal teacher so that I could observe the teacher in her natural disposition and style. We had a
close enough relationship where I did not feel anxious about her being nervous or
disingenuous during her teaching and/or interactions with students. She was also
extremely supportive of my work and allowed me unlimited access to her classroom, her
lesson plans, her time, and her thoughts on teaching and learning. Our conversations
ranged from talking about curriculum and writing to personal conversations about our
families and plans for the weekend. I would often ask her about her mother’s health (as I
knew this was a heavy concern for her) and she would ask me about my job search and
studies since that was heavy on my mind. Our professional relationship grew into a
personal friendship over the course of time, making her ideally suited for an in-depth
study on teaching practices.

I also could not help but feel a professional connection with Tammy as I viewed
her as somewhat of a kindred spirit. I knew that Tammy valued talk in the classroom and
exercised flexibility with the curriculum. Since she was considered “seasoned” and
widely respected in the school and amongst parents, I felt that she used her credibility to
enact curriculum in ways that other less-seasoned teachers would not have the freedom to
do. My research methodology relied on collecting data that was close to children’s
natural talk and experience with print, and I knew that Tammy made space for children to
use literacy in varied ways in the classroom. I have been in many classrooms through my
work where writing workshop was a silent time and an independent activity, and I knew
that Tammy provided children with opportunities to not only talk, but to talk naturally
and freely with each other. This gave me the chance to see what children talked and
wrote about when given the agency to do so.
Her thoughts on literacy closely aligned with my own, which allowed me the opportunity to see the enactment of curriculum as a negotiation between teachers and students – she valued drawing, oral talk, and multiple variations of “writing” as valuable to children’s understanding of writing. Practically speaking, she had a writing workshop everyday where children were given opportunities to create and write stories – a practice that has been replaced by decontextualized word, sound, and letter activities in many classrooms. My study attempts to highlight the struggle that even good teachers have with scripted curricula. Consequently, Tammy was ideally suited for this study, which was designed to capture the nature of practice rather than evaluate it.

**John.** John Taylor was the principal at Roosevelt and entering his 2nd year as the leader of the school at the time of this study. John was originally a marketing major in college and started off in the business world before going back to obtain his certification in secondary education. Although education was his second career, he managed to incorporate his initial degree and his interest in sports through his positions at schools. He spent his first 13 years of his educational career as a high school teacher in business education and moved into an athletic director position for 2 years. Prior to becoming the principal at Roosevelt, he served as an assistant principal at a neighboring school within the district—where I happened to have a long-standing relationship with many of the teachers as well as the principal. I met John during his time as assistant principal. John trusted me, which afforded me easy access to the school and support for my research project. John, like the teachers, spent almost his whole life in the area. It was my goal to portray John as an administrator who was doing his best to carry out his duties as a principal – a position that is politically charged in many districts. I did not want him to
be seen as the “bad guy.” I wanted him to be viewed within the constructs of the educational system: Teachers are guided by principals, who are guided by the district, who are guided by the state, who are guided by the federal government. There are undoubtedly mandates that trickle down from the top to the bottom that are delivered and implemented in schools, and John was only a part of that system. The struggles that John and his team of teachers faced were not new and are certainly a part of the narrative of many other schools as well. Initially, it was not my intention to include John as a major participant in this story about curriculum and schooling, but as I delved further into my site, John’s presence at the collaboration meetings and his interactions with the teachers played a large part in the teachers’ experience with curriculum. He, inevitably, became an important actor in this story.

Table 3.1

*Summary of the Adult Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th># of years in education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tammy Green</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica Capshaw</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonia Drummond</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Taylor (principal)</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>17 (2\textsuperscript{nd} year as principal)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Site**

**School.** Eleanore Roosevelt Elementary School was one of 11 schools that were part of a school district surrounding a university community in a small, urban area in the Midwest. This particular school district just moved out of a multi-year race-based consent degree, which included a court order that required the district to address equity issues concerning African-American students in the schools. One of the major initiatives
of the court order was the implementation of a “schools of choice” policy in place of neighborhood schools as a way to integrate students from different parts of the community. The intent was to make the schools more racially heterogeneous. Under the “schools of choice” program, every school chose a theme as an area of specialty to help families with the choice process. Roosevelt chose “Literature and Creative Writing,” which made it ideally suited for this specific study, as I was focusing on writing instruction. On their official school newsletter, literacy was described as a “gateway skill” and “integrated throughout all core academic areas.” The Literacy Lab, a computer-based reading and writing program, was showcased as something that could “inspire and enhance early literacy skills” for kindergarteners. A “Galaxy of Readers” program encouraged children to spend time reading at home, a “Golden Pencil Award” was a monthly program that recognized developing authors and illustrators, and annual reading events were organized to involve the whole community. At the time of this study, only the “Galaxy of Readers” program and the annual reading events were still intact as the lapsed consent decree and major restructuring of the school district was taking place. Additionally, it is important to note that Roosevelt housed the program for the hearing-impaired in addition to maintaining cross-categorical services for students with other disabilities. For kindergartners, this meant that children with mild to severe hearing impairments were integrated into the classroom since they were not yet extracted from the classrooms for self-contained services as, unfortunately, was the custom for students with other disabilities.

According to the 2010 Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) School Report Card, Roosevelt had about 64% of their students from an ethnic/racial background other
than White. Fifty% of the students were Black, which was higher than the district average (38%) and the state average (19%). This information was particularly relevant because, despite the implementation of the choice program, many of the schools remained similar in their racial/ethnic make-up both prior- and post-implementation of the choice option. Although the court order was now lifted, the challenge of equity on a broader scale (race, class, gender, special needs, etc.) still remained. At Roosevelt, the percentage of children classified as low-income was 63%, which was significantly higher than both the district and state levels. The income status percentage was based on the number of children receiving free and reduced lunch. Roosevelt was a Title I school, meaning that money was federally allocated to the school to meet the needs of students who were labeled “at-risk”, as determined by low economic status. Traditionally, Title 1 funds have been used for literacy-related resources (hiring additional personnel, purchasing supplemental reading materials, creating after-school reading/writing programs, and providing some type of professional development). It was, therefore, critical to examine how teachers viewed and made sense of this heavy influence on improving literacy.

The district was undergoing several changes during the 2011-2012 school year which included a new administrative team at central office, the construction of new STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) schools, and an initial plan to create an international baccalaureate program at one of the elementary schools. Roosevelt was undergoing major changes of its own as well. They broke ground for the construction of their new school, located on what the locals would call a “better part of town.” This promise of a new school building at a more appealing location was
beginning to change the demographic of the school as more affluent, white families were starting to select Roosevelt in the “schools of choice” program in anticipation of the move to the new school, scheduled for Fall 2013. The kindergarten classrooms were gradually starting to change in their racial make-up. In Tammy’s classroom (the focal teacher), almost half of the children were White and only one-third of the children were African-American or of African descent. This number was very different from the norm at Roosevelt where most of the classrooms in the upper grades had a majority of non-White children. As one of the teachers said at a meeting, “Our clientele is changing,” as evidenced by the stark contrast in the make-up of kindergarten classrooms and the intermediate classrooms (formed before talks of a new school). Table 3.2 shows a comparison between the demographic information in Tammy’s classroom as opposed to the entire school in 2011.

Table 3.2

Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Total Number (out of 25)</th>
<th>Percentage in Tammy’s classroom</th>
<th>Percentage in school (2011)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Race</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.4%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-income</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over the years, the school district, like many other school districts, adopted specific reading and writing curricula as a way to standardize and improve the teaching of literacy. However, Eleanor Roosevelt, along with most of the schools in the district, had not met the difficult demands of meeting adequately yearly progress (AYP), according to
performance data on the state, standardized tests. These issues continue to be part of the
everyday life of schools, especially the children and teachers who inhabit that space. It is
especially useful to see how school participants in a diverse school deal with the official
curriculum. Furthermore, this study offers a window into the implications of this
curriculum, its variations, and its enactment in the classroom.

**Focal classroom.** My first visit to Tammy Green’s classroom was early in
September when it was 90 degrees and humid outside. That week, Tammy read the book
*Thank You World* by Alice McGinty (2007). Stopping at the page where she thanked the
cool breeze, she taught the children how to blow on their arm gently as a way to cool
themselves off especially on hot days like that day. Tammy’s classroom was familiar to
me; I made several visits to her classroom over the last few years to watch her teach a
lesson, and even worked with her on a 4-week unit on building community a couple of
years back. On the large bulletin board above the windows on the north side of the
building, Tammy had decorated the board with flowers, grass, and trees along with the
cover of the book *Mrs. Spitzer’s Garden* by Edith Pattou (2001). Tammy said that she
started off each school year by reading this book with the children and ended each year
with the book because it symbolized growth; she believed that kindergartners were
emblematic of the growth process. Next to that was the “Superstar” board where a new
child was chosen each week. The first week, Mrs. Green was the “superstar” and she
brought in pictures and other artifacts from home to model for the children how to bring
something from home that helps others get to know someone better.
Figure 3.1. Super star bulletin board located along the north windows of the classroom. Each week, a student’s name was written in the middle of the square. On the ledge are artifacts that children brought from home to share with their peers.

The children usually brought toys from home as seen on the ledge above. Libby, a painfully shy, Caucasian girl in the classroom, brought in her Little Mermaid doll, her Belle figurine (from Beauty and the Beast) and a tiny, stuffed dog on her week (see Figure 3.1). Children shared about each artifact on each day of their week and participated in a Q&A session that Tammy set up. The questions varied from things like, “What’s your favorite food?” to “What’s your address?” to even questions such as, “What’s your favorite pumpkin?” Strangely enough, the children became very adept at answering all sorts of questions and responded very naturally with answers such as, “My favorite pumpkin are little ones.”

The interior of Tammy’s classroom changed with the seasons. In the summer, she had a garden theme and decorations that represented the sun and summer, but these decorations changed come fall with leaves and trees, and then again in winter with snowmen, Christmas trees, and candy canes. Hanging from the ceiling from one end of
the room to the other were several wires with clothespins where children’s work hung constantly; these pieces ranged from art projects to writing pieces created by the children throughout the year. The students sat at tables with chairs set up around them. On the back of their chairs were individual chair pockets with their names where children kept all of their materials. There were four rectangular tables with 5 children around them and one circular table with 4 children around. On the back corner of the room was a large rug with the alphabet around the edges of the carpet with words like “y” for “yo-yo” or “z” for zebra. I mention this because these words showed up in writing pieces as children, seated on this carpet, could easily look around the rug to find words. Lessons for writing, read-alouds, and other whole class instruction took place on the carpet, with children seated and Mrs. Green situated on the rocking chair at the front. Next to the carpet was a book stand where she strategically placed books that she read to the children. On the back corner of the room was a kidney-shaped table where small group instruction or assessments took place; she was extremely pleased to show this table to me as it was her first kidney-shaped table ever in all of years as a teacher. Tammy’s lesson plans were also neatly placed in a black binder on that table so I always knew to go over there as a regular routine to check on the plans that she wrote out for the day.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Since my focus was on the ways that teachers interpreted and enacted the curriculum, I used ethnographic methods (classroom observations, interviews, field notes, audio-taped conversations, and artifacts) in order to get a picture of teacher practices that I anticipated would include both the curriculum and their own personal histories and identities. My data collection began with an examination of the mandated writing
curriculum, *Units of Study* (2003) by Lucy Calkins. Additionally, the district had constructed a curricular timeline that ordered the length, specific time of year, and the resources need for each writing unit. Since 2003, there have been numerous iterations and revisions of the timeline as well as changes in the actual materials produced by the Teacher’s College Reading and Writing Project and the district. During the year of this study (2011), the Reading and Writing Project published revisions to their writing units for grades K-5. I examined all of these materials in order to understand the intent of the writing curriculum as well as its construction and interpretation by the district. The published curriculum, the revised version, and the district’s interpretation of the curriculum became what I refer to as “official curriculum.” In my analysis of the curriculum, I looked specifically to answer my second research question about the nature of the mandated curriculum. I paid attention to the goals of the lessons, the particular advice given in the texts, the resources that teachers were advised to use, and the pace of the units. Within the examination of curriculum, I paid attention to specific language ideologies as well as assumptions that were made about children’s literacy development.

Because I believe that the enactment of curriculum is a co-constructed process involving teachers and children as they interact with resources, language, and texts, I collected data in two spaces: the teacher collaboration space as well as the classroom space. I attended the collaboration meetings where all three teachers met with the principal as a sanctioned collaboration time, meaning it was mandatory and built into the school day for teachers to meet. In all, there were 5 meetings that I attended throughout the school year that lasted anywhere from 20 – 40 minutes, supposedly occurring every other Monday. In actuality, they ended up meeting about once per month. After
obtaining consent, I recorded each of these meetings, transcribed the audio that evening, and attempted to reconstruct the meeting using my field notes and transcriptions.

On the Mondays where teachers had a 40-minute plan time instead of a collaboration meeting, I met one-on-one with Tammy who graciously gave me the time to talk informally about her classroom, individual students, and thoughts on writing and the curriculum. I relied on these Mondays to clarify any issues that came up in the collaboration meetings and to help clarify my own interpretations of classroom writing events and conversations. In preparation for our bi-weekly Monday conversations, I kept a running list of questions that emerged as I was collecting data and piecing together my field notes. These conversations served as an instant member check - confirming, disconfirming, or extending some of my initial interpretations, as well as alerting me to other ideas that had not occurred to me. Additionally, Tammy was able to offer me valuable insights about the current direction of the school district, as well as some pressures that teachers were facing in the midst of new policies and curriculum. In a year when the district was undergoing major changes in leadership, it was invaluable to be connected to an insider who could give me a teacher’s perspective on all of it. I recorded and transcribed some parts of our conversation (10 meetings in all), but mostly jotted down notes on pertinent issues that came up during our talks. I also collected lesson plans, artifacts, and other materials during this time as ideas emerged from my field notes. Collecting weekly lesson plans from Tammy was a routine practice every Monday as her principal required her to turn in plans for the week. She snidely referred to this as the “new lesson plan regime” which was required of teachers at most of the schools in the district.
Meeting with Tammy gave me a sense of what she thought about many of the issues that arose, but I still felt unsure of where the other teachers stood, especially because the collaboration times seemed to be facilitated and run by the principal’s assessment agenda. In the middle of the 4-month period (mid-November), I scheduled an informal, 1-hour group interview with the teachers to elicit critical reflection on collaboration, their practice, and writing instruction. The whole interview was audiotaped and transcribed while I jotted down field notes, asking questions in the flow of the conversation. Although a participant’s words may not be the best interpretation of what was actually going on, it gave me supplemental information that was useful for understanding their world. I sought answers to questions that arose from my research questions and my field notes, such as:

1. What do you think of scripted curriculum?
2. What are your thoughts on collaboration?
3. What are your thoughts on literacy, especially for kindergarteners?
4. How do you make sense of your own practice and negotiate the curricular goals with your own personal ones?

My goal was to understand their own personal histories as educators (which I supplemented with a personal information sheet that each participant completed and returned to me), their experiences with literacy and the curriculum, and their on-going constructions of teacher identities. In collecting this data, I wanted to capture teaching as a social event that was intertwined with a teacher’s own social and cultural identities.

The second space I collected my data was the classroom space—specifically in Tammy Green’s classroom—in order to understand how teachers instruct children using
the official curriculum. I refer to the instruction in the classroom as the “enacted curriculum” (Jackson, 1986) where children and teachers negotiate the curriculum through interaction with the materials and each other. From September to December, I visited the classroom during the writing workshop segment, anywhere from 3-5 times per week, depending on the on-going narrative threads that emerged from the data. For example, when a child was working on an interesting piece but did not complete it, I came subsequent days thereafter to follow the construction of that piece. Or, if children were engaged in notable conversations at their tables, I came back to see if and how the stories evolved the next day. Each workshop session lasted anywhere from 40 minutes to 1 hour. In all, I observed for 4 months, totaling 49 visits. There were several times during the course of the data collection period where I attended special events. For example, I attended the Halloween parade, I attended a couple of morning sessions where children engaged in other literacy-type activities, I stayed for lunch and recess on multiple occasions to observe children in out-of-classroom spaces, I went to their “gumball party”, and I also visited the “center time” in the afternoon. During these visits, I documented children’s literacy practices and the teacher’s instruction with field notes, and I audio-recorded all mini-lessons that took place on the carpet to reconstruct the writing time.

During children’s independent writing time, I usually sat with a table group of children. Most of my time each day was spent with one table, but every now and then, I split my time between two tables depending on the flow of conversation. All the children were invited to participate in the study, and all of the students had signed consent forms that allowed me to obtain basic demographic information, audiotape conversations, and
collect written productions. It was my original intent to have focal children, but throughout the study, I ended up following children based on interesting conversational and narrative threads that I was able to see and be a part of. I would argue that all the children were interesting and all of the tables on any given day could have offered up a good story to tell. I made decisions as to what tables to visit, focusing on some tables for consecutive days to follow and chase a story.

Placing the recorder at the middle of the table to capture everyone’s voice always started off as a novel thing as children initially became very interested in the concept of recording their voice. Some would lean in real close and spoke into the mic, but eventually the drama wore off as children became more interested in the unfolding drama that was occurring at their tables. I transcribed the audio from the table groups each night and used my jottings to construct my field notes for the day.

At the end of each writing session, I also collected student writing from the children whose table I visited that day. I also collected work that was highlighted by Tammy, either in front of the whole class or privately to me afterwards. I organized the students’ written artifacts by both the day that the work was collected as well as by student. In all, I collected 553 written samples. This allowed me to see written productions on a single day of writing workshop as well as the written productions of children over a period of time.
Table 3.3

Basic Demographic Information of Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Free/Reduced Lunch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.J.</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alisha</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avery</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benji</td>
<td>European/Asian American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danae</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farrah</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamarien</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaquan</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazmine</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jolene</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libby</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzy</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lou</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mario</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikey</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saehan</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanjay</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonea</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treyvon</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis Procedures

The primary objective of this analysis was to probe the interactional processes through which teachers and students negotiate literacy practices, particularly those of school. I analyzed my data using a sociocultural lens – emphasizing individuals as not only part of the cultural landscape, but contributors through talk, interaction, and participation (Bahktin, 1986; Bruner, 1990; Miller & Goodnow, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978).
I began by looking through the data, making note of patterns, regularities, irregularities, and pertinent topics. I wrote down words and phrases to represent these patterns and made special note of recurring ideas within the data set (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). From this initial read through, I developed a list of open codes from analyzing my observational field notes, classroom and collaboration meeting transcripts, the curricular documents, and children’s written productions. After sifting through the open codes, I organized my data into more focused codes around how a) teachers and students negotiate meaning through dialogue, b) standards, values, and ideologies situate their perspectives, and c) perceptions of writing are formed in response to curricular demands.

Using these frameworks, I looked through the entire data set across events and activities to identify patterns and themes, carefully analyzing both “disconfirming and confirming evidence” (Erickson, 1986, p.146).

After collapsing the categories into a manageable set, I looked for major themes and ideas as I sought to answer the following main research questions:

1. How do teachers construct their beliefs about literacy in collaborative spaces?
2. How do teachers interpret and enact the mandated literacy curriculum?
3. How do teachers and students construct the enacted literacy curriculum together?

As part of the analysis process, I organized the data under relevant themes that emerged from the data. For instance, one of my larger themes was the notion of “assessing student development.” I looked for pieces of data from the field notes, transcripts from conversations, student writing, and assessment documents where children’s development and progress were discussed and evaluated. To further understand the nature of assessments, I asked questions about what universal timelines
were placed on children when it came to development. How did teachers talk about those students who were struggling? How did children show sophistication with language that was not measured by official testing data? How did the talk around assessments influence the way teachers taught curriculum and thought about students? The answers to these questions became the basis for assertions I provide in subsequent chapters.

