THE POWER OF TEACHERS: EXPLORING IDENTITY, AGENCY, AND COLLABORATION IN THE CONTEXT OF LITERACY

BY

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DISertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum & Instruction in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015

Urbana, Illinois

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Abstract

This is a time when teachers are not treated as professionals and often are blamed for the state of today’s public education system. Although, there are deep complexities (i.e., race, class, language, funding) that contribute to the inequities in schools, blaming teachers cannot be the answer to such a complicated problem. Interestingly, more than ever, teachers are faced with numerous top-down pressures, mandates, and “teacher-proof” curricula.

This dissertation investigates teachers’ values, beliefs, and ideologies through observations of their various forms of collaboration and classroom instruction, as well as interviews with the participants to understand their past and present experiences. This project explores teachers’ backgrounds, experiences, and ways in which they have been prepared to teach. In a 6-month qualitative study of a focal teacher, his colleagues, and his classroom I highlight the complexities of teaching and how teachers negotiate their understandings with one another in spaces that take place during and beyond the school day in an era of high-stakes testing. Moreover, because the aim of the study is to unpack the complexities of teachers’ perspectives, values, and beliefs within literacy, in the current political backdrop the main research questions that guided this study are: What is the nature of collaborative practices in the school building surrounding literacy? What is the nature of teachers’ agency over the literacy curriculum? How does participation in collaborative practices relate to literacy instruction?

Data for this study comes from the perspectives of three 4th grade teachers as they met during grade level collaboration sessions and multiple interviews, as well as the classroom literacy instruction and practice of the focal teacher. In addition, this study presents the focal teacher’s interactions with his students and furthermore illustrates teachers’ negotiations of identity and agency in a high-stakes era. In sum, this project attends to the perspectives of those
who are in the field day in and day out, fully aware of their students’ needs, and are often
discredited. This study clarifies issues related to teacher education, professional development,
and teacher practice.
To all past, present, and future educators, for all you do for children.
Acknowledgements

The completion of this dissertation marks the end of a journey for me. I started this program directly out of my teaching career, also as a naive mother of two young children that relocated to a new, yet familiar city. This chapter of my life encompassed not only endings marks, but new and exciting beginnings. I am indebted to the College of Education for the invaluable learning not only related to education and teaching and learning, but to the larger ideas and social issues related to race, class, language, and power that I was not as aware of before starting this program. Everything that I gleaned from this program and from the inspiring people I had the opportunity to work with is represented in this dissertation.

I would like to first thank my family for not only enduring this journey, but for also enjoying it with me. There were countless times I came home from class and strong-armed my husband into having late night conversations about the hefty and important discussions I faced in class. There should be a degree for the spouses of Ph.D. candidates because they too learn and grow in their thinking. I am also thankful for my children who have literally walked or crawled alongside me. They ask me frequently, “Why do you still go to school when you’re old, Mommy?” I hope they too will desire to learn and grow in their older years. It’s been a privilege to see what I learn in the classroom in the very lives of my own children’s language development, socialization, experiences with racism, and standardization in the public schools. It’s been a surreal and wonderful experience and each of you have enlightened and aided me throughout this entire process.

I am forever grateful to all the amazing people I have met in this program. Thank you does not express the gratitude and respect I have for Dr. Sarah McCarthey, my adviser, teacher, and mentor. You have been such an understanding and kind person to me in the midst of stressful
and difficult times. You represent the kind of adviser and academic I hope one day to be. Thank you to my wonderful committee. Your feedback and comments have left a lasting mark on my future work and on me, as a person. Specifically, thank you, Dr. Marilyn Parsons for your example of kindness, grace and intellect. You make it look so easy. Thank you, Dr. Karla Moller for being “so real” and making academic work both inspiring and fun at the same time. Thank you, Dr. Yoon Pak for bringing a different perspective to my work and for being so positive along the way. Lastly, I want to thank Dr. Anne Haas Dyson for the lasting impression on my perspective of language, culture, and qualitative research. I will always hear your voice as I move forward to teaching and conducting research. I hope I can do it with the same vibrant and energetic spirit.