Using this same process, I developed assertions that were theoretically supported and grounded in evidence as I examined the data further. The goal of the data analysis was to generate assertions that answered my research questions, but, more importantly, helped me to understand the negotiation process between teachers, students, and the curriculum. The following table summarizes the relationship between the research questions, data collection procedures, and analysis for this dissertation project:
Table 3.4

*Data Collection Procedures and Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Data Collection Procedures</th>
<th>Frequency/Quantity</th>
<th>Description of Data for Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Observations</td>
<td>Field notes; audio recordings; conversation transcriptions; teacher lesson plans; artifacts (teacher writing, books, templates, charts, etc.)</td>
<td>3-5 hours per week / 4 months, totaling 49 visits</td>
<td>Audio recordings were taken of teacher lessons as well as conversations of children in table groups. Field notes were written as jottings to describe details, and document conversational turns, which were checked and extended through transcriptions. Artifacts were collected to supplement the field notes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Level Collaboration Meetings</td>
<td>Audio recordings; conversation transcriptions; field notes; artifacts</td>
<td>Scheduled for every 2nd or 3rd Monday for 40 minutes/5 times</td>
<td>These meetings were led by the principal and were scheduled to last about 40 minutes. The meetings were audio recorded, field notes were written, and artifacts were collected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Interview</td>
<td>Audio recordings; conversation transcriptions; field notes</td>
<td>1 time/1 hour</td>
<td>The three teachers and I met together to talk about collaboration, the curriculum, and other issues related to teaching and kindergarten. The meeting was organized as an informal interview to get their thoughts on some key ideas that were coming up in the data set. Questions were asked to confirm, clarify, or extend my understanding of the collaborative time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal Teacher Meetings</td>
<td>Field notes; artifacts; photographs</td>
<td>20-30 minutes, weekly or bi-weekly /10 times</td>
<td>Tammy and I met to discuss her lesson plans (which were collected), writing/curricular issues, and any other topic that seemed imminent at the time. I also used this time to clarify uncertainties in my data, collect additional documents, and take photographs of classroom resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Published curriculum</td>
<td>Curriculum guides; district timelines; teaching materials/resources; recommended literature</td>
<td>3 teacher handbooks (Calkins, 2003) Revised kindergarten curriculum (1 PDF file) District documents (1 PDF on-line resource)</td>
<td>I looked at both the new revision of the writing curriculum and the older edition of the writing curriculum in order to get an understanding of the nature of the curriculum. I conducted a textual analysis of the curriculum to understand the key ideas and philosophies of the curriculum, especially its definition of literacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written products</td>
<td>Student writing; teacher writing</td>
<td>553 writing samples</td>
<td>I collected written products to understand the overall enactment of the curriculum by the children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Role of the Researcher

Understanding participants’ meanings are always woven in with our own ideologies and stances, not apart from them. We are, as researchers, a part of the filtering process – who we are, how we position ourselves, and our own contextualized representations provide a lens through which we interpret and understand people’s experiences. It is naïve to assume that we are devoid of pre-existing notions – our worldviews, our perspectives, and our own developing culture—and so, as qualitative researchers, we are part of the work and our views and beliefs guide and inform the things that we observe and see in our fields (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Emerson et. al, 1995; Erickson, 2007). As such, I understand that my beliefs developed, at least in part, through my own experiences and histories—and this plays a large role in my interpretation of both what it means to teach in this school district and what it means to teach, as a whole. Being a former teacher colors my analysis of the data (as it inevitably will), but it also gives me specific insight and a point of reference into the nuances of teachers and their experiences. “Teaching, like most other human actions, is not so much ‘seen’ as it is ‘read’…resting on assumptions built into my way of looking at what I saw in those classrooms” (Jackson, 1986, pp.84 – 85). From my specific vantage point, I am interpreting the events in the classrooms with teachers and students as active contributors.

My own local history. I taught in the school district used in my study for 7 years prior to my current work at the university as a staff developer on literacy instruction. I bring an understanding of district policies as well as a version of my own experience within the district, having been part of the system for the duration of my classroom
teaching. After working with many teachers over the years, I have experienced how teaching and learning is a complicated practice that comes with many unforeseen challenges. Having the opportunity to work within many schools, I realize that no two schools, no two teachers, and no two students have the exact same experience since context, culture, and relationships matter. Each classroom of students, each teacher, and each school has unique cultures on top of cultures that make teaching and learning a hybrid of macro and micro influences acting upon each other (Bloome et. al, 2008; Bruner, 1990; Street, 1984). My work allowed me to see the everyday difficulties that teachers face, the inevitable pressures placed on them, and the tensions among curriculum, instruction, and practice. Thus, I have developed an affinity towards teachers as I have worked with numerous innovative, caring, and dedicated individuals, in spite of the abundance of national and local rhetoric about “bad teachers.”

The nature of my work and my own personal history with the district make it almost impossible for me to merely be an observer. I do not consider myself an outsider, having participated in many district policy meetings, professional development opportunities, and curriculum design efforts. I hang out in this state of “double-consciousness,” moving between an insider and outsider status (Henry, 2010, p.368) constantly. However, I am in a precarious situation where I am never a complete insider in any one place because I am not a part of just one school. My work allowed me to visit many different schools (which allowed me tremendous insight into variations in practice), but it also prevented me from being immersed in any one place. The teachers usually saw me as a curriculum specialist who was “helping” them, and the children usually saw me as the special “writing teacher,” which I discovered in my pilot study. This made it difficult for me to assert my
role as a researcher who was neither there to help nor to teach, so I ended up being more
involved in the landscape of the school and classroom than I originally intended. I cannot
completely remove myself from that role since it is my responsibility to facilitate learning
and development for teachers.

**Merging my past with the present.** At one of the collaboration meetings, John
turned to me in the middle of the discussion on one of the literacy programs and asked,
“Haeny, do you know anything about it?” Since one of my roles in the district was to
collaborate with teachers on literacy learning, these questions were expected and, it turns
out, impossible to avoid. Before entering Roosevelt School, I struggled with how to
represent myself – more specifically, I tried to think of ways to “reposition” myself as an
observer. However, past histories, experiences, and personal relationships complicated
my entry into the field site as well as my role as a true participant observer. In several
instances such as the above, the teachers or the principal not only asked me questions, but
they also attempted to engage me in the conversation so that I could feel a part of the
group. Our existing relationships and familiarity with each other made it possible for me
to be embraced by the group in terms of conducting research, but it also created a setting
where the group was eager to include me in their conversations. Henry (2010) talks about
the identities that are often inscribed on us, despite our efforts to mark out identities for
ourselves – in this case, I wanted to be more invisible than I really was or could be. My
personal and professional identity as a former teacher, a teacher collaborator, and, in one
case, a friend were part of the research process and played a role in how I articulated the
story of my participants and how they perceived me as well. However, I also believe that
this experience allowed me to represent my participants as complicated individuals who
have multiple identities that are self-assigned or ascribed by others. These constructed identities position teachers and administrators differently depending on the topic, personal feelings and beliefs, level of expertise or experience, and people who are present at these meetings – including myself.

**Living in the present as a teacher collaborator.** For the past 5 years, I worked as a teacher collaborator at a center that was established as a professional development partnership between the university and the local school districts. I was not a stranger at the district, and many schools saw me as an integral part of their school landscape; I worked with individual teachers or groups of teachers on projects and units related to writing. I felt fortunate enough to build personal and professional relationship with many teachers in the area, often texting each other on the weekends, meeting up for coffee, or having dinner together. The line between my personal and professional life began to blur with each passing year as meaningful collaboration meant getting into each other’s lives as well. After establishing friendships with teachers over the years, I was motivated to embark on this topic of teacher identities and practice. In addition, I wanted teachers to be given the flexibility to make instructional decisions and assert agency in their classrooms despite increased regulatory measures.

I also saw this role as beneficial, especially in this situation, as I have worked with and known these teachers in some capacity for the last four years. Because of the teachers’ comfort level with me as a colleague and friend, I had access to information about the personal and pedagogical ideologies that undergirded their instruction. Furthermore, I saw myself as an advocate rather than an evaluator since the purpose of my study was to tell the story of how curriculum unfolds from manuals and documents to
actual classroom practice. Through this study, I hoped to highlight the messiness of teaching and the potential of teachers to sort through that mess. Stephanie Power Carter challenges researchers to realize that “our interpretations can have huge consequences and implications for their [our participants’] lived experiences in educational contexts and in the larger society” (Bloome et. al, 2008, p. 127). Knowing that my interpretations of teacher practice can contribute to the larger discourse on teacher quality, I used my role as a teacher and staff developer to give voice to the actual contexts that teachers lived in.

Although my familiarity with teachers in the district was a benefit in many ways, I wanted to balance this by choosing a school site where I had not recently worked in a professional developer role. I chose Roosevelt and this particular group of teachers because I had not worked in a professional development capacity in the building for 4 years. The make-up of the school had changed since then, some teachers retired, a new principal had come in, and the literacy leadership had changed hands at the district. It was impossible for me to be introduced as a stranger wanting to do research, but my detachment from the work at this particular school allowed me the space to observe. I would not have been afforded this same luxury at schools where I was immersed in focused work or inquiry with the teachers.

**Conclusion**

I designed my study so as to uncover the intricacies of teaching and learning. I emphasize this place and its participants as situated; they have their own experiences, identities, and interactions that make this story unique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Dyson & Genishi, 2005). I chose to use an ethnographic approach in order to show a specific
narrative on how literacy is discussed, enacted, and practiced by members of this school. Especially present in my study is the undeniable presence of the participants as they make sense of their world. Consequently, I rely heavily on how people interpret and play out their roles in their contexts to find the answers to my questions. In the next three chapters, I present my findings.
Chapter 4

Scripting the Practice of Teaching: Ordering Teaching and Learning

Discovering, explicating, and codifying general teaching principles simplify the otherwise outrageously complex activity of teaching. (Shulman, 1987, p.11)

A prescribed or scripted curriculum takes away the intellectual pursuits needed for teachers to learn and develop the capacity to analyze, critique, and create alternative ways to access content. The current times place teachers and students at a point of conflict that emphasizes creativity, autonomy, and independent thinking as important skills for the future while schools continue to remain regulated, standardized, and prescribed (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In order to measure how effectively teachers are preparing students for the 21st century, curricula is often organized with such high levels of specificity that delivering content becomes overly technical rather than situated and responsive. With the heightened political assaults on the education system, most measures of quality and success have been equated with tests and little attention has been given towards understanding how teachers build their practice with each other and with students. Instead, teaching and learning are being ordered by a) assessments as accountability measures, b) curricula as mandates, and c) schools as regulated places. Hence, the ordering of teaching and learning translates into scripted practices that attempt to narrow and confine the agency of teachers and students.

In this chapter, I explore these three scripts: assessment scripts, curricular scripts, and school scripts. Embedded in these scripts are norms and ways of participating in school that are expected of teachers and children that situate the experience of teaching and learning. I use this chapter to introduce the ways that schools script activities for its
participants. Examining these scripts sets the stage for later chapters that explicate the agency of people. First, I will turn to the assessment scripts to offer a window into how teaching and learning is evaluated in school.

**The Assessment Script**

In contemporary schooling, student achievement is often marked by tests and quantifiable numbers that are used to determine the quality of curriculum, schools, and teachers. The pressure to produce measurable data and constantly monitor student progress causes tension in the everyday practice of teachers who are juggling instruction and assessment within a limited school day. With the passage of NCLB and the adoption of *Common Core Standards*, there are increased attempts to quantify what students are learning into discrete skills and universal standards (Au, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Levin, 2008; Ravitch, 2010). Underlying all of this is the idea that these tests will reveal what it means to be a “good” student as well as what it means to be a “high-quality” teacher. However, collecting formal data and testing these mandated skills is only a small part of what students learn and what teachers teach. Furthermore, the teachers are stuck between administering and gathering these assessments while creating opportunities for children to participate in learning in genuine and meaningful ways – some of which are not quantifiable. Assessment scripts worked to create specific types of discourse that described children from a deficit perspective. The following section discusses the nature of the assessment data – the timed nature and the skills-based orientation of the tests. More alarming are the kinds of labels that emerged from teachers’ talk about children; this negative discourse was facilitated and guided by the assessment data.
**Timed tests and the need for speed.** Time is ordered by adults in schools where children reside; children’s idea of time is not the same as an adult’s perception of time (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). However, the condition of a school is measured by high-stakes tests and universal screeners that are dependent on timing children to assess their ability. The district was implementing AIMSweb ([www.aimsweb.com](http://www.aimsweb.com)), an assessment and data management tool for RTI (Response to Intervention). AIMSweb had benchmarks for children’s development in literacy and numeracy and was considered a universal screener—meaning that it was norm-referenced in order to compare children across schools, the district, the state, and even nationally. When John first retrieved the data for the teachers to look at, he emphasized, “It’ll compare our kids to the nation. So when you look at Treyvon, that’s his percentage nationally with all the other kids in the country…so the bottom 6%” (see Figure 4.1). The AIMSweb was a timed test that placed strict standards for children being correct in a specified time limit. The number of correct items within a given time frame determined how children’s performance was labeled. As the guidelines state:

The maximum time for each letter is 3 seconds. If a student does not provide the next letter within 3 seconds, tell the student the letter name and mark it as incorrect. Point to the next letter and say, “What letter?” At the end of 1 minute, place a bracket ( ] ) after the last letter named and say, “Stop.” The idea was to see how many letters children could name within one minute.
Figure 4.1. AIMSweb Performance Summary Chart. The chart is a performance summary that ranks children based on the number of correct answers. Taken from Pearson’s AIMSweb page, http://aimsweb.com/uploads/AIMSweb%20Lexile%20Report_Rainbow.pdf. Each individual student’s score is calculated, categorized into a performance summary, and recommended into an instructional action plan. The “lexile measure” leads to a data bank of books determined by the level of difficulty generated for each child.

At Roosevelt, it was late September when the children were assessed using AIMSweb materials on number and letter identification. The results of the data were being inputted and tabulated into a spreadsheet with graphs that showed clusters of children’s performance via tinker plots. The teachers were also meeting for the first time as a grade-level group with John (the principal), and the discussion immediately turned to data and children’s performance. John lamented about how the children were not concerned about staying within the bounded time limits, although he knew that they knew all their letters:
The kids knew all their letters, but they didn’t get it fast. Many kids took their time and were not really in a hurry to get all the letters. The dilemma was that they knew all their letters but they couldn’t get all of them in one minute. As an adult, you just wanted to tell them that they only have a minute and they better hurry up.

He was laughing as he was saying this, acknowledging that in order to administer these tests accurately, they needed to rush the children – it was not a time to tell stories or to get goofy, but they needed to operate quickly and efficiently in order to get a good score. Jessica shook her head and smiled and without much hesitation said, “There are very few things we ask them to do fast.” She went on to describe all the different ways that she eased children into school, especially because “we have to remember, they are five,” and for some of them, this was their very first time in a classroom with other children in a place called school. She discussed how she was very careful about giving them the space and flexibility to try things out on their own time, and she talked about how laborious and time-consuming it may seem to teach children the routines of school – lining up, putting their book bags away, signing in, choosing a lunch choice, etc. Consequently, she understood why children would be unfettered by time – the idea of time was relative, and in their case, unhurried.

**Basic skills.** Understanding basic skills and mastering them is not new rhetoric in schools. In fact, the AIMSweb reiterates to teachers that the following four measures are the single biggest factors in promoting good reading:

• Letter Naming Fluency - identified frequently as the best single indicator of risk for reading failure
• Letter Sound Fluency - with equal or better predictive ability to later general reading skills than the DIBELS Phonemic Segmentation measure
• Phoneme Segmentation Fluency - the ability to hear critical sounds in the spoken word
• Nonsense Word Fluency - the ability to link the written code with the most common sounds

The above skills, although a helpful tool in early literacy, only offer a small window into a child’s literacy development. They are decontextualized skills that do not consider the socially constructed and situated nature of reading and writing that include oral language and cultural materials (Collins & Blot, 2003; Halliday, 1969; Street, 1984). These narrowly defined ideas of being literate are how children are classified as being “at-risk” or “struggling” and “in need of intervention.” These narrow definitions can lead to misconceptions of students if the teachers are not perceptive enough to look beyond these limitations. Fortunately, Tammy was able to see beyond that.

Julie was a verbal child with a very advanced vocabulary in Tammy’s class. She had very thick glasses and short curly blond hair, which Julie herself referred to as “curly q’s”. Tammy referred to Julie as an “old soul”, meaning that she had conversations with other kids that seemed very adult-like in nature and in delivery. However, Tammy said that when it came to any kind of formal assessment, Julie always seemed to make errors and freeze up. Tammy was perplexed as Julie not only messed up on oral assessments that were timed, but on little assessments that they took back and did at their seats. These errors puts her at the bottom half of the class every time, but Tammy was sure that the assessment data did not really show what Julie was capable of doing. Isolating discrete skills is a snapshot; it does not capture the full range of a child’s ability as illustrated by
Julie. Her ability to use language in social situations, retrieve the words to communicate with others, and appropriate adult language and manners of speaking were not part of her official score. In situations like this (when the test data did not match up to the child’s demonstrated abilities), it was the teacher that needed to advocate for the child using her knowledge and observations.

With an increasingly diverse landscape, schools need to be particularly careful not to use literacy as a way to stratify students by training speech habits, dialects, languages, and usage (Adger et. al., 2007; Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Ferguson, 2001). After analyzing Tammy’s classroom data on AIMSweb, those children in need of an intervention were almost all African-American and all low-income. The lowest scores in her classroom belonged to the African-American children, but the elephant in the room was never brought up or addressed by anyone in the room. Although, teachers discredited many of the implications to the testing data (particularly AIMSweb), none of the teachers questioned the blatant race-based lines that these tests drew between African-American children and the rest of the class. This is what Pollock alludes to as “race talk dilemmas” (2004), where people who work in schools constantly struggle to illuminate and discuss racial differences while it is penetratingly clear.

The lack of success on the tests along racial lines cannot be ignored or denied as many scholars have pointed out (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Ferguson, 2001; Garcia Coll & Marks 2009; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Noguera, 2008). The fact that all the African-American children were doing poorly on the benchmark tests raises questions of cultural and racial bias that has always been a critique of these norm-referenced tests (Au, 2012). Specifically, this school district’s struggle with equity issues concerning African-
American students is especially pertinent. Due to this, the achievement gap between Caucasian students and African-American students was intensely scrutinized and highlighted because of the consent decree. It was common, in the larger discourse, to talk about student achievement using race as the focal point. As Pollock (2004) points out, race talk needs to “adequately analyze the true complexity of human diversity” while still analyzing the “production of simple orders of racial inequality” (p.115). Schools (more specifically this district) choose to define children by racial categories and markers so race has come to stand for inequities (as seen in the consent decree): special education referrals, discipline issues, and achievement gaps - just to name a few. Thus, the ongoing struggle for equity shows that categorizing someone’s cultural and racial affiliation is tied to institutional labels and power dynamics that frame the behaviors of certain groups (Ferguson, 2001; Noguera, 2008).

The assessment data, in this case, continued to narrow definitions of literacy in culturally confining ways. As assessment data became the material used to place children in classrooms based on abilities, it created an inevitable separation, which was visibly noticeable by race. I presume these separations were not unique to just this school. Deep cultural analysis of children was difficult when broad generalizations about them were made based on this narrow, superficial data, especially when all those children happened to be African-American (Pollock, 2008). These classifications can lead to unproductive ways to group and segregate children. At Roosevelt, the upper grade teachers were using the assessment information to send kids to each others’ rooms by ability levels. This school was not the only school that was implementing this sort of tracking system – many of the schools, in an effort to lift the scores of “low performing” students, divided
students as a grade level into three different tracks for subjects like reading and math.

The classroom assessment data in other classrooms in this school looked very similar to Tammy’s (African-American children performing poorly while their white counterparts were more successful). Thus, tracking children by abilities inevitably resegregated children by race. This practice was common (a part of the script), but an idea that the kindergarten teachers were not ready to accept.

Tammy: We pretty much decided that we were going to teach our own children and not be swapping for the high math group and the low math group and so on. Although, it’s an option. It’s out there, they [other teachers and administrators] put it out there all the time – that we could do something like that. But so far, we feel pretty adamant that we don’t want to do that.

Without teachers advocating for heterogenous groups (as Tammy mentioned on many occasions), the danger of tracking children by limited data measures were the norm.

In the project school, struggling readers and writers were often given an equally narrowing literacy intervention. Literacy interventions – those curricula and resources identified for struggling readers as indicated by AIMSweb - tended to focus on mastering basic skills. John brought up a program to the teachers called Read Well, a “lightly scripted” program as described on the website (http://www.voyagerlearning.com/readwell), which he explained was an intervention program that was being used by the literacy specialist with first graders. The specialist, according to John, was “pretty adamant that it’s doing some great stuff.” He continued,
She thinks there’s a lot of great things for kindergarten. She’s really interested in seeing if there’s a way to sort of infuse a little bit of that into kindergarten next year. So, talk about it and start thinking about it because I really think some of the kids are doing well in the intervention with the things they don’t have. It does a really good job of focusing in on mastery of sounds and letters.

Although it was designed as an intervention program, John talked about how another teacher in the district was using the program for her entire class at a school widely known for its disproportionate number of African-American students and low-income students compared with other schools in the district. Jessica, who had very little experience with the program asked, “Is the focus letters and letter sounds?” John said that it was, and Tammy looked over and added, “VERY much so,” with a tinge of dissatisfaction in her voice. John, noting her skepticism continued to defend the program:

No, it starts out with letters, letter sounds. And then it talks about how to use those to put words together. So, it is a mastery-based thing and you don’t go on until you know that so you can’t really move on. However, they are continually seeing the letters and sounds and how they go together.

Mastery-based, in this case, meant that children could not move on to the next lesson without completely understanding or “mastering” the prior skill. Tammy mentioned that Jaquan might be a good candidate for this because he “cannot keep a letter in his head.” This meant that he could not identify or recall a letter when the letter was presented to him. Jaquan was an African-American boy in Tammy’s classroom who was pulled out for reading and speech interventions. In a separate conversation about Jaquan, Jessica mentioned that his brother was the same way. His older brother also struggled with
processing letters and words, and the two, along with John, speculated that the developmental delays could be a family thing. His name always came up when Tammy was talking about her struggling learners, and she expressed concerns about his cognitive abilities. She added that he still couldn’t identify all the letters in his name, although he was very adept at writing them down. She said that she has given him more interventions than anyone else, but “letters don’t mean anything to him. I just can’t figure it out. We’ll touch it – I’ve tried so many different little interventions with him, but he’s one that I can see a program like that working – but maybe.” For Tammy, it was not necessarily the idea of being exposed to letters and sounds because she attested to have essentially drilled him to death with no avail. She welcomed additional help to figure out what Jaquan needed to grasp letters, but it was confusing and complicated since Jaquan displayed adequate knowledge of other aspects of language. She continued, “He watches and pays attention and participates in writing workshop, tells good stories, and draws great pictures.” She even mentioned to me once that during his week to be “Superstar” (a week where one child was highlighted), Jaquan had brought three Spiderman figures from home and gave a sophisticated talk about the differences between the three. The idea of putting him in another intervention group honing in on basic skills at the cost of participating in literacy with his classmates seemed questionable – hence her hesitant maybe.

Jaquan demonstrated cultural competence (popular culture reference to Spiderman) and communicative competence (speaking to his peers about his interests) in the classroom space. Every week, the children concluded the week by drawing a picture of their superstar of the week. In the following vignette, Jaquan was advising his classmates on what to draw in their picture of him. He shared throughout the week that
he loved Spiderman, football, and pizza. Additionally, he mentioned that his favorite colors were red and green. As he was looking at his classmates’ representation of him, Jaquan demonstrated his competence in language and literacy via unconventional ways. He gave classmates feedback, he refined his own drawings, he made jokes with his classmates, and noticed the print around him.

Jaquan: 

*(He leans over to look at Sanjay’s picture.)* I need a football.

You need to write football in my hand. *(Turns to his tablemates)*

He forgot to write my football in my hand. *(To everyone)* Write a football in my hand and a pizza with it.

Jon: Or a pizza?

Jaquan: *(laughs)* I'm writing myself with a football in my hand and a pizza in my hand eating.

Jon: A pizza - that's funny

Jaquan: *(Looks over at Jolene’s paper.)* That's not me.

Jolene: This you.

Jaquan: No it's not. You should write a football in my hand while I eat a pizza.

Jolene: I'm drawing still.

Jaquan: *(Picks up his crayon bag that has a label with his first name on it).* Man, why my last name not on here?

In this short vignette, Jaquan displayed various aspects of communicative competence.

He was able to interact with his peers purposefully, engaging them in ways that influenced their literacy (e.g., Jolene continuing to work on her piece to take his
suggestion). He was also able to notice the literacy contexts around him (e.g., his last name being omitted from the Ziploc bag). Furthermore, he was able to take multiple aspects of his own identity (playing football and eating pizza) to create a hybrid self that made sense within this context – “a football in my hand while eating a pizza.”

Unfortunately, there was no space in the meeting time to mention these competencies beyond the comments from Tammy. Jaquan’s ability to negotiate and maneuver language with his classmates was brought up by Tammy, but hardly acknowledged. The conversation immediately went back to the task at hand: letter identification and sounds.

Jessica offered a similar narrative with some of her presumably “low kids.” She said that they were all fairly solid in letter identification and had come a long way with sound associations as well. She felt that the part that the children got stuck on were knowing sight words and putting everything together to read words, which often slowed them down. She did not argue with them reviewing their sounds, but she wanted them to have a handle on words; the basic skills of letter ID and sound was too narrow and simple of a goal for children, like Jaquan, who were socially adept and aware of language in use.

Tammy interjected by saying that the program addressed the issue of going beyond these skills “only if the children got far enough. It’s very, very, very strategic; very strategic…really basic and a drill-type thing.” Tammy and Jessica, in their examples, were not against the idea of children knowing letters and sounds, but they revealed that children who always showed up on the bottom of tests were moving beyond just the basic skills taught in these interventions. Children like Jaquan, whose understanding of language and his ability to communicate, showed high levels of sophistication that were far greater than the mastery of letters and sounds. Mastery or what is deemed research-
based, sequential understandings may leave children with a limited pathway towards language learning while in reality, they are traveling along different paths towards literacy (Clay, 1998). Tammy’s discussion of Jaquan was nuanced and attempted to probe beyond his poor performance on the test. Unfortunately, there was no time or space to advocate for children beyond the data in front of them. Simply put, the official assessment data drove the discourse as it was the primary way to evaluate children. Thus, the assessments scripted the ways that teachers talked about children with their principal.

**Collecting “hard” data.** At the first official grade-level meeting, John informed me that the team was focusing on creating essential learning standards and common formative assessments in math together. The goal of the collaboration time, according to John, was to “talk about the progress they were making towards the 8-10 math standards that all kindergarteners should know.” John notes on their discussions through the “Collaboration Meeting Notes” sheet, but rarely was there any writing on it in most cases. This year, the kindergarten report card had a “Common Core” insert, which was given to them by the district math coordinator which included identifying shapes, writing numbers from 1-10, counting from 1-25 from any given spot. John asked, specifically, when the teachers thought this data would be collected and Tammy said,

I’ve been working on counting, shapes, and writing numbers since the first day of school…but pulling mass groups to take a benchmark or assessment is hard and it’s easier to conference with individuals and give the assessments during math tubs because then I know the other kids are doing something significant while I am assessing.
Although he recognized that the teachers were doing most of the assessments informally, as Tammy just described, he wanted them to “formalize it because continued practice may not work so we may need an intervention. We need data to support that.” He added, “On October 3rd and 4th, we will be getting subs for 1 ½ hours so that we can look at the data,” reiterating the push for tangible data. The teachers all looked up by this new information and fell silent. It was clear that they were unaware of being pulled out of their rooms on these days. John asked, “Is this something that you don’t want to do?” Jessica and Tammy immediately shook their heads while Jessica said, “I like being here with the kids.” Tammy echoed this on numerous occasions to me about how often the teachers were getting pulled out of the classroom to look at data or provide feedback on the curriculum or attend a district meeting. John, picking up on their dissatisfaction saying, “So, what’s the consensus on the back to back sub days? It won’t hurt my feelings.”

Tammy responded, “Tonia, what do you think?”

Tonia hesitated for a little bit and answered, “Let’s skip it.”

She sensed that Jessica and Tammy did not want to do this and went along with the group – willingly or not. John relented and offered a compromise – he told the group to make a list of students that were really struggling with the specific concepts by the end of the week. Jessica asked, “Lowest or fringe?”

He said, “Lowest for now.” He also asked them to have their formal, math assessments done by the next collaboration meeting in three weeks.

Later on in the year, the same discussion was applied to literacy. John acknowledged that there was a lot of writing going on in each of their rooms, but he
wanted to know, “How easy is it to assess that? And measure it? Can we come up with a good rubric?” Jessica mentioned that they already had rubrics for writing that the district literacy coordinators put together a few years back as well as another rubric developed by kindergarten teachers even earlier. The rubric, according to Jessica, broke everything down into quarters, which she found helpful, except when it came to abstract, literacy skills that were hard to objectively assess. John, however, continued to ask about formal assessments and Tammy responded, “We have the DRA (developmental reading assessment) coming up, if you want that hard stuff.” The DRA was a reading assessment used by the district to measure accuracy, fluency, and comprehension (http://www.pearsonschool.com/dra2). For kindergarteners, this meant that children were given a book to read out loud to the teacher at their perceived reading level (as determined by the teacher). Teachers kept track of a child’s oral reading fluency by marking mistakes (word errors, punctuation errors, pronunciation errors, etc.) and timing the amount of time it took for children to complete the book. Teachers used this information to determine children’s accuracy and fluency. Following the reading, the children answered questions while the teacher recorded their responses on the assessment form. From these responses, teachers determined whether or not the answers were adequate enough to meet the comprehension standards. These tests were used to determine children’s reading level as well as form reading groups based on abilities.

John, in response, still thought the DRA was very subjective and did not give an accurate portrayal of children’s reading abilities so his question still lingered, “Outside of a writing rubric and a DRA, if we’re going to put numbers on literacy ability in kindergarten, how do you do that?” As the discussion ensued, it was the basic skills that
emerged to the forefront in the collection of hard data and evidence – something that John pushed for in light of local and national pressures. “Sounds, letter ID, blends, rhyming words, and word identification – those things are easy to measure,” he said. This was the data that was valued in schools, but beyond that, this was the data used to categorize children into “well above average, above average, average, below average, and well-below average.”

It was the collection and value placed on these numbers that consistently labeled the same children. In Tammy’s case, these children were Jaquan, Jamarion, Tonea, Treyvon, Danae, Jazmine, and Lou - all African-American, all low-income. Furthermore, their abilities were clumped together into the “below average” category and targeted for intervention while in reality, their experiences and language abilities were wide and varied across the spectrum. Figures 4.2-4.8 are examples of each of these children’s work at the end of November. Tonea always demonstrated a talent for drawing, paying attention to small details with clarity and precision. Lou, whose own drawings may pale in comparison, possessed more verbal language in his repertoire than most of the children in the class. Jamarion had a knack for including as many details as possible in his drawings, placing friends and relatives in his story. His stories actually changed daily depending on the happenings and the people involved in his social world at the time. It was not uncommon to see him erasing his entire picture from the day before to write a new story inspired by the ideas around him and his interactions with others. Treyvon used the resources in the classroom very readily as demonstrated in his writing – he was adept at taking words from around the room and incorporating them into his pieces. Treyvon was also retained, so he was obviously much more versed in participating in
school subjects such as writing than the other children who were novices. Jazmine was one of the few children in the classroom who kept a cohesive story going from page to page. Jaquan demonstrated excellent motor skills as seen in his carefully constructed pictures and letters.

These children, although clumped together as struggling, demonstrated that fixed categories only touch the surface regarding the resources that children bring to their literacy practices. Additionally, their paths to literacy were quite different, challenging notions of “one-size-fits-all” basics interventions that deconstruct literacy to its smallest part. Tammy was the one to alert me to these differences in their writing – she saw these very strengths in the children’s written attempts that were not highlighted or even discussed in the collaboration meetings as counterexamples. Tammy used this knowledge in her own classroom practice, but these writing pieces were never used in the official meetings to talk about children’s language competencies. The children here were experimenting with literacy in broad, communicative terms as well as its more specific elements - but rarely apart. Furthermore children weaved in and out of different literacy practices as illustrated by each of these children. Obviously, the understanding of literacy within this “below average” category of children varied widely across the spectrum of writing.
Figure 4.2. Jaquan’s piece.

Figure 4.3. Jamarion’s piece.

Figure 4.4. Treyvon’s piece.

Figure 4.5. Tonea’s piece.
Figure 4.6. Danae’s piece.

Figure 4.7. Jazmine’s piece.

Figure 4.8. Lou’s piece.
The children displayed a range of strengths and abilities that looked more dissimilar than similar. John, under pressure, pushed for “hard” assessment data that were given along a set timeline (e.g., benchmarks after every quarter; AIMSweb at the beginning, middle, and end of the year; literacy inventories administered at set times in the year); these assume that children develop in a linear fashion along a predictable trajectory. Furthermore, they also assume that looking at a few isolated skills somehow explains the complex literacy behaviors that children are displaying. The children above demonstrated that they were presenting their teachers with writing in social contexts that produced wildly different literacy practices including drawing, writing, and talking.

“What a sequenced curriculum ignores is the deeper and broader orchestration of ‘knowing about print’ that is being constructed by any single learner” (Clay, 1998, p.133). Children’s use of literacy practices are not only developed in socially constructed ways as they interact with peers and adults, but they are constructed and demonstrated in different contexts that include “out-of-testing” environments. When children engaged in these free writing constructions, we were able to see children as “single” writers and not simply as collectively struggling.

Given the complex nature of written communication and the creative ways that children use language, collecting hard data was literally “hard” to do. There is a need to conduct careful analyses of what it means to be “low-performing” or “high performing” as well as illustrate the complexity of children’s development (Rose, 1995). Test scores ignore the “social, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of teaching and learning – and as well, we’ll miss those considerable intellectual achievements which aren’t easily quantifiable” (Rose, 1995, pp.2-3). Insisting that children be measured in complicated
terms that are not easily coded or categorized requires vigilance on the part of teachers and administrators to view children holistically.

Tammy wrestled with this issue at school, stating once that these tests seemed to be motivated by ease and manageability:

It’s computer-based so you can plug your data in and anybody can look at it. I think it's a way to ensure that a child has met this benchmark. I can look over this data - whoever I am, wherever I am very easily. It’s easy and manageable, looking from the top-down. And a program that makes it easy to monitor from the outside looking in. It's not enough. I mean we better do a lot more than that or you're not going to get your child from point A to point B…but I do think a lot of our programs are chosen this way.

However, by examining children’s literacy attempts, it is clear that we cannot rely on assessment scripts to “write” the complete story of children’s abilities. Instead, we should acknowledge that children often veer off the categorical lines that are often built around them – they do not fit neatly into prescribed categories, they do not all benefit from the same intervention or prescription, and they certainly reveal capabilities and resources that move beyond just the predetermined “basics” (Dyson, 2007; Genish & Dyson, 2009). These abilities cannot be captured by time constraints and measurable tests, but are demonstrated through interactions with others in classrooms. Disturbingly, these assessments (although rejected by the teachers) were still used as the agreed upon measures of students’ literacy abilities, children’s categorical labels, and racially identifiable divisions that went unaddressed. In the next section, I examine curricular
scripts or programs that were chosen to continue the narrowing of language and to regulate the teaching of literacy.

**Curricular Scripts**

Scripted curricula are commonplace in elementary schools, especially in the areas of math and literacy. In many settings, it is assumed that the best language arts curriculum for children who struggle are reductive strategies for language learning that begin with phonics, the alphabet, sight words, and constant drill and practice. Roosevelt was no exception with scripted curricula, skills interventions for children who fell below average, and talk about making sure that children have mastery over the basics before moving on. All the more, with the plethora of new curricula that touted alignment with the common core, it was essential that teachers thought critically about the curriculum they delivered. Tonia noted, “I don’t have that privilege of knowing what it’s like in kindergarten to not teach scripted lessons. It’s been like that since I got here.” In other words, scripted curricula have become the norm rather than an anomaly. Additionally, scripted lessons, whether or not they are only “lightly scripted,” are ideologically charged as this chapter illuminates. “The pendulum has really swung,” said Jessica. Tammy elaborated:

Since we moved to scripted curricula, it doesn’t connect. You have to artificially connect it to the kids all the time. I’m always looking for that connection…so it’s not the scope and sequence that’s bad, I want to make it more meaningful for the kids. I’m doing more for them.

The curriculum’s lack of connection to these children’s experiences required teachers to be more reflective and responsive in their practice – meaning they could not
simply rely on the script to create meaningful learning opportunities for the children. As both Tonia and Tammy reiterated, they were doing much more than the script to get students from one point to the next. In other words, the curriculum was not the determining factor for students’ success, it was the teachers who negotiated these curricular goals to match the children’s goals.

While there are figurative scripts that teachers are expected to follow, there are literal scripts – actual written out segments that tell teachers what to do, exactly what to say, and a sidebar that arguably tells them what to think. The following example illustrates this idea of dictating the actions and thoughts of teachers. The writing curriculum cautioned teachers about children working alongside each other, talking quietly as they work, which can “spiral into an environment in which no one gets any work done at all” (Calkins, 2003, p.40). Instead, the writers of the curriculum offered up an alternative where children have silent periods of writing with intentional and deliberate chosen intervals for talk - whole class “private writing times” and whole class intervals for “partnership talk.” The following excerpt was a segment from part of the script. Written in the text is a plan for how two teachers can present the lesson on partnerships by modeling the kinds of talk that children are expected to have with each other. Abby (a teacher) and Lucy (the other teacher) are showing and teaching children the meaning of partnerships and productive talk.

Let me show you how writers plan with their partners. Watch closely because this is what you are going to be doing from now on…we will decide who goes first. Partner one will and that’s me. So I read my story to Abby.” [She reads]. “Now, I’ll tell my partner what I will write today – and part of that means we’ll talk about if I’m done with yesterday’s story or if I’m going to continue working on it. And I’ll tell my partner what I might say in today’s story. Watch.”
Now, I’m going to ask Abby, “What are you going to write today?”
“I’ll write about getting a dog,” said Abby.
“How will your story go?” [I’m really going to listen to her answer].
Abby answered by telling the words of the story she’d soon write.
“So now we both have plans for writing and we can get started!”
Writers, all your life you are going to want to have conversations like this one in which you share and plan writing. For now, we’ll work alone, but in about twenty minutes, you’ll regroup with your partner. (Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003, pp. 23-24).

In the above segment, the partnership sequence seemed “artificial and contrived” as Tammy once said to me at a meeting. On the contrary, the curriculum stated that the sort of conversation demonstrated above can “launch children into a lifetime of good conversations…and that the conversation should keep going back and forth” (Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003, p.24). This idea is disputed by many scholars who assert that different cultural communities have different rules for acting and talking – norms for taking turns, ways of participating in communicative events, ways to respond to others, etc. that should broaden perceptions of what it means to hold a conversation (Brandt, 2001; Cazden, 2001; Clay, 1998; Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Heath, 1983). In the above conversation, not only were the rules for a “back and forth” type conversation set, the content of the conversation were around plans for writing, which as later sections will reveal, are always produced and changed through social interactions. In a Bahktinian sense (1981) we are always putting words out there, trying to understand the available words, and appropriating them for our use. Instead of seeing children as passive agents that need the tools to communicate, it is useful to see children as active participants who bring their own knowledge and experiences to conversations (Clay, 1998).
In the following exchange in Tammy’s room during writing time, the whole table of children got involved in the construction of one child’s, Sanjay’s, piece about putting out a fire. It was not a back-and-forth communication style that the curriculum suggested. The children contributed what they wanted, when they wanted; instead of asking each other about their individual writing intentions, they turned their focus to one child’s piece by inserting their own interpretation onto Sanjay’s story. He started off by informing the rest of his table that the marks on his page were not scribbles but smoke from a fire. The fire truck was on its way to putting out the fire (see Figure 4.9).

![Figure 4.9. Sanjay’s fire truck piece.](image-url)
Farrah: That's a lot of water (*looking at Sanjay's paper*). The water should be heading that way (*she motions for a downward direction.*)

Sanjay: No, it's - the smoke is going that way (*points from right to left on his paper*).

Jamarion: And where's the water?

Sanjay: Here.

A.J.: You told us that was the water (*referring to the scribbling*), and that was the – wait, it's the water and the smoke?

Sanjay: Yes. It's mixed together.

Jamarion: So, what is that? (*points to the mass at the bottom of the picture*).

A.J.: So, make it so we can tell which one is the water and which one is the smoke.

Farrah: How about you make some water headed that way so you could put the fire away. Make more water. Scoop it all over the fire so you can't see the fire. (*He keeps scribbling.*) Then, draw more fire here.

These conversations along with its corresponding written attempts happened in tandem; therefore, the oral and the written piece worked together in the construction of Sanjay’s written attempts. The idea of planning for writing ahead of time was often trumped by interactions as children wrote in response to one another. Sanjay not only changed his ideas as he was talking with others, but he added more to his piece upon
receiving suggestions and criticisms from his peers. Furthermore, he used print to clarify his picture: “I am putting the fire out.”

Tammy knew that the children were already talking to each other like this quite a bit in their table groups, and the idea of formalizing the process by creating structures for talk, giving them the words to say (scripting their conversations), dictating when and who they talked to, and limiting the amount of talk wasted a lot of precious time. In her words, there was no writing without the talk and the “buzz of one-inch voices” that the curriculum recommended was neither possible to enforce nor desirable.

Amidst the actual words, there were other recommendations, printed off to the side of the script for teachers to follow as they delivered their lines. One piece of advice included the following:

Partnerships are especially important if some of your students are English Language Learners because these children need language input more than anything. Try to partner children so that not two who speak Mandarin are partners…You’ll also find it helpful to partner children so that one has stronger English skills than the other. (Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003, p.23)

In this section, there was a very distinct hierarchy and order for language – English, and perhaps a version of standard English, was seen as highly valuable. Children who spoke another language or a variant of English were immediately labeled as disadvantaged since they did not have the language of power in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers were discouraged from partnering children who spoke the same language, which limited children’s interactions to their ability to speak in English. Instead of providing more opportunities for collaboration, many second language learners may find themselves in an
environment that isolates them even further, making writing an even more solitary experience.

The curriculum provided a simple solution – “Don’t hesitate to put words into your children’s mouths” (Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003, p.24). I would contend that conversations are not the result of putting words in each other’s mouths, but they are exchanges where speakers and listeners are attempting to understand each other (Bahktin, 1986; Hymes, 1972). Clay (1998), in her own work, cautions teacher about “teaching by telling” (p.68) where children are taught to parrot teacher talk instead of thinking about what is being said. Rather, it is important to allow children the opportunity to work out their learning for themselves as they try out language (Cazden, 2001). Languages, as many scholars point out (Collins & Blot, 2003; Halliday, 1993; Hymes 1972), are filled with meanings, intentions, ideologies and beliefs.

**School Scripts**

**Learning the drill.** Kindergarteners not only learn how to read, write, and do arithmetic in school, but they learn how to participate in school as an institution that has norms, values, and practices for students and teachers (Jackson, 1986). In schools, there are particular practices – lunch lines, number orders, hallway expectations, assemblies, and weather drills – that children take part in as members of the school community. In kindergarten classrooms, newly inducted children are beginning to understand the expectations of school as well as the expectations of the classroom. For example, Jessica talked about the ordeal of getting the children in order for their first tornado drill, a rather standard operation for schools in the Midwest. When the drill went off, she talked about how easily 1st – 5th graders were able to go out into the hallway, kneel, put their heads
down towards their knees, and line up quietly. They were used to it because they knew the script or the way things like this were meant to go. She laughed and said, “And whose kids have never experienced this?” She looked at the rest of the group with her hands up and each of the teachers nodded in knowing agreement. Jessica went on to describe the step-by-step directions she had to give while guiding them to remain calm despite the blaring, alarm-like siren flashing in the hallways. She re-enacted the scene:

I told them, “You’re probably going to bend over like this (places hands on top of her head and hunches over); this is called duck and cover. So, we’re going to do this, and in that whole thing, I had to go into all this extra explanation about it.

They never experienced this before.

The ducking and covering as everyone rushed out the doors were scary and fearful things for the children who did not have a frame of reference for this activity.

These new activities included many other “firsts” as well. It was almost 11:15 and the children were about to get ready for an early dismissal – the first one of the year. Jon was telling his tablemates that his “poppy” was picking him up today, referring to his grandfather, which made him very excited about going to his grandpa’s house. John remarked to Tonea at another table across the room that he didn’t like to miss lunch, which made the idea of dismissal undesirable. While Mrs. Green was calling the “car riders” to line up, Jamarion who was sitting at another table, ran over to me, tapped me on the knee and looked at me with wide eyes and a concerned look and said, “Are they going home?”