I cannot forget the friends and colleagues I have studied with, written tirelessly with, and enjoyed many meals with. Thanks for pushing me to think deeper, as well as giving me moments to take a break from thinking and find comfort in coffee talk, eating good food, and enjoying one another’s company. Specifically, thanks to the insightful women who have gone before me: Dr. Haeny Yoon, Dr. Rebecca Woodard, and Dr. Sonia Kline. You are all my inspiration that there is a light at the end of the tunnel and for making the seamless transition from PhD student to assistant professor. Also, special thanks to Cate Gerrard, Wendy Maa, and many other friends that are continuing on this PhD journey, we can continue to meet and study together!

I would be at a loss without thanking two very special people, my parents. They sacrificed many dreams and hopes immigrating to America, so that my brothers and I could have better lives. Thank you for sacrificing your comfort, so that we could have more. Especially, thank you to my father who gave up his dream of getting his Ph.D. I am thankful that I got to benefit from your lasting impression of the importance of education to pursue this degree.
Finally, I could not have accomplished any of this without my Lord, Jesus Christ. Thank you for opening this door; I am incredibly blessed. I see this journey as two-fold, an end of a chapter of my life, yet also a new adventure that will unravel. All I can say is, thank you.
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Preface

Within the first weeks of teaching a literacy methods course at the university, one of my students raised the questions, “Why do literacy teachers have to learn how to make lesson plans when teachers use manuals to teach reading and writing?” At first this question alarmed me and made me question what kind of teacher this student would be. However, after a few moments I thought about why she asked this absurd question in the era and times that she was learning how to become a teacher in. She was simply observing her cooperating teacher whom she never observed create or construct her own lesson plans; the cooperating teacher read from a scripted curriculum and followed the structure and timeline of the teacher’s manual. After this session I was thankful that the student was willing to ask such a bold, yet appropriate question at the start of our literacy methods course. This set the tone for our course and I made a concerted effort to address it throughout the rest of our time together.

As I reflected on my first years teaching in the classroom, I recalled the pressures that I faced from my principal and district to adhere to teaching from the basal for reading and writing instruction. However, as the years passed I felt more confident to veer from the curricula and create more appropriate and meaningful lessons for my students, many of whom came from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This sort of confidence developed over time and as I engaged in conversations with my colleagues I felt even more equipped to move away from the script. The more experience I gained in working with the curricula and with students, the more agency I developed. Beginning and novice teachers are faced with many pressures as they embark on their teaching career. However, more experienced teachers have a wealth of knowledge and have more opportunities to exert agency over the curricula and resist top-down pressures.
As I have been a classroom teacher, a resource teacher, and now a literacy methods instructor, I see the challenges that pre-service teachers are faced with as they are learning to teach in an era of standardization. There is a trend toward deprofessionalization that is taking place in our field and where teachers are being stripped of making curricular decisions and exert agency to do what is best for their students. This has led me to studying how pre-service teachers are prepared to teach in these highly-scripted times and how teachers are engaging in professional development to continue to grow and push their instruction forward. I believe in the work that teachers do, yet I also believe teachers need support and accountability to grow in their practice.

This study is personal and highlights the messy work, challenges, and complexities teachers are facing as they use their personal and professional knowledge to make curricular decisions that best fit the needs of their diverse student populations. There is a need for space and time for teachers to be included in the conversation of working with curricula, improving school cultures, and doing what is best for children. This case study has helped me to hear the voices of teachers, those that are so often silenced, in this era of standardization and deprofessionalization.
Chapter 1

Introduction

I was sitting at a coffee shop with a group of moms and they started to discuss the topic of “bad teachers” that they hoped their children would not one day have. I quickly felt an urgent need to defend teachers and stand up for the work they do. However, I, too, was the first to admit that I have encountered some “bad teachers” in my time teaching in the public schools. This made me question and wonder what makes a “good” or “bad” teacher. Moreover, the group of moms’ analyses and conclusions of teachers were colored by the news (e.g., Time’s December 2008 issue with the symbolic image of Michelle Rhee clutching a broomstick; Newsweek’s March 2010 issue with a bold title of “We must fire bad teachers”), media (e.g., Waiting for Superman’s message that American public education is failing students; Oprah Winfrey’s notion that charter schools are the answer to school reform), and personal experiences (e.g., encounters with teachers who didn’t quite meet the needs of their own children). At the close of our conversation, a few of the moms shared that we were simply talking about the quality of teachers and then it ended with a realization that there are many other factors to consider.