I replied, “They are. And you are going home too.”
He went back to his seat and looked over at the long line of car riders and started to cry saying, “I don’t want them to go home. What about lunch?” As I sat there watching him, he was clearly finding any reason to stay in school with his friends. His eyes were shifting from one kid to the next as tears started to well up in his eyes repeating, “I don’t want them to go home.”

Mrs. Green, who was standing by the classroom door, replied to Jamarion, “Oh you’re going home too, Jamarion. We're finishing up early today, remember? Early dismissal.”

He got his stuff together and walked out the door and stood in line for the bus, but I could still hear him in the hallway asking, “What about lunch? We didn’t even had lunch yet!” Part of his plea could have been that he was, in fact, hungry, but the other part of his plea was to stay at school in a place that he “loved” (using his own words). The early dismissal threw him for a loop – it was different from the usual routine. Furthermore, it was unclear why everyone was leaving on this particular day.

It was these school activities that were scripted for students that children were expected to navigate through – and sometimes, even the most simple of school norms was difficult for children to understand. Simultaneously, the teachers needed to order their day so that they had the room, the space, and the flexibility to anticipate these spontaneous and planned events as well as the ways that students decided to respond to these events. However, the script for the school day included more than just navigating the school’s structure and rules. In essence, there was more to school than just academics; it was about figuring out a new social world. This world of school included routines, structures, and events while making sense of the movement between these
things from moment-to-moment and day-to-day. This made it difficult to adequately plan for a school day since there were a number of school events that made it difficult to move smoothly from one thing to another. Some of these events were large scale (e.g., all-school assemblies, field trips, bus evacuation drill, tornado drill, health programs, etc.), but there were many small interruptions that added up to lost time.

For example, one morning, Tammy was trying to finish her writing lesson when several interruptions occurred. The children were waiting on the rug and Tammy spent a few minutes trying to get Avery (who was identified as “on the autism spectrum”) to sit on the red cushion that he used on the carpet. As soon as she got him to sit comfortably in a good spot, she started to begin the lesson when suddenly the intercom went off and the office announced that today would be “blacktop only” day. They had to spend a few minutes talking about what this could possibly mean since this was the first time the students were participating in this. Shortly thereafter, Danae walked in (late as usual). Jamarion cried, “Danae! Hey Danae!” which prompted Mrs. Green to welcome her into the classroom community as well. As a kindergarten teacher, Tammy knew that there was no understanding, rule, or routine to take for granted. Part of Tammy’s role as a teacher was not just to introduce them to letters and numbers, but the scripts that were part of the everyday life of being at school. Children needed to be introduced to and socialized into this new cultural space.

**Scheduling the “pull-out”**. With the implementation of *Common Core Standards*, there had been a greater emphasis on those children who fell into what was deemed “Tier 2”. This group of students failed to meet the benchmark goals set by the district and needed a targeted intervention. Although most of the interventions were set
up for 1-5th graders, kindergarteners were also pulled out of the classroom for extra
speech support and informal reading interventions. These interventions were meant to
help children, but at times, it ended up preventing them from engaging in important
activities inside the classroom.

Tammy: And you know, the reality, this year in particular, I have kids
coming and going all the time. Your special needs kids are coming
and going. So many different teachers coming in and out. We
couldn't even get through a rehearsal. I finally just closed the door
and said, "NO more this week. We are going to have a rehearsal."
Between social work, speech, hearing impaired, OT, PT, you
know. That's another reason why the script doesn't work. There's
too much going on in today's classroom to easily move from this to
that.

Individualized support was useful, but Tammy’s point was that the constant coming and
going made it difficult for her to enact her plans (which involved the whole class) as well
as for children to be active members in classroom events. This made the children’s
understanding of their day disjointed and fragmented. Although the cooperative response
would be to let the student be pulled out, Tammy was adamant about keeping them with
her.

Community was an important part of participating in the classroom. Tammy
talked about how difficult it was for children who were labeled as struggling learners to
fully participate in the classroom – it was ironic. In hopes of helping children “catch-up”,
these same children were falling further behind by simply missing the instruction, the
events, and the interactions happening inside the classroom. Tonia, in agreement, described this dilemma teachers had with the curricular timeline in light of the school day. On the one hand, the script pushed teachers to keep moving forward. On the other hand, some students were pulled out for interventions (a part of the school script) that made it inefficient and unsettling for teachers to move forward and literally leave children behind. Tonia said:

They say keep moving on, but you know you can't keep moving on. You go back, you want the kids to know, but just doing it out of that book is not going to get them to know it. Just letting it come up, and never going back to it. And just relying on it [the curriculum] is not going to get them there.

Simply put, she could not just rely on the pace of the curriculum and ignore the fact that children were not even present. Some children had their schedules organized and scripted into choppy segments that made it difficult (even in kindergarten) to be a part of the continuous flow of the regular classroom. The continuity of a child’s day was just as important as the content and skills they were being taught, in and out of the classroom space.

The pull-out could also have a segregating effect on the racial make-up of the classroom. For instance, Tammy’s tier 2 students were either African-American or hearing impaired, creating an instant division between the African-American children, children with disabilities, and the White children. On one occasion, the school social worker was coming to pull Jamarion out of the classroom for social skills training. As soon as the social worker came into the room, Jamarion ran out of the room towards the office stating that he did not want to leave the room. The social worker shouted down the
hallway, “Don’t you run away from me,” while Jamarion was looking back. He kept running, and eventually Tammy brought him back to the room and told the social worker that this was not a good time. Tammy got this reputation around school; she was seen as someone who changed her schedule around often and politely asked support staff to come back later because it was not a good time for a child to leave. Instead of being sent out, Tammy made sure that Jamarion remained in class. Ferguson (2001) described the “punishing room” as a place where the “bad boys” (African-American males) were sent. They were consistently being sent away until it became part of their experience in school. Although in this case, the stigma of being pulled out was not as clearly articulated or formalized as the school in Ferguson’s study, the idea of being sent somewhere else was still felt. Jamarion’s reaction clearly demonstrates the social stigma a child felt when someone came for him. He knew that he would have to be set apart, and his reaction demonstrated that he did not see this pull-out as a positive event. Although Tammy could be viewed as uncollaborative for these actions, she could also be viewed as agentive, advocating for children’s participation in the classroom community.

**Classroom scripts.** Within the community of school, there were also practices that were organized by the classroom teacher. Mrs. Green had routines for writing workshop which became the norm for writing time: Gather together at the carpet, hear a mini-lesson, go off to your tables and write, and conclude at the end with some type of wrap-up. This routine was consistent with the routine that was suggested in the official curriculum. After learning this participation structure for writing workshop, children became accustomed to this format and expected it. However, these practices were not defined in static terms, but were also interpreted by students who viewed these routines
as an expected cultural practice during writing workshop. The absence of these structures led to reinterpretations of writing workshop as well as new meanings about what each segment of writing even meant. Moreover, curriculum writers and teachers, as well as students all infused different meanings on these structures revealing that even the simplest structural elements can take on multiple meanings and intentions.

On one occasion, the children were on the carpet for a science lesson and as the science lesson wrapped up, Mrs. Green asked them to go to their seats. I took my chair and waited by the carpet with my notebook and recorder (as was my custom during the start of most of the writing sessions). Julie looked over at me from her table and whispered, “I don’t think we’re coming back there. We’re not having writing workshop.” Minutes later, Mrs. Green had the children get their supplies for writing and come back to the carpet. Julie, as she was trying to find a spot on the carpet, passed by me and questioned, “Why didn’t we just stay here?” This was a logical question and perceptive – if they were already at the carpet, why didn’t they just stay there without going through the extra formality of coming back and forth. As children got acquainted with the norms of the classrooms and schools, they started to expect them, rethink them, and question the efficiency.

In Tammy’s classroom, the structure (or script) set up by the teacher was negotiable as the children had some agency in disrupting this structure. The following example shows children’s ability to transform extant practices. As children were taking their coats off, I heard A.J. say at his seat, “I love writing workshop. Mrs. Green, I don’t even want to go the rug before writing workshop.” Mrs. Green called children over to the carpet, and she invited A.J., Jon, and Saehan to come sit at specific spots right up the
front. By the time the other children got there, the three boys were facing the other children.

Mrs. Green: Do you know why I invited these three boys to sit up here by me?

A.J.: Why?

Mrs. Green: Well, I'm going to ask them. Do you know why I asked you come sit here?

A.J.: No

Saehan: Because we are ready?

Mrs. Green: Say it again Saehan.

Saehan: Because we are ready.

Mrs. Green: Not only are they ready - they are so ready. Saehan, tell me what you said when it was time for writing workshop.

Mrs. Green: Stand up and tell us. (He stands) I love hearing this. He said he was so excited to get started?

Saehan: Yeah.

Mrs. Green: Started what?

Saehan: My story.

Mrs. Green: Your story! I love it. Okay, now, I'm going to have A.J. stand up (A.J. stands up) A.J., what did you say?

A.J.: Before we went to the rug?

Mrs. Green: Mmhmm.

A.J.: I said I didn't even want to go to the rug because I wanted to finish my story.
Mrs. Green: Aw! And Jon, what did you say?

Jon: I said I was too excited to get on to my next paper.

Mrs. Green: Guess what, I love their ideas. They didn't even want to come to the rug. They didn't even want to learn another little lesson about writing. They just wanted to write. I think that was an awesome idea. Off you go.

There was no official mini-lesson. Mrs. Green simply used the momentum the children had in continuing their stories. The lesson, it can be argued, was getting them excited about writing their stories and starting right away. A.J., along with some of the students, opened their mouths wide and looked at each other, some with quizzical looks on their faces. Some hesitated in getting up while others bounced up quickly and hurriedly made their way back to their seats, treating it almost like a race to get started right away. A.J., along with many other students, learned that day that writing workshop did not necessarily have to start with a mini-lesson – and from A.J.’s comments, the mini-lesson did not mean as much to them as getting their writing down on paper. Although there was a script for school events as well as a script that organized classroom events, these scripts could actually be reorganized here.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I demonstrated how school could be seen as a script in itself – there were norms, regulations, rules, and events that were particular to the setting of school. I, also, discussed that the school script for kindergartners was new as they were first-time participants within the school’s normal events. This placed these kindergarten teachers and students at a unique position as teachers initiated children into the social and
cultural practices of the school as well as the particularized practices of each classroom. The children were not only learning how to read and write, they were learning how to take part in the social worlds of their school, their classroom, and their relationships with one another (Dyson, 1989, 1993).

While literacy practices were closely tied to their social intentions, the ways in which they were assessed were not. The assessments evaluated children on their abilities to work quickly, delineate basic skills (e.g., letter recognition, letter-sound correspondence), and avoid the below average label on tests. Additionally, the instructional components were designed to help children achieve a better handle on the basics: scripted writing curricula that emphasized “stretching out words” (Calkins, 2003) and reading interventions that focused on individual letters/word parts.

Meanwhile, the children were using literacy to meet their personal curiosities – they found words on the wall, they discovered the similarities in their names, they wrote about their friends, and they collaborated on texts using their messy, unstructured conversations as guides. The scripts used to order teaching and learning attempted to set students on a developmental trajectory – making claims about the best approach to teach children how to read and write. Not surprisingly, most children do not follow this type of linear path towards learning the mechanics of language as many scholars have pointed out (Clay, 1998; Dyson, 2003, in press; Goodman, 1984; Halliday, 1969; Lindfors, 2008). The task, then, of teachers is to see the language sophistication of children (like Tammy did with Jaquan) in spite of the scripts – they need to be resisted and reordered. The next section addresses the reordering of the scripts as teachers assert agency on the practice of teaching and learning.
Chapter 5

Reordering the Scripts: Negotiating Order in Collaborative Spaces

The good teacher’s life is not an orderly professional pathway; rather, it is a personal journey shaped by context and choice, perspectives and values…It is primarily through story, one student at a time, that teachers organize their thinking and tap into the collective, accumulated wisdom of their profession. (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995, p.xvii)

The scripts that are set up for teachers to follow assume that the life of teachers is an orderly one. With experience, teachers understand that each classroom of students is both familiar and unfamiliar. Tonia beautifully articulated in an interview the hard truth,

In teaching, you make choices though. I don’t have the kind of class that will actually do this [the scripted direction]…It doesn’t work for every class. Even if you did something last year and it worked perfect, that doesn’t mean it’s going to work the next year. I’m not going to pull my hair out with that particular way of doing it. I’m going to change something.

Every class is, indeed, different. Even with similar routines, similar scripts, and similar materials, teachers and children build new classroom communities as they engage with each other and the context around them (Bruner, 1990; Holland et. al., 2003). As individuals participate in communities of practice, they can shape and transform them as they make meaning out of the available cultural tools (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). This process of meaning-making is accomplished through interaction and is negotiated by the people involved. Within the practice of community, there is individual agency, collective action, interpretive meanings, and power dynamics that play off of each other.
as participants engage in practice and construct identities. In this chapter, I discuss the agency of teachers as they re-order these scripts – instead of remaining static and inflexible, the teachers used their collective insight to make malleable what was meant to constrain their practice. Although assessments and curriculum were both scripted and ordered by the administration, the teachers actually deviated from the scripts and were able to change the status quo.

By collaborative spaces, I refer to both the official and unofficial structures that these three teachers participated in. One collaborative space was their in-service time, which was similar to an “institute day” where teachers had professional development while the students had a day off. In this particular school, these days (five 2-hour sessions) were used for grade level teams to work on their collaboration goals independently. Tammy stated, “It’s just us…we’re not driven by somebody’s specific agenda…so when we get to do that…”

“It’s very helpful,” added Jessica. They valued the time to truly get things done and talk about their concerns in the classroom since otherwise, they did this in the hallway or in the morning before the school day started. The hallway encounters and “drop-ins” into one another’s classrooms became informal collaborative spaces where they were able to talk about their immediate concerns, “chit-chat or make incidental comments” and bring up questions about how they would handle things that came up.

Collaborative spaces included the grade level collaboration meetings that were a district-sanctioned event, like it is in many other districts. The schedules were created to allow for a common, plan time where the teachers from each grade level came together to implement the goals of their professional learning community (Dufour, 2004). At this
school, the professional learning communities (PLC) were formed by grade level. The goals of the PLC were school-wide: to create common formative assessments that were consistently used by each teacher at similar grade levels. These meetings were bi-weekly, during the school day, often led by the principal, and centered around the discussion of data. Jessica described the professional learning community as the idea of collective responsibility for the kids in the grade. All the teachers were responsible for all the kids and the philosophy behind it was to give suggestions and ideas related to instruction and not take things personally. It is to collaborative spaces that I turn in an effort to examine how teachers re-ordered the scripts – exerting agency over their thoughts, actions, and practice. To highlight the role of teachers, this chapter focuses on the collective power in collaborative spaces as they reordered the assessment scripts, reordered the curriculum, and reordered the teaching scripts. Moreover, this chapter shows the ways that teachers negotiated, and even circumvented the scripts in order to provide space for children’s multiple literacies.

The Nature of Official Collaboration Meetings

Tonia: I feel like there needs to be a place for “other” in our collaboration notes.

Tammy: It’s true, we don’t get to have this kind of talk. There’s no time. We have to hurry and get everything done.

Tonia: It seems like there to be something outside of what we’re talking about that needs to come up. It seems like there should be something at the end that’s like, “anything else”?

Jessica: Yes, within that time.
Tammy: It does say “other”. We never get to “other”.

Tonia: Yeah, we never get to other.

The collaboration notes (see Figure 5.1) did not include a section labeled other, contrary to Tammy’s assertion. The conversation above depicted the nature of the collaboration meetings. The teachers wished they had more time to talk about other issues and concerns, but the reality was that the time frame was too short and their minds were too preoccupied. Furthermore, the design and format of the meetings dictated the content as seen below (see Figure 5.1).

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**Figure 5.1.** Collaboration meeting notes. The document was used to take minutes during the grade-level meetings.
The collaboration sheet shown here illuminates why collaboration time was largely a discussion about assessments. Instead of discussion about teaching and instruction, curriculum, or “other” topics, the form was developed in order to discuss the standards, the assessments, the children who did not meet these standards, and plans for continued data gathering. Within a limited time frame, this was the on-going narrative that took up a bulk of the collaboration meetings. There was hardly enough time to move the discussion beyond the assessment framework. Simultaneously, teachers were constantly conscious of the time, worrying about picking up their students in a timely manner.

Tonia: I don't like to have anything that I have to do where I have to talk or schedule during that time [plan time] cause you're always looking at that clock. 10:20 comes around and you're rushing because you have this class to pick up.

Collaboration meetings were often sandwiched in between the flurry of activities, making it very difficult for teachers to be fully present (figuratively) without being concerned about time constraints.

The meaning and how “meaningful” collaboration can be is defined differently in schools as well as within teams. The teachers, in this case, recounted the importance of agency and control over their collaboration times. In fact, Tonia admitted that although the collaboration time was not perfect, she felt like they were moving in that direction. “We’re not quite there yet, but John is moving towards that when he said that we could bring something valuable about how we are teaching this or that. When you look at numbers, it’s just number until you put it together.”
Jessica added that this focus on meaningful collaboration came from the PLC (Professional Learning Community) concept outlined by Dufour (2004). She was one of the members of the school who attended a training during the summer. The following is Jessica’s interpretation of the PLC:

You come as a team. What comes into collaboration stays in collaboration. So when your kids are down here, and somebody else’s kids are up here, don’t take it personally, but instead we should be open to saying, “Hey Tonia, how did you do that? How did you get those six kids that before were down here? How did you get them up here?” So, I know he [John] always has that in the back of his mind.

Tammy agreed that she felt this movement from him, especially in light of the most recent collaboration meeting where John acknowledged that it was difficult to get “hard data” in kindergarten. Instead of focusing so much on the numbers and categorizing students into 1’s and 2’s, or 3’s, he shifted the conversation by asking, “What did you do to get them there?” Instead of focusing so much on administering and collecting data, she felt that he understood the constraints that assessment overload had on their school day and their teaching. Tammy noted, “For the first time that last meeting, he understood that we cannot sit down and do whole group assessment, just like that, and get something covered.” However, all three of the teachers wished that they could come together and talk about what they were doing to help students, but she said that this happened more informally in the hallways or before or after school when they had more control over their conversations. “Sometimes, you wish you could talk about some other things, but
it’s very strategic.” I learned over time that Tammy described things as “strategic” as code for, “I don’t like it.”

**Re-ordering Assessment Scripts**

The assessment data was not just a tool to see what children could do, but the data provided a backdrop for teachers to discuss and talk about the implications of this data. Although the collaboration meetings could be seen as regulated and led by the principal, the meetings also provided a shared space for teachers to critique the tests not just in terms of discreet, isolated skills but also in terms of developmental patterns. As John was looking through the data, highlighting children who did not meet the expectations, Jessica interjected, “We are not basing their score on just one assessment, but it’s playing into all the other assessments, right?” She was concerned that the instruments that they created as well as the official tests were indicative of the child’s skill, fearing the mislabeling of children. The teachers recounted the tale from last year (which was a story that came up more than once at separate meetings) about a girl whose test results were far from her actual ability. Tammy recounted, “I always flash back to last year with my highest reader who showed up as one of the biggest at-risk kids and I was like, ‘You’re kidding me, really!’” More than the instrument itself, it became more important to uncover the reasons why children were scoring poorly on certain tests. This interrogation of assessments was important to voice since most of the collaboration meetings were about these very assessments and categorizing children into ability levels while identifying those children in need of interventions. In fact, taking up the whole side of the north wall in John’s office was a giant assessment chart with children’s numbers (in order to protect anonymity), color coded by grade levels on cards, and neatly placed in the proper slot.
(i.e., below, approaching, meeting, and exceeding). A chart similar to the one below took up wall space in every school in the district (either in the principal’s office or in the literacy specialist’s office), and the task of moving children from one slot to the other was part of the collaboration agenda (see Figure 5.2).

![Assessment wall chart](image)

Figure 5.2. Assessment wall chart. The chart was used to track children’s growth on benchmark tests. The cards are color-coded by grade level and labeled with numbers to represent students. Far left is the “below” category, followed by “approaching”, “meeting”, and “exceeding”.

This chart became a physical sorting system that instantly categorized students. These sorting systems are often the basis for deficit discourse that defines children as “high” and “low” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Ferguson, 2001). The implications for a child’s educational future could be imagined, especially when children failed to move up on charts like these, displayed for the entire staff to see. However, in these collaboration meetings, no time was used to focus on this chart, which was unusual in relation to other collaboration meetings I have sat in, since keeping up the chart was part of the district
mandate. Instead, the teachers changed the conversation by turning the focus away from collecting and dumping numbers into neat checklists and charts to focusing on how messy and complicated it was to get an accurate picture of any one child. They interrogated the problematic nature of delivering and collecting data by articulating the problem of time, by challenging the value of these tests, and by highlighting counter-narratives of children’s development as seen in their daily interactions with “low-performing” children.