I share this vignette because teaching cannot be viewed as a simple everyday activity as there are numerous pervasive issues (e.g., language barriers, funding, inequalities, standardization) at play. Scholars (Cohen & Barnes, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2010) agree that high quality teachers can be the agents of change in educational reform and student improvement. However, there are complexities involved where teachers are faced with unique circumstances in the diverse cultural communities they teach in.

These complexities prompted me to consider agentive teachers who are making meaning as they plan and develop lessons, instruct, and interact with students. Agentive teachers are
constantly reflecting, remaking, and redoing as they teach and interact with their students and fellow colleagues (Schon, 1987). Leander and Osborne (2008) argue that teachers are agents of school change as they position themselves in relation to other educators, in relation to students and parents, in relation to knowing and learning content matter, and in relation to pedagogical practices and texts. Kelly (2006) contends that teachers are constantly learning as they reflect on their practice and work with others. Teachers with more reflective and discursive identities participate in an ongoing “conversation” with their practice, adopt stances which respond to their students’ difficulties, seek to collaborate with students and colleagues in resolving these, and adopt complex measures of success.

Teachers with a critical lens have certain values and beliefs and hope to find avenues to create change—starting a teachers’ study group or inquiry group can be a way of finding allies to sustain a commitment to teaching over time. At times, school cultures can be resistant to change, critical and progressive thoughts, or collaboration; working in isolation presents numerous challenges and makes initiating change difficult. With the installation of the No Child Left Behind Act (P.L.107-110, NCLB), teachers, particularly those who serve marginalized students, have increasingly been told what and how to teach (McCarthey, 2008). Additionally with the Race to the Top Fund states must demonstrate success in raising student achievement and accelerate reforms in the future. When teachers work together in collaboration they can combat assumptions and coercive environments (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Little, 1987).

Just as children are socialized and participate in the cultures of childhood, teachers are also a part of the cultures of schooling and as they are inducted into the field of teaching it is beneficial for them to develop collegial relationships. Feiman-Nemser (2001) created a
continuum of the central tasks of learning to teach—a call for all parts of the whole to work together. She wrote:

If teachers are going to participate in building a new professional culture, they must be introduced early on to the skills of inquiry and given many opportunities to develop habits of critical colleagueship. They must be inducted into communities of practice where they can learn with and from reform-minded teachers working to improve the education and life chances of all students. (p. 1049)

As teachers collaborate they bring past experiences, special expertise, and a wealth of knowledge; at the same time the sharing of ideas requires time and often conflicts may surface. The investigation of collaborative practices as a locus of study can provide an avenue to deeply explore the points of divergence that may surface and a window to notice the ways in which teachers construct, reconstruct, and further develop their identities while allowing the group to problematize and build on one another’s ideas.

Statement of the Problem

During a time when so many are condemning public schools—and public institutions in general—I have been traveling across the country, visiting classrooms in which the promise of public education is being powerfully realized. These are classrooms judged to be good and decent places by those closest to them—parents, principals, teachers, students . . . places that embody the hope for a free and educated society that has, as its best, driven this extraordinary American experiment from the beginning. We seem to be rapidly losing that hope. (Rose, 1995, p. 1)

In this study, I hope to represent teachers’ perspectives, roles, and experiences. As teachers are under scrutiny and the deprofessionalization and negative public perception of teachers is rampant in our society, their voices are often not heard (Beck & Young, 2005; Nieto, 2003; Rose, 1989). This study was a response to the devaluing and silencing of teachers in an era of standardization, high-stakes testing, and faceless students. I am aligned with scholars like Rose and Nieto who suggest that only when teachers are given an opportunity to problematize and
think through tough issues, allocated time to make this happen, and provided a platform to have a
voice in the larger landscape, can the needs of our diverse student population be met.