The problem of time. The teachers articulated all kinds of conditions that created variables in the collection of data from children’s comfort with the person giving the assessment, children’s behavior at a specific day or time, children’s ability to use their language to demonstrate their ability, or their inability to perform within the time constraints. Time was an issue for two distinct reasons: the speed of taking the tests as well as the amount of time it took to administer these tests to children. It was clear from the collaboration meetings that teachers had a good sense of their children’s progress – they had paperwork (checklists, teacher-created assessments, anecdotal notes) that documented children’s development. However, the process of obtaining this data was viewed as even more complex than it was in the upper grades at this school. According to John, the upper grade teachers could give paper tasks to children, but most of the assessments for kindergarteners had to be done individually. In kindergarten, the teachers mentioned having to give these assessments one-on-one and orally which meant that the time it took to give assessments took time away from their classroom instruction. Tammy stated, “I do feel this year that I am assessing more than I’m teaching.” In
addition, she thought all the assessments happened at once, so the pressure to finish all of them so as not to fall behind added more stress to an already packed day.

The pressure to meet the district’s assessment deadlines, at times, overshadowed the point of administering them; the point was to figure out what children were capable of doing, as determined by the assessed skills. Between the universal screeners, the district benchmark tests, and now the teacher-created, on-going assessments, there were multiple tools that essentially tested the same thing, creating an avalanche and an overkill of assessments, leading Tammy to ask, “Do we have to do this again and again and again?”

The issue of time was a common plague in school – there was only so much time within a school day and many things to accomplish within it. The assessments co-opted some of the teachers’ instructional space - not only their whole group time, but their individual and small group time with children. In order to avoid individually administering assessments, the teachers attempted to administer some of these assessments in whole group settings but felt that it gave them a false sense of how children were performing. Jessica said that she would think the children understood a triangle or numbers when they did this as a whole group, but when it came to individual tests, she was surprised that they didn’t know since they were “nodding their head every day when they say triangle and even said it with them [the whole class] sometimes.”

Tammy: This is the whole big thorn in our side for kindergarten. You really want to know how they do? You need one-on-one. Pull them over. When are you going to do one-on-one? I mean, and how many categories and test are there? Letter ID, letter-sound recognition, high frequency words? They are all one-on-one…I mean, if you want to know exactly what they
know about that, you better bring one of them over while 24 of them are doing something else.

Jessica: All that is one-on-one.

John: Yeah, sure…I get it.

At a separate meeting, Tammy, again, lamented about the one-on-one nature of testing in kindergarten:

Benchmarks are artificial for these kids. I mean, we have to do it, it’s good, but we also have to do it on-going, you have to pull that little group over and see who you can get to work with them. And they work with each other…I’ve always worried about what’s valid and reliable with kindergartners.

Consequently, teachers had to be creative about integrating assessment and instruction, “squeezing” it in throughout the day when they could. Tammy said that she could usually test 5 kids a day informally by having them practice counting in front of the class during calendar time. Jessica was surprised by Tammy’s ability to do this and couldn’t believe that they could sit through that extra time whereas she could squeeze in 3 per day. Tammy added, “I’ll even do it in between little transition times.” Tonia also used transition times while the children were moving and getting ready to go back to their seats, but found that the students couldn’t sit still so she barely got through two. In order to keep the excitement high and get her assessments done, Tammy described a grandiose production for “counting from any given number”:

They pop up and come up to the front. They think it’s neat. They like to be up standing…They don’t ever get tired of it…they love it. And everyone gets a round of applause. “Give that learner a round of applause.”
Obviously, this took time, energy, and effort to do. Instead of being a quick check during transition times, it ended up being a bigger endeavor than intended in order to keep the children interested.

**Percolating up.** Tammy once mentioned to me that she liked the idea of “percolate up” rather than “trickle down.” Principals deliver a lot of mandates to their teachers without an accurate knowledge of children’s development (as John would readily admit coming from a secondary education background). He was willing to admit his lack of expertise, which made the collaboration time a crucial time for the teachers to assert their authority and expertise in this area. By the end of the semester, he was starting to agree with their frequent assertions: there were too many assessments, they needed to bypass some of them because it was redundant, and kindergarteners were so different in their developmental stage than other grades.

Tammy: At the beginning, John was really into the data. He needed it. And that’s really hard at kindergarten, to get that hard data. But, I felt like he even started to shift…I liked that he, for the first time this last meeting thought, “Maybe kindergarten doesn’t have to keep doing this over and over and over. And I think, he for the first time, understood that we cannot sit down and do whole group assessment, just like that, and get something covered…In the past collaborations this is how I felt: he wants numbers and data, and he wants that from all of us, but it’s just different for us.

John, understanding the gravity of it, said,

So, for some of these things, you have to pull 25 kids on 3 things and if we have to bring data like that every time, maybe it’s not all 25 that we need to be looking
...The assessments are designed for everyone, but if kids, in your conversation with them, have it, then I don’t know if I’m as worried about that. I think those kids are going to be doing pretty well though your everyday, good teaching. So things like this you are seeing at the end of the quarter [referring to the benchmark data], you’re already going to know.

The teachers nodded and agreed that children who have mastered out of a skill probably did not need to be tested because there were no surprises. However, the reality of accounting for every child and offering up formal numbers was expected. John, in an effort to alleviate the pressure, asked, “What could you use? If there were some competent volunteers, could you use some volunteers to come and help do some things?”

He said that he could mobilize people and get them to come administer assessments, but Jessica said that she was content with herself, the classroom aide, and the interventionist administering the assessments. Jessica insisted on “using just those two” because the children were familiar with the teachers and responded to them. The assessments, according to the teachers, required a trusting relationship between the assessor and the one who was being assessed. In other words, teachers and other members of the classroom community had a situated knowledge and perspective on children that went beyond students knowing specific test items.

Tammy: They know Mrs. Petty and Mrs. Cutter. They know us.

Jessica: So, they’ll work for those two. They should work for those two.

Tammy: They will because they’ve done it before. But it’s amazing because even on the AIMSweb, I think of Amy [a student]. She’s not so good with Petty even. I have to pull her over and double
check just because she clams up – she’s painfully shy. Now, she’s used to Mrs. Cutter, but she just clams up.

Tammy: If it comes down to the wire, I’ll use some people.

Assessments are not given in an isolated vacuum, but they are administered by people, and as seen above, the person who gives assessments to the children matter. The consistency and importance of having a familiar face in kindergarten was important not only in teaching but assessing students as well. Thus, two children with the same score could have completely different reasons for getting a specific score (e.g., the time of day, the child’s mood, familiarity with the test, familiarity with the test’s administrator).

Questioning the validity of the tests coupled with the enormous amount of time needed to administer them effectively became a point of contention that came up in every single one of the grade level collaboration meetings. The script for administering assessments became cumbersome, inefficient, and unmanageable. Tonia admitted to her colleagues once that she brought the checklists and spreadsheets to the meetings because she knew that John wanted them. However, she noted, “Numbers are just numbers until you put them all together…thinking okay, I have to do something different with this student.” With more and more of a push to show evidence, they ended up spending more time on how they were pulling it together than what they were doing about it. Although in one sense, teachers followed the scripts, they also inadvertently challenged them. The next section highlights the oversimplified nature of assessments that failed to capture the complexity of children’s development.

**Counter-narratives: Children on the crosshairs.** Assessments are often structured and interpreted as ways to find out what children do not know. It was
designed to target children who were not up to par with their peers. The collaboration meetings were an example of this phenomenon – looking at data to uncover what children do not know rather than helping children firm up what they do know and what they can do (Clay, 1998). Analyzing assessment data was not necessarily a simple process of putting like-numbers together, as Tonia alluded to earlier. The following discussion illustrates that a myriad of factors were involved in the examination of data that goes beyond categorizing children with numbers that could bauble back and forth.

As they were discussing whether children were able to count up to 50 from any given number, John pointed at Evan’s score and said to Tonia, “That’s surprising.” He had not scored very well, and for someone who seemed to be talking all the time, this score did not seem to match his verbal abilities.

Tonia said that after Evan counted rote from 1-50, he got stuck and didn’t know (or want) to count from a random number and do the same thing. “I don’t know, it’s different for him…I can go back to it next week, and he may do it for me.” Evan just acted silly some of the time, and it really depended on what time of day he was given these tests or whether or not he had a good day or whether he chose to be silly.

Jessica asked, “So, he can’t count at all from any given number?”

Tonia reiterated that he did not do it for her, but she believed that he could. “It just depends on what kind of day he’s having, whether he’s going to show me…I think he can do more…I’d like to keep trying,” she said with confidence.

The number, although formalized, was not static but flexible via teacher input and insight, an example of situated knowledge as discussed earlier. There were a number of rules and regulations for keeping the data: specific days to administer them, certain
language to use as not to give anything away, and time constraints. However, these assessment measures did not have to be the final judgment for children as Tonia demonstrated above.

Tammy used similar reasoning when she shared about the students that fell below expectations in her classroom who were mostly African-American as noted in the previous chapter. Danae, for example, was never at school. In fact, at the time of this meeting, her case was being taken before the truancy review board because she missed so many days of school. Repeated inquiries were made to her mother about the issue. Tammy attempted to contact her at home and stopped her when she saw her in the hallway dropping Danae off. Tammy was sure that Danae would have passed if she was actually present in the classroom and able to participate with the rest of the students. On the days that she was there, Danae was painfully shy and extremely quiet; thus it would have been easy to miss her even when she was there. Just like Tonia did for Evan, Tammy attempted to explain some of the children’s scores through narratives and personal insight. Her only real concern was Mike (a low-income, White child) who used cochlear implants to hear. His scores were not surprising, but in her words, “tricky” – and the scores were not helpful in providing a picture of Mike’s issues as a learner. In the following excerpt, the group was trying to determine what Mike’s issues could possibly be. Tammy, in an effort to paint a picture of the situation said that Mike had “nothing” at home to help build his learning – this meant, in her perspective, that he didn’t have books at home, he didn’t have someone who was reading with him, and that he had parents who both had to work – making it difficult for them to supplement or support his reading and writing at home.
John: He’s tricky because I wonder how much he really can’t hear and can hear, do you know what I mean?

Tammy: See, and he’s just had nothing at home.

John: I know.

Tammy: He just had nothing. I don’t even think hearing is his primary disability. I mean we kind of all agree on that now (referring to the special education teachers as well as his case manager).

John: Yeah, I don’t either. But it’s hard to tell if he even does have another disability because he has had –

Tammy: He’s had nothing.

John: And he probably does hear without his hearing aids.

Tammy: And he wanted to hear with no hearing aid. Period. He had them. They just broke and nobody replaced them for a while.

John: So, he wasn’t hearing anything for a while!?

Tammy: Yep. And no preschool, no support, and no anything. So, you put it all together and –

John: No wonder he’s –

Tammy: Very, very immature too.

John: Oh my God, so little and so young.

Tammy: There’s just a lot. I don’t really know for sure with everything, but that’s what I was telling Tonia was the things about these [assessments]. We keep these checklists because it’s based on our
on-going, on-going work that we do, not the definitive assessment if you want to call it that; because the kids go back and forth.

The example of Mike demonstrates the numerous variables that go into understanding one student’s score. Instead of moving children’s color-coded cards on a giant assessment chart from one level to the next, it was more important to carefully think through the underlying reasons for these scores. Mike’s lack of support for reading and writing at home, his issues with his implants, and his immaturity would never be reflected in a single score. These were dimensions that were considered only after Tammy asserted the trickiness of accurately assessing someone like him.

The group’s discussion of Mike also raises another important issue about labeling children. The scripted language of assessments (well above, above, average, below, well below) becomes not only an evaluative tool to place children’s abilities, but it also becomes a marker of identity. Calling children “fringe” kids or “lowbies” was part of the common discourse used in this group to talk about the students. Rose (1995) talks about how even good, well-intentioned teachers are swept up in the discourse used in schools to talk about students. He gives the example of a new teacher (a respectable, well-intentioned one) who used categorical labels (e.g., “slow one”; bad at math; challenged in reading) to describe the students. Perhaps these labels stood out to him because the teacher was charged with targeting perceived weaknesses – “by a single cognitive characteristic” (p.xviii). The labels grown from assessments feed into this mindset, which reduces the complexity of individuals into simplified notions that we would not, ourselves, wish to be defined by.
Similar to the teacher Rose describes, I was always so impressed by Tammy’s knowledge of children; I was even more impressed by her ability to honor and respect children who were otherwise dismissed by other adults in the building. For example, Tammy’s class was walking down the hallway when the school librarian passed by. She stopped Tammy and in a reprimanding voice reiterated to her how much trouble Jamarion was having in library. Tammy said, “Well, I don’t know anything about that,” and continued to walk her children down the hallway. Tammy later told me how much it bothered her when teachers publicly humiliated children – she noted that it was happening the most to Jamarion. She felt compelled to protect his reputation as she feared that the other teachers were creating a negative image of him and playing off of each other. She acknowledged that Jamarion was very active and talkative and could get under peoples’ skin, yet so bright. However, even the best teachers use words to quickly distinguish children because it is part of the script; it is part of the common language that everyone, unfortunately, understands. Part of the problem with assessments is these terms (e.g., “low”, “high”, “gets nothing”) that need to be unpacked rather than simply stated and accepted. In this section, I have demonstrated how complex it was to administer and interpret simple assessments. The assessments are not simply made to categorize children’s ability, but as mentioned earlier, it is tied up with their identities as well.

**Re-Ordering Curriculum**

In this setting, the language arts curriculum (like many other schools) reduced language learning to strategies that began with phonics, the alphabet, sight words, and constant drill and practice (Rose, 1995). At Roosevelt, there were scripted curricula,
skills interventions for children who fell below average, and talk about making sure that children have mastery over the basics before moving on. These days the staying power of curriculum is fleeting as something old is always going and something new is always coming. All the more, with the plethora of new curricula that tout alignment with the common core, it is more essential that teachers think critically about the curriculum they deliver. However, despite pressures to stay on schedule, pace the lessons in rapid speed, and deliver the language and materials of the curriculum in lock step, the teachers, in their collective expertise, circumvented the curriculum and pulled away from the script by bringing up the problems associated with these scripts to the forefront and asserting their own philosophies on teaching and learning.

Teachers felt trapped by the curriculum when the values and beliefs of these scripts were not congruent with their own (Doyle, 1992). Tonia noted this exact sentiment when she told me in an interview, “I feel like the curriculum we have kind of closes us in. It boxes us in so that’s what we get stuck doing.”

She continued to talk about how it was easy and doesn’t require a teacher to go out and find their own materials since all the books are right there, all the lessons are written out, and all your goals are set for you. Essentially, it left no room for “error” and had a narrowing effect on teachers and students. Underlying the curriculum were several implicit goals including monitoring teachers’ coverage of content, regulating their pace, narrowing the scope of what they say (literally) and do, and placing value on certain materials, texts, and content.

Scripted curriculum works against the natural grain of everyday life. Our lives are spontaneous, based on interaction, and highly social by nature. Tammy said,
“Scripted curriculum cannot work in the classroom for the same reason as No Child Left Behind. We are just not cookie cutter kids or teachers.” She lamented on how the script does not and cannot account for a child that just threw up or the child who loses his first tooth in the middle of the day.

Tonia agreed that, “none of the programs that they purchased could ever cover every different child you have in the classroom.”

This is in line with Clay’s (1998) assertion that as long as there is individual diversity, a prescriptive program will never make all children readers and writers. Children in schools as well as teachers cannot be scripted for several reasons: children were pulled in and out of the classroom to receive various interventions missing some of the classroom instruction (e.g., Tammy having to close the door at one point and saying “No” to children leaving so frequently); teachers enjoyed certain aspects of the content and curriculum and tended to enact them differently (e.g., Jessica lingering during writing workshop because the children enjoyed it); situations occurred during the school day that were beyond their control (e.g., Jamarion pooping in his pants out of frustration at his day); teachers made intentional decisions to add or delete to the curriculum (e.g., Jessica combining 5 days worth of lessons into 3 days; Tonia replacing the books in the shared reading curriculum with other books that she discovered after reading teacher blogs). Not everything works according to plan because individuals assert their own identities, perceptions, authorities, knowledge, preferences, and interpretations into the words that are on a piece of text, which of course, is situated within specific contexts. The conversations between teachers in this group consisted of looking at the curriculum,
finding the strengths and weaknesses, and adapting the materials for themselves and the children.

The teachers also talked about how the curriculum was redundant and confining. Tonia found herself “double teaching” in an attempt to cover all the curricula that teachers were required to deliver. Tammy mentioned that one curriculum might have been adopted before the other, and instead of replacing or consolidating them, they layered them on top of each other. Furthermore, they were given specific books, specific literature, and specific material that may not connect with the children’s experience or other topics that they were talking about as a class.

For instance, when the children were learning about their five senses, Tammy just used the science text to talk to the children about adding feelings to their writing. Another time, instead of using the book in the writing curriculum, the children went on a shape walk outside to notice that shapes (triangles, rectangles, circles, etc.) were everywhere just like ideas for writing: all you needed to do was look. The idea of reading books aloud to children, having discussions about books with them, reading chorally a piece of text, and guiding children through reading were not bad ideas. However, instead of having a choice of what to use, they were pigeon-holed into using certain texts that teachers may not like to use at all.

The abundance of curricula that were mandated and scripted worked to overcrowd an already crowded schedule as each subject became more compartmentalized. There was a math, reading, and writing curriculum, each with its own calendar and pace, all of which did not coincide with each other as they were created by different publishers. Tammy mentioned, “If I don’t find a way to integrate everything,
I’ll never get it all done.” Tonia, who always seemed more hesitant about deviating from the curriculum, stated that she finally learned how to integrate curriculum by using Christmas trees to talk about length and making snowmen out of the shapes during the winter months where Santa, snowmen, and Christmas trees were on all the children’s minds. Jessica reminisced about the “good old days” of teaching kindergarten where every academic subject was under that umbrella of a theme. During Thanksgiving, Tammy reiterated,

I am loving this week. This past week was like taking a step back because I’m very thematic this week…everything is tying in together and the kids are just having a ball with it. We just flow from one thing to another. I didn’t realize how much I missed that.

Tonia added that they got a lot more done if they taught thematically anyway. It was Thanksgiving and the children were learning about Thanksgiving traditions around the world. Tammy had a Thanksgiving feast of her own in the classroom, had the children practice for their musical, wrote a shared writing piece on their feast, predicted and counted seeds in pumpkins that they collected from their field trip to the orchard, and looked into the anatomy of a pumpkin. She met several of the goals and objectives by tying all the subjects together instead of delineating them into separate compartments as the curriculum ordered.

The prescribed curricula created a disconnect between subject areas that could easily have connected together. Shared reading, like Tonia said, could be done with any book. It was not about throwing out the goals of the curriculum directly but circumventing the prescriptiveness of it, and making it personal. At times, teachers
embraced the prescribed curricula if it was in harmony with their own ideas and goals. They resisted when there was disharmony between their own philosophies and those of the curricula (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Doyle, 1992). Tammy said, “It’s just about wrapping your curriculum a little tighter by tying in science and social studies books, and even good literature books, something you used that you know just meets their needs better.”

Undergirding this was the importance of bringing the curriculum into the context of children and connecting what they were required to know with their own experiences. Teachers were not trying to be rebellious or ornery; they were simply thinking about the strategies and the goals of the curriculum and making them a part of the everyday life of children.

Teaching is inherently personal. Curriculum publishers in an attempt to control the resources and content tend to underestimate personal pleasure, enjoyment, and satisfaction as factors in teachers’ work. Children and adults find more engagement in activities that they enjoy. Teaching was just as much a personal endeavor as it was a professional one:

Tonia: I guess that it’s a confidence builder because you can open it (the script) and it tells you what to do. But it’s not how you really want to teach. Some of it doesn’t even sound right coming out of your mouth. What? You stop and go, “What did I just say? It makes no sense…In teaching, you make choices though. I don’t have the kind of class that will actually do this (what’s in the book), I need to think of something else we can do.
The way teachers felt about specific curricula and the extent to which these goals and resources aligned with their own ideologies were important in how the curriculum was enacted in the classroom. This section illuminated the ways that teachers appropriated the curriculum despite its scripted nature. Circumventing curriculum was, in the teachers’ opinion, a direct response to children. The teachers, understanding the big ideas and goals, felt that they could easily maneuver through the curriculum by inserting their own ideas, own materials, and own philosophies into these goals. The pace of most scripted curriculum was always a point of contention for the teachers whether it was a reading, writing, or math curriculum. At times, in the name of coverage, depth of content was sacrificed in order to superficially cover materials and content. Instead of operating according to children’s development and timing, it could feel like the curriculum was driving the movement of time and ordering development. Jessica felt like the writing curriculum went so fast and changed abruptly instead of “lingering” over ideas that interested the children. Part of being flexible meant that teachers needed to not only feel comfortable with their instruction and interaction with children, but confident enough to deviate from the path. Tammy said, “I think flexibility comes too when regardless of how many years you’ve been teaching, when you finally feel free and comfortable and confident enough to trust children and know that they are going to lead you at the pace and in the direction they need to go.” Curriculum comes and goes while teachers remain the same. For Jessica and Tammy, they have outlasted many iterations of curricular mandates and materials. This experience allowed them to think of curriculum as a recommended option rather than a strict order.
Reordering Teaching Scripts: Opening Up Narrow Definitions of Children’s Development

Tonea, Lou, Jolene, Jon, and Jaquan were sitting at the table together working on writing workshop. On any given day, this table was engaged in a flurry of conversation ranging from Halloween costumes, Legoland, toys, family, etc. In the midst of the constant conversations, the children managed to get writing down on paper. Tonea was one of the children that the writing curriculum would have labeled developmentally delayed since she was not yet matching letters to sounds. Furthermore, until this point, Tonea made little attempt to write letters down on paper. By late November, her writing workshop constructions consisted of excellent pictures and a lot of talking and playing with her tablemates – no real attempts at letters. This particular day was no exception. However in the midst of her play, Tonea made some important discoveries about letters through interacting with others at her table. Lou and Jon were writing each other’s names on their paper when Tonea looked over at Lou’s paper. They were sitting across from each other so she was “reading” his paper upside down.