Additionally, teachers are negotiating the political landscape with the mandated
curriculum, constraints of NCLB, and pressures of meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP),
while developing relationships and coming to understand the complexities of the students,
families, and community. By holding schools accountable for the academic progress of all
students, the intention and impetus for NCLB was to create greater educational equity. However,
in light of the punitive measures that are impressed on schools whose students do not perform on
such tests, the heavy emphasis on high-stakes examinations is resulting in even greater
inequities—especially for cultural minority students (Bielenberg & Wong Fillmore, 2004). Many
classrooms and schools are situated in urban communities that serve socioeconomically and
culturally diverse student populations (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Moll & Gonzales, 1994).
Linguistic and cultural diversity is prevalent in schools today with an increase of immigrant
children (Noguera, 2003), and students who speak various dialects or languages (Delpit, 2006). I
am interested in how teachers come to know, understand, and teach students with diverse
socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

I cannot agree more with Rose’s (2009) statement,

We have a strong tendency in our segmented, siloed world to consider separately social
topics that should be considered together. We put into place a testing program without
thinking ahead to how it might refine teaching or about the model of mind that’s implied
in it. We also believe that the testing program alone will correct political and bureaucratic
stagnation and compensate for the need for teacher development or for the burdens poor
kids bring to school. (p. 7)

As I conducted research with students and teachers, it was imperative to consider the whole
child/person, with attention to race, class, gender, and socio-economic status against the current
political backdrop.
The aim of this study was to understand the ways that teachers in diverse contexts were able to negotiate the curriculum and external pressures and maintained their values and beliefs in their teaching and practice. The focal point of this inquiry was to understand teachers’ perspectives on literacy in the current political backdrop, as they came together in various forms of collaboration, negotiated their own identities, and brought these to the classroom.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to investigate teachers’ identities and agency as they were situated in this high-stakes era through observations of their various forms of collaboration to understand their past experiences. I conducted a case study and investigated a teacher’s background, experiences, and ways in which he had been prepared to teach.

This study addressed notions of power in schools, districts, and public education and revealed teachers’ roles and positions against this larger backdrop. Neoliberalism and globalization have intensified control, conformity and hierarchy in the field education. The U.S. government passed the NCLB Act in 2001, and it represented the widest ranging and most penetrative mandates by the federal government into local and state educational policies in American history (Barret, 2009; Popham, 2004). The roots of NCLB can be traced back to *A Nation at Risk* (1983), a report typifying early calls for improved standards and reported evidence of an educational crisis in America. Interestingly, the evolution of NCLB placed education as a servant of the economy in our global society, which revealed the public perception of teaching as well as the government’s intent in educational reform. Barret (2009) examined how the policy shift impacted the professional practices and identities of pre-service and early career teachers, whose pre-service education had been completed at the start of NCLB, compared
to veteran teachers. He found that the veteran teachers modified their curricula and adopted new plans to align with state standards and testing mandates. However, the newer teachers felt these practices may have come more naturally since they completed some of their schooling during NCLB’s implementation. Both sets of teachers perceived their practice to be shaped by official pedagogic discourse, yet they experienced a tension between their internal values and beliefs and the external demands impressed upon them by NCLB.