Tonea: You wrote two l's.
Lou: No I didn't.
Tonia: Yes, you did. L,l,l,l,l,l (starts laughing). You wrote Jon’s name.
(She turns to Jon) Yeah, I'm about to write Lou name, okay?
Jon: (To Tonea) Write Lou's name. I write Jolene's name (writes it).
Tonea: (laughs and writes Loe).
Lou: (looks at Tonea's paper) That's not my name! This is my name.
(He pulls out his nametag that they just got this morning from his
back pocket). This is my last name. (He begins to spell his last name). Last name.

Tonea: Lou, write my name (Shows him her nametag that she also pulled out of her chair pocket). Look Lou, we have this! (shows the "R" in her last name and the "R" in Lou’s last name). We both has this! (Tonea is smiling widely and starts to squeal and giggle at this discovery. She started to show Jon and kept pointing it out to Lou who showed little reaction). You want to write my last name?

Look, it's the same thing, like Lou's. (Laughs and shows me).

Tonea had just discovered the connection between words and how they connect to individuals and their names. She found great delight at the idea that she and Lou could have the same letter at the start of their name. As Tammy said to me, “You never know when they wake up and notice.” She found it fascinating the way that words and letters connected to children at different points at different times, and she marveled at how random and unpredictable these revelations were as indicated by Tonea. Tammy said she noticed that about Tonea – all of sudden she decided that the letters were meaningful to her and she wanted to use them. Instead of relying on universal timelines for children’s language development, Tonea revealed that understanding language is a contextual practice that is situated in experiences and interactions. After her initial discovery, Tonea continued to notice patterns and connections with letters:

Tonea: Wait, wait, wait. A "j" start with that (points to the “j” on the writing folder). I mean, uh, I mean, I mean, Jolene start with that!

Jaquan: Huh?
Tonea:  *(pointing to the "J" in Jaquan's name)* Jolene start with that!

Jaquan:  A "J"? *(Jaquan points to the "j").*

Tonea:  Mmmhmm.

Jaquan:  Jolene, do you start with this? *(Points to the "J" on his nametag).*

Jolene:  Uh-huh. I start with "j".

Jaquan:  You start with this too? *(Points to the “j”. He opens his mouth wide and Tonea smiles and nods).*

Jolene:  Yeah, I start with...(looks over at Jaquan’s name tag) Yes!

Tonea beamed with pride at her new discovery, especially with the reaction that she got from Jaquan who seemed to be equally surprised that Jolene’s name started with the same letter as his. Although she got very little written on her paper (in terms of drawing or letters), she accomplished a great deal as a language learner. In the next couple of days, Tonea’s story included pictures and letters for the first time since the beginning of the school year.

*Figure 5.3. Tonea’s written piece.*
Tonea, in an attempt to write words solicited the help of her tablemates to write the above story:

Tonea: We're having a race. The smallest car is gonna win (voice fades).

He went right past me. The smallest car was going to win. Jolene, how do you spell smaller car?

Jolene: Small.

Tonea: Smaller car.

Jolene: Smaller...I don't know.

Lou: Small - Sma. Ask Jon Harris, he know.

Tonea: X? (She thought Lou's ask sounded like x because he said, “aks.”).

Lou: Ask Jon Harris.

Tonea: Jon Harris! (turns to him).

Jon: What?

Tonea: You know how to spell small car?

Lou: (to Jon) Tell her!

Jon: What?

Lou: Tell her how you spell small car. (No response).

It was my sneaking suspicion, based on the exchange above, that no one really knew how to spell small car. Each child placed the onus on someone else until everyone avoided the task all together. Tonea was left to construct her story about a “small car” the best way that she could. For Tonea, writing letters to go along with her story started to matter, and her string of letters below her picture was an indication of that intent.
The writing curriculum stressed the idea of making sure that children knew how to match letters to sounds, claiming that two-thirds of kindergartners come to school knowing their letters.

As you teach children to say a word slowly, and listen to its sounds, keep in mind that your kindergartners should be on track as readers and writers according to the expectations embedded in the Common Core State Standards. It is important that by October, each of your kindergartners will at least grasp the principle that each sound (or phoneme) needs to be represented with at least one letter on the page.

(Calkins, 2011, p.10)

The curriculum defined writing as simply printed words – letters only meant something if the sound matched; for Tonea, the letters meant something, regardless of whether or not the sound matched. Tammy encouraged the children to think about writing as both the pictures and the words, placing importance on both of these aspects of written communication (Albers & Harste, 2007; Clay 1998; Dyson, 1993; Lindfors, 2008). The children, in fact, used drawing and writing interchangeably even in their talk as they make requests such as, “Look what I wrote” in reference to texts that contained just pictures. Furthermore, the children were not discouraged from talking during writing workshop – most of which was not monitored or regulated by Tammy. She roamed around the room to have conversations with children and talk to tables about their work, but most of the time, the children were talking freely with each other. She mentioned to me on several occasions that she knew that some of them probably did not get that much down on paper, revealing that her non-regulatory manner was deliberate – giving children
the space to participate and engage in different ways – through talking, writing, and drawing.

Some things that the children were asked to do as well as the pace at which they were asked to do it seemed developmentally inappropriate to the teachers. Tammy added, “They could get a better balance on being more developmentally appropriate while having the children accomplish things they are capable of.” It was not about lowering the standard for her, it was about widening what was viewed as valuable – moving beyond the basic skills such as letter identification, sounds, and sight words. All of these were measurable and validated by the tests whereas negotiating and building social relationships, using language in intentional ways, and entertaining divergent thoughts were difficult to measure with hard data, and therefore, not discussed as a part of children’s development.

Children’s development, as mentioned earlier, is social. Creativity and pleasure play a large role in the every day life of children – this is the nature of childhood as a unique, situated time in the life of people. The social, emotional, and intellectual lives of children are stimulated by connecting to others and their worlds within the cultural landscape. “You have to just remember that they are 5-year olds and we need to not lose sight of that. I have a feeling that it happens from time to time,” said Jessica. The political push to meet benchmarks for all children made it difficult to remember this.

It was a couple of weeks before winter break, and the buzz of the holidays, the first snow sightings, and holiday performances were on the forefront of children’s minds. The teachers were discussing assessments, as usual, during the collaboration meeting when this discussion arose about capitalizing on children’s excitement.
Tammy: Memorable! That's the whole point. What are they really going to remember? That they were assessed on December 12\textsuperscript{th}? (laughing) Or you know, I read you that book? Or that they did a gingerbread man activity or something like that? They had a chance to run around the whole school and try to find the missing gingerbread cookie.

John, in a gesture of agreement with the group said, “You need to deviate from the curriculum in order to get a lot of mileage out of their excitement…it’s memorable.”

Traces of the time period are evident in the conversations and writing of children as children enact their place, their identities, and their pleasures with others. School, as Tammy pointed out, could be a place where those pleasures are validated and experienced. All the teachers, despite the curriculum, tried to capitalize on this: Tonia used a snowman art project to reinforce shapes, Jessica had children make Christmas trees and order their lengths, Tammy and Jessica baked gingerbread cookies and organized a scavenger hunt using books and deductive reasoning. Reinforcing the pleasures of childhood by incorporating the multiple worlds that children are a part of (Dyson, 1989, 1999) was important to children’s development. They used the resources of the time period (holidays), their social relationships (families and friends), and references to popular culture (toys, television, and people) to participate in activities at school. In this section, the teachers demonstrated that there was no one way to access learning. Furthermore, insisting on one path actually prevented some students from connecting with the material. Instead, it was necessary for teachers to think of children’s development in socially and culturally embedded ways. Although gingerbread men,
Christmas trees, and snowman had no place in the curricular timeline, the teachers created curriculum with the children’s pleasures and interests in mind.

**Conclusion**

Official collaboration times were scripted with sanctioned activities for teachers, provided by the district. In the same way that children could not be ordered by scripts, these teachers revealed that they would not be ordered by these scripts either. Their individual frustrations, professional insights, and experiences with children worked to build a collective story. This story included counter-narratives of children’s development and deviations from the curriculum; all of this was done in the official space, in front of their administrator. John, after spending a whole semester listening to the teachers’ perspectives started to understand and sympathize with their sentiments. In this community of practice, there was a visible movement and shift in thinking that was pushed by the teachers – the collaboration space was transformable. The conversations at the collaboration meetings, although they were short, were filled with tales from the classroom. In so doing, John, as well as the other teachers, was able to get specific pictures of children as individuals, not simply as a group. Finally, there was emphasis and value placed on the lived experiences of the classroom space and the authority of teachers to know that context best. Delivering mandates was neither the only nor the best way to build teachers’ knowledge. Part of building knowledge was experiences and reflections that were tied up in their relationships with each other.

Teachers can know something in a variety of ways: directly through lived classroom experience, vicariously though observed or described experiences of
other teachers, formally through professional reading and study, or intuitively through their value system. (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995, p.15)

It is through these multiple communities of practice (classrooms and collaborative spaces) that teachers build practice and create curriculum.
Chapter 6

Disorder in the Scripts: Writing Practices in Classroom Spaces

As their composing becomes socially situated in their lives together, child composers may confront issues of responsiveness, representation, and inclusiveness. Teachers’ sensitivity to such issues matter because these issues matter; they are worthy of public discussion in an official classroom world that aims to support “good” communicators who learn to respond to others in an ever-widening world. (Dyson, in press)

This chapter attempts to take up these issues of responsiveness, representation, and inclusiveness within the social plane of the classroom. Classrooms, as mentioned above, are sites where children stitch together their social goals and intentions with the act of composing texts. Therefore, a discussion about teachers, curriculum, and writing is not complete without a deeper look into the classroom space where curriculum is enacted. Many scholars reiterate the notion that curriculum is not simply just a set of instructional goals to follow, but is a series of enacted events that occur in the classroom (Apple, 2004; Deng and Luke; 2008; Doyle, 1992; Jackson, 1986; Zumwalt, 1989). These events are mediated by the teacher who makes decisions on whether or not to support children’s efforts to communicate.

In this section, I focus on Tammy Green’s classroom and her students as they make meaning out of the curriculum through interaction with each other. These interactions reveal the multiple translations that occur around curriculum – it is first translated by the teacher, and then translated by individual students, some of whom have varied ways of interpreting what was being said. Most importantly, Tammy and her
children show that curriculum is transformable; thus the order of the script can be
disordered or disrupted by the participants in the classroom community.

Mrs. Spitzer’s Garden: Wrapping the Curriculum Around Children

Tammy started off each school year reading the book, Mrs. Spitzer’s Garden by Edith Pattou (2001). In the book, Mrs. Spitzer is an elementary school teacher in Room 108. There are six tables in her room – 4 circles and 2 rectangles. Her room has a birthday chart, housekeeping corner and a dress up area; Mrs. Spitzer’s room would not be “academic” enough for today’s standards. At the end of the summer, Mrs. Spitzer is given a packet of seeds by the principal for her to plant in the garden - a metaphorical representation of children. As we learn how Mrs. Spitzer plants her seeds and tends to her garden, we see her philosophy of children’s development at work:

She knows that different plants need different things. And that each plant has its own shape.

Some of the plants grow quickly, pushing upward, eager, impatient.
Some grow more slowly, unfolding themselves bit by bit.
Some plants sprout thin and tall.
Some are bushy and wide-spreading.
Some are bold, showy. They are brightly colored, saying, “Look at me!”
Some are silvery and quiet, the color of the earth.
A few are like wildflowers and will grow anywhere you put them. And some need gentle care, a special watching-over.

(Pattou, 2001)
When the year is over and her job is done, Mrs. Spitzer sits on the grass with her cup of tea and watches the plants continue to grow as they open themselves up receive her new packet of seeds and tend to her new garden.

I heard Tammy mention this book many times over the last few years, and throughout my study, it was undeniable that Tammy was her own version of Mrs. Spitzer – she appreciated and honored children’s growth. I never heard her raise her voice in the classroom and nothing seemed to catch her off-guard (even though later conversations revealed that it did). For example, Jamarion who had built for himself quite a reputation as Tammy pointed out, flourished under the guidance of Tammy. He could often be heard at random moments, blurting out, “I love Eleanor Roosevelt School! Roosevelt is my favorite!” I interpreted this as, “I love Mrs. Green. She is my favorite.” On many occasions, he could be heard stomping down the hallway with his arms crossed and a big pout on his face because he just got in trouble by one of the other teachers. Despite the negative rhetoric swirling around Jamarion, Tammy (as illustrated in collaboration meetings) stood up for him. She knew the strengths and weaknesses of children and displayed a genuine respect for each of the children in her classroom. On Thanksgiving, she made a certificate for each child where she thanked them for their contributions to the class. Each certificate was personalized and beautifully handwritten for each child to take home (see Figure 6.1). She believed that each of them had something to offer and the children responded to her in ways that I could not convey adequately through this study.
Tammy was an advocate for children – she believed in the power of playtime in kindergarten and believed in educating the whole child. She saw every part of the day as important to a child’s success. She believed in building healthy eating habits, getting enough physical exercise at home and at school (e.g., recess, “running laps” to keep their energy up, snacking outside, taking walks around the school grounds, etc.), having opportunities to build relationships and community, and most importantly, to wrap curriculum around the child. “I’m such a big believer in the healthy child. That’s just always been my philosophy forever with teaching…all of these things are necessary for a healthy, balanced child.” Obviously, there is no script on how to raise balanced children, but the absence of a script was where her practice shined.

For instance, snack times were a fun, but important part of the school day. The children read labels and predicted what kind of ingredients might be in their food. On
one occasion, I walked in while Jamarion was saying that “sodium bicarbonate” might be in the *Wheat Thins*. It certainly was, and I learned that day that sodium bicarbonate was the scientific term for baking soda. Understanding these words and associating them with their everyday experiences were nothing new for the children. The conversations around snack time were charming, amusing, and inspiring. On another occasion when I arrived in time for snack, they were outside eating apples and enjoying the fresh air and nice weather by the garden, located right outside Tammy’s classroom. After they finished their apples, they casually tossed their apple cores into the garden because they knew that the cores would decompose and fertilize the soil. Again, it was an everyday event and a daily part of their school day, but the way that Tammy set up this culture in her classroom was part of who she was; these ideas were understood and enacted by the children.

“Trust the children.” This was Tammy’s mantra and this was what caused tension between her and the school scripts (curriculum, assessments, and school mandates). When these scripts clashed with her personal philosophies, she found other ways to present information that connected with the children and wrapped around the children, as she mentioned earlier. However, she was organized enough to assert her authority over the scripts; it was the deep knowledge that she had of children, specifically the children in her classroom that allowed her to reflect critically on what was being asked of her. She made space for children to “mess up her plans” because teaching and learning were not just about meeting teaching goals, but learning to make sense of self and others.

Teaching and learning are dialogic – teachers and children go back and forth and ultimately create shared understandings (Bahktin, 1981; Freire, 1970/2010). Tammy not
only believed this, but made a space for children to insert their own ideas, identities, and responses. Her “garden” was always created anew.

At the beginning of the school year, I was walking down the hallway with Tammy after watching her first writing lesson of the year. The children were in school for less than a week, and today was a big day for them in terms of putting something down on paper. The plans in front of her (which had to be given to her principal at the start of each week) indicated what her goals and outcomes were for this particular lesson. She got through about half of what she planned. As we were talking about the day’s lesson, she looked at me, shrugged her shoulders, and said, “Like I always say, you can make plans, but the children decide the pace.” She sacrificed the goals of the curriculum in order to meet the goals of the children. Tammy described to me in an interview:

I always love that description of a teacher who facilitates learning. I just think that's so true. I think that's what we're here for…Not to do a script, but to just make this a place where learning happens. And to do that, I think you really, really have to trust your kids. That they will pace you, and they will guide you, and then you will facilitate the opportunities for them to become learners.

I share about Tammy’s teaching style not to idolize or idealize her nor to put her on a grand pedestal, but to undergird the importance of teacher agency in creating a space for children’s efforts, intentions, and individuality. In order to give teachers back their practice, stories like Tammy’s need to be highlighted as a response to the negative portrait painted of teachers. Her story is not simply about delivering curriculum, but about constructing curriculum with the help of children; this only happened because she allowed the curriculum to be “permeable” (Dyson, 1993) and influenced by children
themselves. In fact, curriculum is created in response to children who add, delete, and extend the intentions of what is being taught, thus “you can make plans, but the children decide the pace,” as the next section demonstrates.

**Improvising the Curriculum: Teaching as Dialogue**

It was the first day of November and the children completed their first writing unit. Unlike the curricular timeline that called for “small moments” and personal narratives, they just finished writing a bunch of made-up and true stories using pictures, words (printed and oral), labels, and letters. Tammy showed them a huge, expanding folder that had each of their names in it as well as all the writing pieces that were in their folder up until now. Treyvon said, “It’s like a mailbox!”

Tammy smiled, nodding enthusiastically at this revelation, and added that she would be saving all their work for the whole year so that they can take it home with them at the end of the year. This was a momentous occasion for the children and there was a murmur of “ooh’s” and “ahh’s” as Tammy announced that their folders were completely empty so that they could start something new. This “something new” was a small moment (Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003). Calkins defines a small moment as “zooming into a part of a story” while the author “stretches out the sequence of actions across several pages to make the moment feel important and interesting” (Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003). Tammy, on occasion, confided in me that she was unsure of whether or not the children really understood what this even meant. Up until now, most of the students were not writing about “real” events from their own lives but making up stories; some of the children were writing stories “in the moment” rather than drawing from a “small moment.” In the following excerpt, Tammy decided to introduce this concept by sharing
about a time she was flying a kite. According to her plans (her translation of the script),
she was going to share with the students the idea of writing about only one part of the day
and not the whole entire day, hence a small moment.

Mrs. Green: We're going to talk about how to write one story. And, I'm going
to make it even better, put your hands together like this (She brings
both her pointer fingers together and leaves a 2 inch space).

Small moment. Try it again (she has the kids follow her). Small
moment. Watch how my fingers started out here (she has her
fingers stretched out the width of her torso), I took a moment that
was pretty interesting, and I made it a small moment (brings here
fingers together, leaving the couple inch space). I'm gonna write
about a little, tiny, part, and I'm going to make it really interesting,
are you ready? I must tell you that this is a true story, but it didn't
happen to me today or yesterday. It happened to me in the
springtime.

Jamarion: Haw! Spring!

Mrs. Green: This was with my whole family, so are you ready?

Jamarion: Yeah!

Mrs. Green: My whole family's not in it, but they were there when it happened.

I took a moment like this (puts her fingers out wide and then
makes it smaller) and I'm going to make it very small.

Jamarion: Okay!
Tammy started to draw her first page, starting with a picture of herself. As she was drawing the rest of her picture, the children were shouting out what they thought it might be until finally, Jamarion said, “A kite! Kite!” A.J. suggested that Tammy should label herself in the picture (a common practice with writing thus far), but Tammy interjected that she was not going to label anything but draw each of her pictures first so that she could get her “ideas down quickly.” Tammy emphasized this by saying, “I’m trying to do this quickly cause it's important. Am I taking a long time drawing these pictures?” In the curriculum, Calkins and Oxenhorn (2003) suggest that teachers should build the habit of sketching their ideas quickly on each page so that they can hold on to their ideas and then go back and write. Ironically, the children rarely did this, but wrote one page at a time instead. She went through the rest of the story by telling the children that on that day, it was windy (a perfect day for kite flying), but then clouds rolled in, raindrops fell, and a thunderstorm blew in, breaking her kite string and sending it up into the sky. “It broke my kite string. It broke, and the kite completely flew away.”

This story was introduced as a small moments story, focusing on how the teacher wrote about a small portion of the entire day and stretched it out into a full 3-page story. The children were so taken by the story asking her questions about when it took place and whether she cried at the loss of her kite. Jake even came up to her after and said, “I lost my kite once, but I ignored it.” Tammy smiled at him, thanked him for sharing, and told him that he could possibly write about that as well. The whole mini-lesson was about writing about something real that had happened to you (although Tammy did not overly emphasize it as much as the curriculum did), but it was clear from the conversation that children were more interested in what happened to Tammy’s kite. Instead, Tammy’s
small moments story ended up being a co-constructed piece, created with the children’s input.

The very next day, the children continued to offer their input on Mrs. Green’s kite story (See Figure 6.2): they wanted her to label objects in her story (e.g., kite, cloud, me, sun, etc.), they wanted to add sound effects (e.g., BOOM, FLASH, pitter-patter), they suggested motion lines to indicate movement, and children encouraged her to show emotions by drawing tears coming down from her face. Tammy’s piece was now a collaborative one – one that she would say was written partly by them, “The kids always come up with something better than you plan. I have a general idea, but everything else was all them.” In the following excerpt, I show how this collaboration occurred.

When Tammy pulled out the previous day’s writing during the mini-lesson, on the next day, the children immediately recognized the piece and started to retell parts of it all at once. Per Tammy’s request, the children started to add their own contributions to the piece, deviating from the script. The idea of a small moment got lost as children thought about all kinds of sound effects and expressions to add to the story. They were not concerned about whether or not Tammy’s story was true or if it captured a small moment in time. Instead, they were more concerned about how they would put their mark on the story; thus the children were trying to figure out what they could contribute. In a moment of recognition, Tammy abandoned the script and went along with the children’s plans. She added their suggestions into her story, and seemingly by the end, everyone seemed to have forgotten about the small moment.
Mrs. Green: Okay, I can't make thunder because you can't see it, could I do a sound effect that says, "BOOM" (kids say yes)? Okay, so it should be right -

A.J.: With an exclamation mark!

Mrs. Green: Here, I’ll make it real big.

A.J.: With an exclamation mark. You can use an exclamation mark!

Julie: FLASH!

Mrs. Green: Ooh, I like that idea, exclamation mark and I'm making some lines under it, and what does that say? (Kids say BOOM!)
Mrs. Green: Oh, Julie, Julie had another good idea. She said that I don't have to say rain, what could say?

Julie: Pitter-patter, pitter-patter *(sing-song voice)*.

Mrs. Green: So, we've got a lot of sound effects. *(She writes pitter patter).*

Pitter patter. I better write it again. Pitter, patter. Cause she said it twice. Oh, I love this. Look at this story, okay.

BOOM! FLASH! Pitter patter.

Some of the children contributed to Tammy’s story; the excitement came from being able to place their words into her story. According to the curriculum, this would be considered chaos and disorder. In fact, the text advised teachers against letting the children interrupt:

Don’t let the particular content of children’s interruptions lead you to be inconsistent in your message that it is not time for interjections. You can say, “Early on in a minilesson I will talk to you, your job will be to listen. Then later in the minilesson, I’ll ask you to try what I’m teaching, and that’s a great time to talk. *(Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003, p.3)*

On the contrary, I would argue that the series of interjections made by the children grew the piece. Tammy did not signal the children to stop their comments, but she acknowledged them. In addition, these comments were the materials that she used to construct her own writing piece. The comments the children made mattered not only to her story, but more importantly, the comments mattered to her.

Curriculum and instruction are only pieces of the larger picture that include enactment – clearly, children draw on multiple resources (their own experiences, their
imaginations, their peers, and their teachers), but most importantly they use these resources to carry out their intentions. Children re-interpreted the goal of the lesson as illustrated by how they discussed and understood Tammy’s story, problematizing the idea of presenting lessons as a script. Children showed that they were capable of taking someone else’s story and moving it along, even though the experience did not personally belong to them. None of the children were at Tammy’s house when she was flying her kite, but in conversation, she accepted their suggestions and inserted them into the story; they did not have to be there to contribute their ideas. Tammy welcomed their input; she veered off the official script as well as her own plans, allowing her teaching to be guided by the contributions of children in the classroom. The children had a voice in the official script; moreover, they were not expected to follow it, but encouraged to be co-collaborators in disrupting the plans. The written artifact of Tammy’s kite story was an example of how children’s words and intentions were honored and written (literally and figuratively) into the story, creating a new order. The disorder that children created in the script was enabled by Tammy – she created this permeable space (Dyson, 1993). In the next section, the class not only demonstrated permeability in the curricular goals, but redefined what it meant to be a “writer.”

**Appropriating Literacy**

Under the direction of the writing curriculum, children were told that during writing time, they “must draw and write” (Calkins & Mermelstein, 2003). It is the belief of the curriculum writers that storytelling and “sketching” are important, but that kindergartners need to appropriate writing using print to accompany their story. In order to have children write conventionally, they advised children to go back and insert letters
into their story since writers use pictures and words. Underlying this is the inherent value of print literacy over other aspects of language use, including talking and drawing. In order to be a writer, children must learn to use writing conventionally.

Tammy defined writing a bit differently. She advocated for “clear pictures” and valued children’s telling of their own stories. One way that children could do this was through printed words, but another avenue could be through clear pictures. When Tammy traveled around the classroom to inquire about children’s stories, she often sat next to a child at the table or knelt down eye-level with him/her and asked, “What are you writing? Tell me about your story.” Some children had conventional words down on the paper while other children had drawings (some clear and some unclear). Nonetheless, her question implied that each child was considered a writer; they were told this constantly during the minilesson, “Each one of you is a writer because you got your ideas down on paper.” Moreover, the children referred to drawing and writing synonymously as many of them could be heard saying, “Look what I wrote,” in reference to drawings on a page. Tammy’s view of writing aligned with what many scholars who define writing in a broad sense as transmediated across sign systems (Berghoff, Egawa, Harste, & Hoonan, 2000; Dyson, 2003; Street, 1984). In other words, the alphabet is one sign system, but individuals use multiple sign systems (sometimes simultaneously) to communicate. They can include numbers, pictures, codes, etc. Tammy’s definition of writing broadened the literacy possibilities of students while the curriculum attempted to narrow it to print literacy.
The children translated writing in their own terms as well. The following example shows a glimpse of how children interpreted the act of writing. Julie appropriated writing by drawing on her observations of what adult writers do.

Jon: You're not writing words! *(Looks at Julie’s work, which is a bunch of squiggles).*

Julie: I'm doing it. I'm doing cursive writing.

Jon: Oh.

Julie: I'm doing it in cursive. Cursive is not usual writing. It looks like gibberish, but it isn’t, I actually know how to do my name in it. I'm doing my name in gibberish. In um, in um that kind of writing.

*Figure 6.3. Julie’s cursive piece.*
In Julie’s piece, language was not just about imitation but about appropriation through interaction. The constructive work that children engage in as they develop language prior to school is a display of creativity and innovation (Chomsky, 1968/2002; Clay, 1998; Lindfors, 2008; Rogoff, 2003). As they come into school, they bring these conceptions of language and ideas that they have learned from their interactions with people as they express their desires, confront confusions, ask for help, and communicate with individuals (Clay, 1998; Halliday, 1993). Julie’s construction of “cursive” in the above example is what Dyson (1993, 2003) would call an appropriation of writing and a shift from representing language through drawing to an approximation of conventional writing. In this conversation, we see Julie constructing a theory about written language that came from observing her social world – mainly the adults around her. In writing workshop, Tammy allowed these experimentations to occur, leading to many instances such as these where children were starting to make sense of the writing process in their own terms. Within classrooms, then, children with different experiences and interpretations of literacy come together to create texts, making classrooms the site where multiple cultural communities merge. These cultural practices are adopted, adapted, changed, and continued by other children. The act of writing, then, is social as the next section illustrates.

Social interactions and the production of texts. Tammy was a big believer in the social relationships as a means for learning. Many times, she referred to the tables as little communities where children shared ideas, talked to one another, and helped each other maneuver through their written communication. There was no writing without talking in her classroom. On any given day, there was a steady, constant stream of
talking amongst the table groups, none of which were the buzz of “one-inch voices” that
the curriculum encouraged the teachers to enforce. There were times when the children
were happily assisting each other on their written products and other times, when
arguments ensued between them – this is, after all, what happens in communities of
practice as people negotiate and navigate relationships. Tammy felt that the idea of
“turning and talking to each other” and spending a lot of time teaching children how to
face each other and talk in certain ways seemed “contrived and artificial” and thought
that it wasted a lot of precious time. She said that the children really do help each other,
which was why she really thought purposively about the social arrangements at the table
groups. She knew that the children were not always talking about writing or asking each
other the right questions, but regardless, she saw this time as valuable for their
intellectual pursuits as writers despite what actually made it on paper. The main thing
that Tammy did here was to stay out of the way; she allowed the children to talk freely
with each other, knowing that it was not always what would be viewed as on task. The
purpose of the talk was not just to “go right back to your own work” (Calkins, 2011,
p.38), but to engage in the act of writing through relationships.

Writing, like other forms of communication is a social event as children learn to
produce written language while accomplishing their social goals (Dyson, 1993, 2003).
Rather than an individual, independent act (as the curriculum asserts), young children’s
written attempts are supported and collectively constructed through conversations as
illustrated in the following excerpt. At the beginning of December, the “December word
chart” went up on the board, which revealed some significant “December words” such as
snowman, Christmas tree, winter, present, and of course, Santa. Consequently, many of
the children started writing stories about making snowmen, having snowball fights, and putting up Christmas trees.

At his table, Jamarion was happily writing a story about Santa while intermittently shouting, “Yo-ho-ho” in a deep, guttural voice (possibly a mix of Santa and pirates wrapped up into one). Sanjay, who sat right next to Jamarion, first caught wind of Jamarion’s story and pointed out that Santa seemed to be floating in the middle of the page and needed to be grounded on a flat surface. Farrah, another tablemate, glanced over at the picture and said, “No, Santa’s in the sleigh, he’s in the sleigh…and that’s his reindeer flying.”

As, Jamarion - pleased with Farrah’s logical response to Sanjay - replied, “Yeah, that’s right Farrah,” he started drawing two heart-shaped ears on top of the “reindeer’s” head. The figure in the middle of his page was actually a picture of his friend the day before and not a reindeer at all (See Figure 6.3). He continued, “And that’s his present.”

“Is he going to give you a present?” asked Farrah.

“Yeah,” responded Jamarion.

“Is he going to drop it?” Farrah asked again laughing.

“Yeah…and he’s going to go in my trampoline.”

After drawing his trampoline, Jamarion stated, “Santa’s gonna drop my present…he’s gonna come in my trampoline and he’s going to bust his butt.”

“Yuck,” said Farrah in disbelief as the other children at the table laughed.

This only prompted Jamarion to continue, “He’s going to come down my chimney, like on the arrow, and drop my present in my Christmas tree.”
Farrah added, “He’s going to squeeze himself. He’s going to squeeze himself down the chimney. Ok, Santa Claus is going to go down the chimney and drop his present in the fireplace so he could bring it to the tree in the morning.”

Saehan, who sat at the opposite end of the table, finally looked up from his own work upon hearing this animated exchange and asked, “Tree in the morning?” and looked over and said, “Where’s his tree?”

By the end of the writing period, Jamarion’s story had turned into a bona fide piece about Santa Claus coming to his house. There was now a clear picture of a reindeer, Santa on his sleigh, a trampoline, an actual tree in the house, and him sleeping on his bed at night. As he looked at his picture, he said, “Yo-ho-ho. Yo-ho-ho. Yo-ho-ho,” in a deep, Santa-like bellow. In between his “yo-ho-ho’s”, he turned to A.J. and asked, “How do you spell ‘yo-ho’?”

After much erasing, pointing, pronouncing, debating, and helping, Sanjay and A.J. managed to help Jamarion write “YOHO” on his paper.

Figure 6.4. Jamarion’s Santa Claus piece.
There are several instances of collaborative acts that occurred between the children at this table that reveal the interaction between talking and writing. First is the idea that children talk to each other about their writing not because they were helpless and overly dependent, but they talked to respond to, clarify, and extend each other’s ideas. Sanjay, who initially critiqued Jamarion’s writing by pointing out the “floating” body was clarified by Farrah who defended Jamarion’s decision to put Santa in the middle of the paper. Furthermore, she extended the idea of Santa by bringing in reindeers, presents, and dropping them down the chimney. In response, Jamarion put these ideas together, revised his drawings, and added text that showed the collective work that happened around his piece.

Second, multiple writers contributed to this piece through offering suggestions, asking questions, and continuing the storyline. This problematizes the idea of going back to your own work. Jamarion’s piece was a co-constructed piece – the ideas were brought together through talk, the pictures were clarified in response to Farrah and Saehan’s inquiries, and the text was written with the help of A.J. and Sanjay. Whereas the curriculum emphasized the idea of single authors who are responsible for their own pieces, the children demonstrated that authorship and ownership were blurry as different individuals contributed to Jamarion’s text. The questions that percolate from this are: How do we define ownership? Whose piece was this anyway? Whose ideas were being implemented in Jamarion’s story? Arguably, this piece of writing was a collaborative text, co-constructed and transformed through talk as different children offered different ideas to him – ranging from language mechanics (spelling of words) to content (assisting in the generation of ideas).
Similarly, these ideas found their way into other children’s texts. Sanjay, on this same day, was continuing his story from the previous day, which was about trucks. Sanjay wrote about trucks on every single piece that he wrote – everyone in the class knew that he loved trucks and busses. On his superstar day (a whole week where one student was highlighted), he brought a remote-controlled dump truck to share with the class, what looked very much like the ones he constructed in many of his stories. At the end of writing workshop, Tammy chose Sanjay to share his writing piece because he added more to his story. She complimented him on doing this and gushed about how exciting it was that Sanjay was excited to go home because Santa was coming and bringing presents (new additions to his story). The following story was what he originally had:

*Figure 6.5. Sanjay’s original truck piece.*
This is what he shared with the class after working on Jamarion’s “santa piece”:

Clearly, the idea for his “revision” came from his tablemate who was sitting nearby. In the act of writing, individuals take up other people’s ideas (Bahktin, 1981) and fit them into their own. For Sanjay, the idea of Santa bringing presents to his house not only fit Jamarion’s narrative, but it worked within his as well – providing the materials for extending and transforming his own writing. Although he was given the credit for incorporating Santa into his story, the origin of that story started with Jamarion who might have gotten the idea from the “December Words Chart” or from Tammy’s own story about picking her Christmas tree. Lives intersected on cultural and social planes that were located within the classroom (e.g., the word chart) as well as outside of the
It was the interactions around these shared experiences that provided the context and resources for appropriating literacy, as seen from the collaborative writing experiences of these children. As Bahktin (1986) theorized, other people’s words and ideas become a part of our own repertoire as we take up those words and make them fit our intentions and purposes.

Mrs. Green walked by Jamarion and Sanjay’s table, stopping several times to inquire about the children’s stories. She saw what they were writing about: Sanjay was writing about putting out fires, A.J. was writing words on the back of his story to help others spell words, Saehan was crafting his “magic potion” story, Farrah was continuing her series on Ella the talking bird (who happened to live in the bird house in her backyard), and Jamarion was well into his Santa Claus piece. Clearly, the children were not writing about small moments, let alone personal narratives, but Tammy did not proceed to berate them on following this curricular script. Instead, Tammy asked them questions about their story to move it along, expressing excitement and delight at what was written on the page.

For example, Tammy generated some buzz in the room during the whole group sharing time by highlighting Saehan’s story about a mysterious potion. Everybody, including myself, kept asking him about what was going to happen, but he kept saying, “You’ll just have to wait.” While she was talking to Saehan about his potion story, A.J. sat close by attempting to eavesdrop on what was being said:

Mrs. Green: So, what kind of potion was it?

Saehan: (whispering softly) A magic potion.

Mrs. Green: Oooo, you should write that.
A.J.: *(turns to Ms. White smiling)* I heard that! Mrs. Green, I heard that!

Mrs. Green: *(smiles back at A.J.)* Did you?

There were several decisions she could have made to redirect Saehan from writing this untrue story. Some of these redirections were included in the curriculum:

A few children might try to write fictional stories. Tell them that for now we are writing small moments of our lives and lure them to find these vignettes quite fascinating *(Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003, p.vi).*

Tammy, instead, relied on Saehan’s story as a lure – other children, like A.J, were interested in the story, and more importantly, Saehan was interested in continuing his story. It is important to note that despite the curriculum’s insistence that “writers think of something that happened to them” *(Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003, p.14)*, Tammy did not attempt to change his idea or challenge the reality of his story. It was obviously not real, but it was a meaningful text that Saehan used to engage in writing. Within Saehan’s story, he incorporated many of the writing strategies they had talked about so far: labeling, writing speech bubbles, using exclamation marks, stretching out words as best as you can, making clear pictures, and creating a sequential narrative *(see Figure 6.7).*

He practiced his literacy using the lure of this “fake” text, and arguably, writing personal narratives was not the pathway he used nor was it the path that Tammy enforced.
Figure 6.7. Saehan’s potion story. The text underneath is his oral retelling of his story.

Page 1: “I am wondering what this is.”

Page 2: “What is this potion for? I am curious!”

Page 3: “The potions explodes! It was magic potions!” I am surprised.

Page 4: “I was in the potions! We love bubble! Where is dad? And where is Sejun? I am happy!”
The next section addresses children inventing new writing practices through their fake texts.

**Inventing new literacies.** Children not only take up others’ ideas, but they also invent and imagine new ways of using language. Children grow up with language at home, in their communities, and in their environments. They are actively constructing and using formal and informal definitions of literacy to make sense of the world and themselves. When children come to school, they encounter formal definitions of literacy in the form of literacy activities that include letters, phonics, writing, and reading. In the process, I argue that children are using their imagination to create new ways of using language – thus inventing “new literacies.” The ways that children played with language in this classroom did not fit standard definitions of written conventions. The inventiveness that children demonstrated as they wrote (e.g., Julie’s appropriation of cursive) was not appreciated by the curriculum or the assessments. Instead, stretching out sounds, writing down conventional letters and words, and creating a readable sentence was rewarded. Tammy, however, rewarded children’s innovations by not only privately praising them but publicly as well. Her genuine appreciation for children’s playful and clever written construction was on display in the following excerpt.

At the end of writing workshop, Jake was encouraged by Mrs. Green to share his story to the rest of the class. Jake, as was always his custom, interacted with the class quite a bit while sharing his stories. He asked his classmates questions like, “And do you know what’s going to happen next?” He was also very animated in his storytelling, using grand hand gestures to illustrate his point as well as varying the tone, volume, and intonation of his voice to go along with the story. The children usually looked forward to
Jake’s renditions of his story and many of the children could be seen laughing during Jake’s animated storytelling. Jake, it could be argued, possessed a lot of cultural capital in this classroom not for his ability to write letters and sentences well (in a conventional sense), but for his ability to engage everyone else in a good story. On this particular day, he brought up his piece about the “Clone Wars”, which he told me was about him leading his Storm Troopers into battle. Tammy planned to have Jake share his story because he had invented his own way of getting words down on paper.

Figure 6.8. Clone wars piece written by Jake. This is the piece where he used “GG” as a shortcut for writing “good guys”.
The following is an excerpt from the sharing session:

Jake: So, usually, the good guys, these are the bad guys, and these are too big. So, there's two big blimps filled up with water. And usually, you know what this is? (Turns to the class and points at his paper) Try to notice. It's one of the wings.

Jamarion: Jake, what is the wings?

Jake: Oh, the wings? That's side is the good guys.

Mrs. Green: Now, how do we know that's the good guys. You did something that I thought was so smart.

Jake: G-G

Mrs. Green: What's that stand for?

A.J.: Good guys.


Jake: Usually, g-g stands for good guys.

Jake invented a new way of representing the content of his story. Instead of sounding out the letters or using the word wall to write in words that would fit, he decided to abbreviate good guys into “gg” (see What Did I Write? [Clay, 1975] for an explanation of the “abbreviation principle”). He knew the beginning sounds of these letters and invented his own way of representing them on paper. He could have easily found the word “good” around the room, he could have asked children around him, he could have phonetically sounded out each letter, or he could have just explained his story without the print. However, he used his growing repertoire of literacy tools and created a new form
of representing the good guys in his story; this became a cultural practice in this classroom.

The idea stuck and several of the children adopted this idea into their own repertoires. I would argue, though, that it was not just Jake’s use of “gg” that proved fascinating for the children, but it was Tammy’s unbridled enthusiasm for this invention that gave this idea momentum. After all, the children were eager to please – they often called her name to show her something and ran up to her when they tried something new. The script encouraged children to move on a linear path: labeling with letters, then labeling the beginning and ending sounds, then stretching out the words by sounding it out, and then taking your best guess to fill in all the letters. Nonetheless, Jake’s new construction and Tammy’s support for it disordered this neatly woven path for writing. Jake found himself a shortcut, and Tammy honored it; thus it became a practice that other children readily adopted – a practice that I assumed ran counter to the plans for writing laid out by the curriculum writers.

A week later, Jake extended his literacy (See Figure 6.9):

Mrs. Green: Look at my friend Jake. Remember, last week when Jake wrote "gg" for, what does that stand for?

Jamarion: Good guys

Mrs. Green: Good guys. Why did you put a "t" in front of it. Now it says TGG.

Jake: It says good guys, t. One of my troops name is "T" so I added a t.

Mrs. Green: I got it, so you added another letter to make it more clear. And look at all these letters he has. Here's what I noticed -
Jake: You know what, I didn't have enough room for more letters, so I added a line. I need more space, so I write more words.

Mrs. Green: And what did you draw? You drew...

Jake: Words

Mrs. Green: Lines to put your words on.

Jake: Mmmhmmm.

Figure 6.9. Jake’s “TGG” piece. In the upper right hand corner is “TGG”, showing a revision to his “GG” piece. This is the piece Mrs. Green showed to the entire class during the sharing session.
Not only did he create a new literacy practice, he extended his own idea and experimented with more letters – understanding that writing represented stories on a page. I would argue that Tammy, in her expertise and intuition had confidence that Jake’s own, creative practice would lead him to where he needed to go. That same day in writing workshop, Julie had a piece where she was going to the grocery store with her mom, dad and grandma. In her words, she described the piece to Jon:

I'm at the grocery store, getting with my family, and my mom and dad said that after, I get to go to a merry-go-round at the mall. And I wanted to go now, but they said, “You'll have to wait until after we leave the grocery store.” It's what they said. After then, we'll go home, and I'll take a nap.

However, as she was continuing to write her piece, she turned over to Jon and said, “I made ‘gg’ for good guys...That’s my family and that’s the bad guy.”

Jon looked over at Julie’s piece and asked, “What are you going to do with the bad guy?”

Julie replied, “The bad guy is going to sneak inside and try to steal my stuff.”

“And then what are you going to do?” asked Jon.

“I’m just going to go home and eat a snack and find out,” laughed Julie.
Continuing on this phenomenon, Jon created the following piece: He took a pirate ship piece and inserted Jake’s “gg” idea to represent good guys in his own story.

Figure 6.11. Jon’s “GG” piece.
Jon: There's these pirates trying to steal this treasure from the good guys and then they're trying to get in the way, before they take it.

Mrs. Green: Oh, so the pirates are trying to take it away or the good guys are trying to take it away?

Jon: The pirates. They're trying to dig up the treasure before they get it.

Mrs. Green: This is the pirate. Who's this? *(points to the triangular figure at the top left)*

Jon: This is the good guys.

Mrs. Green: How can you show me that this is the good guys?

Julie: Spell good guy.

Mrs. Green: But it would have to be on the name of the ship so we'd know or at least on the ship. Hey, I remember, um, what Jake did. What did he do for good guys.

Julie: G-G

Julie made a suggestion to Jon using an invented practice. She inserted it in her story and suggested Jon do the same. It is also important to note that “gg” not only changed the technical aspect of writing but it also changed the nature of children’s stories. All of a sudden, good vs. evil stories started to pop up in the classroom, providing occasions for some of the children to include this writing practice in their stories. Julie’s final piece was explained as, “There's raindrops, you see, birds in the sun, and I'm at the grocery store still, and there's a bad guy that's trying to steal the stuff from the grocery store.”
The “good guy” phenomenon demonstrates that children have the ability and the creativity to play with language in ways that curricular scripts do not account for. Underlying the construction of letters and learning language is the idea that language learning, including the practice of writing, is social. “GG” representing good guys was introduced, created, and reappropriated by children in the classroom accordingly. In a true Bakhtinian sense (1981), Jake created a form of literacy and a use for language that was made available to the rest of his classmates. These available letters (“gg”) found their way into others’ stories, but they were reworked for their own purposes. Jake and his friends showed that language could, in fact, be transformed anew; therefore, the ordered nature of curriculum with its sequential frame for acquiring language became disordered by the children in this class. The disorder caused by the children did not happen with the children alone. I would argue that this practice, though invented by children, was pushed forward by Tammy who not only allowed it to happen but celebrated it. Teachers are, ultimately, the ones who decide what practices are open for use and what practices will end up “underground” or used in secret. Fortunately, these unconventional uses for writing did not end up as hidden practices but were given credence by Tammy.

Conclusion

Understanding the social worlds of children calls for adult researchers to overcome barriers, such as the temptation to “study down” the work of children (Thorne, 1993). Instead, I approached my observations of children with the assumption that children are actively involved in shaping their worlds and their experiences (Dell Clark, 2011; Dyson, 1993, 2003; Ferguson, 2001; Thorne, 1993). I argue that Tammy did the same – she took seriously the work of children and validated the unconventional ways
they crafted writing. In this chapter, I highlighted the ingenuity, creativity, and innovation of children as they participated in literacy. A critique on curricular ideologies needs to include the voice of children who interpret the goals of curriculum with their social and personal goals inside the classroom.

I also highlighted the role of the teacher who is quite critical in allowing these innovative practices to take shape and flourish inside of the classroom. Teachers have a few choices in their instruction: They can dictate classroom events, they can allow the curriculum to dictate classroom events, they can allow the students to dictate classroom events, or they can allow negotiation between the three. In this chapter, I emphasized this negotiation between Mrs. Green, the curriculum, and the students in this classroom. Undergirding this negotiation process was the role of the teacher in creating a space where the curriculum and students could exist together. Tammy was comfortable with fake stories, multiple literacies, and uninhibited conversations amongst students. Their self-expressions and self-interests overrode the interests of the curriculum writers. It was in this classroom (a social, collaborative space) that children learned to write for themselves and for each other.

Mrs. Spitzer’s garden is a metaphor for children who grow and develop in different ways. When the curriculum dictates how this growth should happen, it is inevitable that children who do not fit the ideal would find it difficult to flourish. This is where the person who tends the garden (in this case the teacher) can maneuver and change the circumstances. In sum, curriculum gives instructions, teachers translate those instructions to meet the needs of children, and children translate those instructions to meet their personal and social goals. It is through these multiple translations that
curriculum is ordered, reordered, and eventually disordered. I have demonstrated that in
the “disorder” of the classroom, notions of literacy can be expanded through creativity
and imagination.
Chapter 7

Re-writing the Script: Summary and Implications for Further Research

The findings presented in this research have offered a critique on curricular reforms that narrow the agency of teachers to flexibly navigate, recreate, and create literacy curricula. Educators find themselves ostensibly pressured to close the achievement gap and to place higher standards on children; early educators, especially, are threatened by the mantra that performance in the early grades are indicators of their performance through the rest of school (NCLB, 2007). Therefore, this dissertation focused on the situated response of particular teachers and probed the perspectives of the voices that often go unheard: students and the teachers who believe in them. The standardization of practices via scripted curriculum, the labeling of students using limited assessment data, and the narrow ideas about literacy create situations in schools where teachers and students find themselves marginalized and powerless. In the midst of these heavy demands, I have attempted to tell the story of teachers who were able to create flexible spaces to work with children in constructing literacy practices and negotiating curriculum, both of which are socially constructed. While the efforts to regulate learning continue, (e.g., Common Core Standards http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards) the individual teachers and children presented here challenge us to expand our vision of teaching and learning to include them in the process of making and remaking curriculum. Curriculum is always evolving as teachers and students interact with curricula to create their own meanings, construct their own identities, and build their own communities of practice.
In this chapter, I briefly summarize the major findings of this study. Using my theoretical frameworks, I use the broader ideas of teaching, learning, and identity in order to situate my findings within the larger professional conversation. Throughout this dissertation, I have highlighted the agency of teachers as they circumvent the curriculum; I have also shown children who practice literacy in unscripted ways, creating disorder to scripts that attempt to standardize language activities in schools. To conclude this chapter, I go back to my own work as a teacher collaborator – a role I view as significant in framing my work. I reflect on my collaborative efforts with teachers who have worked to sustain, develop, and transform my own views on practice. In light of this, I propose some directions on the professional development and learning of teachers based on the connections between this study and my own work with teachers.

**Summary of Findings**

As researchers, the dilemma of whose voice is being heard is often a challenge in itself. The narratives of the individuals in any study do not generalize towards every person in that situation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Erickson, 1986). Yet, my purpose is to illustrate the ways that teacher agency can provide space for children’s literacy practices upon entering school. My responsibility, then, is to connect the perspectives of these teachers to the public policies that may get in the way of how they make sense of teaching and learning. Interpreting other people’s perspectives is always a challenge as the risk of misunderstanding or misreading intentions can easily lead to wrong conclusions. Framing a potentially controversial issue into the social ideologies of our time requires careful inquiry and an equally careful examination of how the work is presented. It is my goal not to be indifferent or unbiased as I present my
findings, but to convey them with integrity to my site and its participants (Emerson et. al., 1995; Geertz, 1973; Maxwell, 2010). With this in mind, I offer up the following summary of my findings using the three main themes: identity, teaching, and learning.

**Identity as a cultural practice.** Identities are complex for adults who have accumulated many more years of experiences than children. Adults, like children, come to school with their own storied identities; the beliefs, ideologies, and experiences that undergird their identities become the lens they use to interpret curricular materials and mandates. As seen in this study, these teachers struggled with mandates when the goals of curriculum and assessments were not congruent with their personal values and beliefs (Doyle & Carter, 2003). They learned to teach around the script when the ideas in the curriculum and the results of the assessments did not match their own philosophies and insights.

Tammy saw writing as a social event, and despite the curriculum’s advice to temper children’s talk, she did otherwise. These divergent practices were supported by the others in her collaborative group who affirmed her, agreed with her, and/or followed up with a similar story of their own. Both Jessica and Tammy reiterated the notion that children help each other during this time; this was especially notable in studying Tammy’s room. Like classroom communities, teachers also develop their own shared practices (e.g., creating common, formative assessments; condensing the curricular goals and timelines) and experiences with each other in teacher communities (Wenger, 1998). These collaboration meetings provided examples of how these teachers were able to assert authority and change scripts through collective voice and action.
Teachers build their identities with each other, but they also continue to build identities with children (who are also doing the same). Many theorists have illuminated the cultural practices of children before they come to school (Dyson, 1999; Garcia Coll & Marks, 2009; Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Hymes, 1972; Li, 2008; Moll & Gonzales, 1994). As children engage in these cultural practices, they participate in their worlds while constructing their own position, place, and identity in that world. These identities are then brought into the classroom community where new practices are introduced to children. These practices, along with the practices of their cultural communities explain the on-going construction of identity. It is never fixed or static, but continuing to evolve as individuals continue to participate in multiple communities; thus, they are constructing multiple selves in multiple spaces (Dyson, 1989; Holland et. al., 2003; Wenger, 1998). The children in Tammy Green’s classroom show the diversity that exists in this unique space. These diverse backgrounds include interests, ethnic/racial background, familial relationships, friendship groups, neighborhoods, sports, popular culture, etc. These are the identities that children use to “story” their lives, literally on paper as well as figuratively in the world. Nonetheless, classrooms are also places where these multiple identities can come together to build their own figured world (Holland et. al., 2003). Together in community, they can share experiences, resources, and practices. Jake’s “good guy” phenomenon demonstrated the idea that children introduce practices into the classroom that the rest of the community embraced and used. Because these practices are situated and emergent, they cannot be scripted and mandated.

**Teaching as a dialogic practice.** The practice of teaching is a dialogue – people take cultural action to operate within the existing structure as well as transform it (Freire,
Freire’s work is useful to consider here because teaching does not happen as a series of sequenced steps that is organized and scripted. Instead, teaching occurs in particular interactions as children and teachers work with, off, and against each other; therefore, it is at least potentially transformative rather than prescriptive. One purpose of this study was to show how this transformation happened in classrooms. Tammy presented an idea and children responded to it. These responses were obviously not part of the script. In fact, the curriculum discouraged teachers from allowing children to interject. However, these interjections enriched Tammy’s teaching and the children’s engagement with materials. Tammy’s “kite story” was co-constructed; it was also transformed by the children who had very different intentions to this story than was planned. Tammy demonstrated flexibility in this case as a teacher who valued the input of children. Their interactions around this text showed that teaching was not a solo act. It was a collaborative practice, involving teachers and students as they interacted with curricula. In this sense, I have argued that curriculum needs to be developed with children who insert their own ideas into what is being taught. This, inadvertently, changes the practice of teaching, making it more reciprocal than one-sided. Tammy, as demonstrated, did well by allowing this reciprocity to occur – she made the plans but what transpired happened with students.

**Learning as a social practice.** Learning is inherently social – we learn with each other and through each other (Dyson, 1993; Halliday, 1993; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). This applies to both teachers and students. In these kindergarten teachers’ collaborative spaces, the three teachers also shared ideas on how to keep track of assessment data. Additionally, they shared their frustrations with assessments,
curriculum, teaching, and students; these conversations were also sites for learning to take place, as teachers negotiated and shared experiences. For example, they were able to challenge the developmental timeline ordered by assessments (e.g., the language of counting), advocate for children who were otherwise seen as below standard (e.g., Tammy’s observations regarding Jaquan’s sophisticated language use), and give students a second chance (e.g., Tonia’s confidence in Evan’s abilities). Most of all, they were able to offer a viewpoint of children that often fell to the wayside in light of meeting standards: They were children, they were five, and they were entitled to have fun. These spaces became a place where these ideas were introduced by teachers and supported with other teachers. Furthermore, I showed John’s growth process over time as he came to understand the frustrations of the teachers. He learned in dialogue - with this group - and shifted. I don’t show John making monumental shifts (this would not be accurate), but I show the ways that John negotiated assessment demands with the teachers (e.g., cancelling the sub day, trimming down on assessments, accepting teacher’s insights along with the data).

Learning is “lifelong,” using Tammy’s own words; teachers are not just teaching children but learning from them as well. In studying Tammy Green’s classroom, I have highlighted the ways that students contributed to the goals of the curriculum. In fact, the students were not only responding to the materials, but creating new ideas (e.g., “GG” phenomenon, cursive writing, the kite story). Specifically in literacy learning, children are learning to communicate with others using reading and writing as a tool – it is a social act (Dyson, 1993, in press). In this classroom, the children gave each other advice on writing pieces, but they also gave Mrs. Green advice on her writing pieces. These pieces
were attempts at participation and belonging, a key notion in sociocultural views of language (Collins & Blot, 2003; Dyson, 1993; Halliday, 1969). In order to learn to write, children needed to be engaged in meaningful events related to its use. Writing letters and words were tied to social goals ranging from developing friendships to clarifying ideas to building cultural capital in the classroom. Sanjay’s fire truck piece was written to do just that – clarify ideas while responding to the ideas of his friends at his table. Jack’s “GG” piece allowed him to have ownership of that practice; as other children were adopting and using it, Jack’s idea gave him cultural capital in the classroom. Learning and literacy, as demonstrated by teachers and children, are social.

**Implications**

The key to saving American education: We must fire bad teachers.

(Thomas & Winger, 2010)

I go back to this attack on teachers to open up the dialogue towards school reform. Saving American education is far more complex then this simple solution. This dissertation attempts to reveal these complexities within this particular school. Every school culture is created with teachers, students, administrators, staff members, families, and many other participants who are situated in particular contexts in a particular time dealing with particular issues. This dissertation emphasizes the importance of teachers who, along with their principal and students, were able to keep up the spirit of collaboration in spite of scripted mandates. They possessed agency for many different reasons (e.g., teaching experience, reputation, past success, strong opinions, etc). However, I assert that John accepted their reordering because they knew the children that they taught, both academically and personally. They knew the “importance of children’s
own interests…and cherished their capacities for engaging in imaginative play” (Meier, 2002, p.48). This all-important task should not be the job of just kindergarten teachers, but it should be the job of all teachers at all grade levels.

With assessments that act like sorting mechanisms, it is critical to have teachers consider individual children’s learning styles, the practice of cultural communities, and the funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzales, 1994) that children draw from. In so doing, teachers can provide counterarguments to assessment data that tend to depict children as one-dimensional. I would argue that it is the ethical and moral obligation of teachers to expand the repertoire of tools and talk we use to describe children in a diverse society — advocating for their capacities rather than highlighting (literally and figuratively) their deficiencies. Predetermined categories give educators limited insight into the abilities of children; these limitations can potentially narrow opportunities for children to develop and grow at school. Deeper insights cannot occur without changing the discourse — transforming the labels, words, and measures we use to explain the capacity of children.

I am not suggesting that there should not be curriculum or that standards are not healthy for teachers to have for their students. However, curriculum should not be treated as a script, but offer guidelines. The curriculum and its goals offer a direction for teachers that inform their practice. Upholding high standards for our children ensures that all children are being offered opportunities to reach their potential as learners. Despite these important goals, educators need to interrogate the ideologies of curriculum, challenge the culturally marginalized potential of standards, and offer alternatives to scripts that propagate hegemonic ideals. Students bring resources to classrooms that make teaching and learning a dialogic process, making lesson plans a set of intentions,
not necessarily realities. I encountered teachers who have been reprimanded for the quality of their written plans rather than the quality of their actual instruction. But rarely do the written plans coincide with the actual interaction and conversations that transpire when multiple individuals come into a room together. In the midst of instruction, teachers make adjustments using a combination of professional judgment, student reactions, and common sense. Simultaneously, students bring to the lesson, tools, language, and experiences that are unpredictable. Therefore in light of efforts to “teacher-proof” curricula (Doyle, 1992; Levin, 2008), this dissertation shows that what happens in the classroom can be disordered by individuals. Rather than treat teachers and children as passive recipients of curriculum, it would do us well to engage them in rethinking the curricula that is ordered by schools.

Asking for these changes to occur requires a shift in thinking – of how much time we give teachers to collaborate thoughtfully, the amount of autonomy we give teachers over their instruction, and the opportunities given to teachers to build theories of teaching and learning through their involvement in everyday practice. This is the opposite of what we have now – full school days where collaborative time is minimal, rigid timelines on accomplishing what every kindergartener needs to know, and scripted curricula that takes the thinking out of teaching. The collaborative group studied here revealed that a great deal could be accomplished in collaborative spaces where teachers’ input was valued, new ideas were supported, and divergent practices were expected. Providing a safe, supportive space for teachers to engage in collective reflection could lead to reflexivity (Emerson et. al., 1995); in other words, teacher reflections can lead to actual changes in practice.
Directions for Future Research

**Expanding literacy possibilities within children’s culture.** There have been groundbreaking studies done on the communicative practices of cultural communities (Dyson, 1989; Heath, 1983; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Moll & Gonzales, 1994). These studies problematize the language ideologies of school that marginalize the practices of some communities over others. Dialects, vernaculars, and languages that fall beyond the definition of “standard English” go unrecognized in schools (Adger et. al., 2007; Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). Instead, children are being socialized into the practices of the language majority. For instance, the curriculum had clear ideologies for literacy and communication: conversations as a turn-taking activity, second language learners as deficient users of language, and print literacy as dominant over other literacies. These socialization practices are not only harmful for the language development of children but for their identity formation as well. Language and identity are intertwined as scholars assert (Bahktin, 1986; Collins & Blot, 2003; Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Hymes, 1972). With the rise of scripted curricula, we are in a political climate where language ideologies are not simply outlined through guidelines and goals, but these ideologies are articulated word-for-word in print. With this growing phenomenon to standardize knowledge, specifically language, there is a continued need to study the mismatch between curricula and children’s culture. Furthermore, the ways that literacy is practiced in this digital age further complicate the functions and uses of print literacy (Dyson, 2003; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Marsh, 2008; New London Group, 1996). Therefore, research should continue to illuminate the communicative competencies and variations in language use within cultural communities.
Understanding practice within teacher narratives. Teacher identities and their personal narratives influence their experience of curriculum. In this study, I focused on three teachers as they constructed their own experience of school over a 4-month period of time. I highlighted Tammy to illustrate the importance of individual identity in the enactment of curriculum.

We as human beings tend to interpret our lives by weaving comprehensive frameworks in which the incidents, people, actions, emotions, ideas, and settings of our experience are brought together, inter-related and situated. (Doyle & Carter, 2003, p. 130)

Curriculum that is ordered with specificity is headed for failure when it does not take into account the complete human experience articulated above. Our stories color our own perceptions and interpretations (Jackson, 1986). In this way, studying teacher narratives – how they story their lives, their personal and professional histories, their present values and beliefs, their relationships, etc. – are relevant and powerful in understanding teaching and learning. I have only provided a small piece of teachers’ stories; teacher narratives in the construction of identity are beyond the scope of the study as I acknowledge the limitations of time. To this end, I advocate for future studies that specifically study the storied identities of teachers. Giving voice to teachers acknowledges their own histories as an important piece of creating curriculum. The next section continues to build on the agency and voice of teachers in the development of their own learning.

Professional learning within teacher collaboration. Professional development could be the source of innovation and change in practice, but it can also be ineffective and haphazard when decontextualized strategies and practices are given to teachers
without their input. I approach professional development as a learning experience that is grounded in the classroom. The efforts of teacher development should be rooted in collective inquiry and developed with the expertise of everyone involved, including classroom teachers, administrators, researchers, and students. In my own work, I have wrestled with this idea of transmitting information as opposed to constructing knowledge together. While one-shot workshops might give teachers new ideas or a bag of tricks to try out, there are daily issues and struggles that teachers encounter as they interact with children that cannot be fixed by generating new ideas. Meaningful professional development that improves teaching and learning requires a close critique of the “transmission model” of learning. In this model of professional development, teachers commonly attend one-shot workshops intended to arm them with a variety of tools and strategies. However, these efforts often lack a clear focus and amount to little change.

I have spent the last 5 years working with teachers on literacy in K-5 schools through my work with the Center for Education in Small Urban Communities. This professional development partnership with the local schools has afforded me the opportunity to be in many classrooms as well as build communities of practice with teachers. I stress “with” because there has been so much professional development done for teachers, research done on teachers, and methods and strategies done to teachers. Instead, it is imperative that we restore some of the agency to teachers who actually have the best information to create opportunities for learning within their own context. In other words, we must create spaces for educational collaborations that involve teachers, schools, researchers, and policymakers. Deborah Ball (1999), in her work on professional learning, gives us many pictures of university researchers and teachers
working together on their practice, grounded in the classroom. My own work is based on this – I work with individual teachers on units, I plan with individuals and groups of teachers on particular questions and problems of practice, I work with whole schools or districts on their new initiatives. I can say with complete confidence that despite the negative rhetoric surrounding teachers, there are so many dedicated ones who are really trying to better their practice, and I am privileged to be a part of it. I have learned to listen to teachers, work to support and facilitate their ideas, and empower them to continue to trust their instincts. Although we are living in a very tumultuous and politically charged time in the educational landscape, we are also in an exciting period where we can really speak to these larger issues and have a voice. It is really my hope that professional development continues to be a partnership as university researchers, school administrators, teachers, and community leaders work with local schools to improve practice, support the cultural communities of children who come to our local schools (Moll & Gonzales, 1994), create spaces and structures for educational collaboration, and publish research that informs the larger political agendas.

**Conclusion**

Overall, this dissertation attempts to shift the mindset of blaming teachers to that of acknowledging the messy work of teaching in contemporary schools. I acknowledge that bad teachers exist in the teaching field who do not spend the time, energy, and effort that teachers like Tammy spend on creating relevant, meaningful opportunities for children. My intention is not to deify teachers or to romanticize what teachers do. However, I do believe that we should dismantle the script that says that bad teachers are the problem in the American school system. Instead, I show that a close examination of
classrooms reveals that the complexities of teaching and learning run far deeper than poorly equipped teachers. They are only one part of a complicated equation of providing quality schooling for the diverse landscape of children.

In sum, I suggest that efforts at standardizing teaching practices through universally, prescribed curriculum leaves less room for permeability (Dyson, 1993). It is this flexibility that allows for individual agency and decision-making as teachers respond to students. I close this research with a brief summary of points regarding the work of teachers: Teachers, if given the space to do so, have the potential to transform curriculum and provide opportunities for the children they teach. Students, if given the space to do so, have the potential to creatively construct meaningful literacy practices. From this, I can only conclude that curriculum is always in-process and constructed.
References


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