Bernstein (2000) conceptualizes the U.S. NCLB legislation as a deliberate shift towards a performance model of official pedagogic discourse. This discourse has an emphasis on standards, accountability and marketization—it is shaped largely by the state and its agents in the official recontextualizing field (ORF) while the status and agency of those (teachers, in particular) in the pedagogic recontextualizing field (PRF) have been significantly inhibited. Consequently, teachers’ professional practices and identities are considerably altered. Bernstein (2000) suggests that official pedagogic discourse has become increasingly shaped and established in the ORF rather than in the PRF, which is a response to the changing global economic trends and linked to attempts by the government to “to take over.” This leaves teachers with little autonomy and agency and subordinate to the government’s top-down moves. With this current political backdrop in mind and understanding the tensions that experienced teachers faced (Barret, 2009), I saw a need for this study. I chose to observe teachers’ collaborative and professional development sessions because it provided an opportunity to highlight the complexities of teaching and how teachers negotiated their understandings with one another in spaces that took place during and beyond the school day. There is a need to hear from teachers’ perspectives and voices during this era of standardization, as they are the main people working with students throughout the school day.
As I explored teachers’ agency, identities, and collaborative practices within this political landscape, I sought to clarify issues related to teacher education, professional development, and teacher practice.

Research Questions

The aim of the study was to unpack the complexities of teachers’ perspectives and identities, within literacy, in the current political setting. The research questions revolve around the notion of various collaborative practices that were enacted in teacher practice and instruction.

1. What is the nature of the focal teacher’s literacy’s practices within a school context?
2. What is the nature of collaborative practices in the school building surrounding literacy?
3. How does participation in collaborative practices relate to literacy instruction (e.g., interactions, material, organization)?
4. What is the nature of teachers’ agency over the literacy curriculum?

Outline of the Chapters

In chapter 2, I present a sociocultural view of collaboration (Bruner, 1990; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978) and teacher agency (Bourdieu, 1977; Ortner, 2006) to set up the context for the study. I hone in on the particulars of how each school context and community varies and has its own ideologies, and suggest that teachers are active participants in the dynamics of the school and bring their own values and beliefs into the classroom and collaborative spaces (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Last, I present the notion of collaboration as a form of professional development.

In chapter 3, I present the methodology for exploring a group of teachers’ perspectives, lived experiences, and meaning making (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Dyson & Genishi, 2005;
Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). I flesh out how I used a case study approach to highlight the nature of the professional development culture in the school, as well as interpret how the teachers make meaning in their collaborative sessions and specifically in the focal teacher’s classroom. I introduce my role as a researcher, the participants, the site, the procedures, and data collection and analysis to situate the meaning making within a particular context.

Chapter 4 investigates the case study of the focal participant and focal classroom. The nuances and dynamics of the school and classroom are visible as I peel back the multiple layers of the particular culture. This chapter details the focal participant’s personal and professional histories, school power dynamics, and particular classroom literacy practices. Through the lens of this particular teacher, I uncover tensions among administration, curricula, and teachers’ personal values and beliefs.

Chapter 5 establishes the formal and informal professional development and collaborative spaces available to the focal participant. This chapter also highlights how the focal teacher’s collaborative practices related to his literacy instruction. I problematize the kinds of professional development that were offered to the teachers and how teachers negotiated and made sense of collaboration in their instruction.

In chapter 6, I zero in the ways the focal teacher negotiated various norms and curricular scripts and how he exerted agency over the literacy curricula. I document how he followed the assessment script, at the same time he found opportunities to combat top-down pressures and alter the curricular scripts to best meet the needs of his students. I highlight the political tensions and loopholes the teacher was able to find to navigate his way through the system.

Lastly, chapter 7 summarizes the key findings from the study as I connect them to the three main themes: identity, agency, and collaboration. Throughout this dissertation I assert that
there is a blurring of lines between professional and personal identities and these identities are constantly evolving and changing. I highlight agency as a negotiation of identities and voices that develop over time through interactions with oneself and others. I review the ways teachers benefit and grow from collaboration and I end with educational implications that this study offers to the growing body of research.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

In this chapter I define key terms, review the notion of collaboration as a form of professional development, and explore how the literature connects collaboration to teacher agency and identity. As teachers are involved in various collaborative practices, the literature reveals the ways in which teachers have (or do not have) agency over their own professional learning and growth.

Theoretical Framework

In the last three decades, a paradigm shift has occurred related to assumptions and perspectives about teaching and learning (Hargreaves, 1995; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Little, 1987; Smylie, 1995). Researchers and practitioners altered their view by considering the ways students construct knowledge in relation to their surrounding contexts (Bruner, 1990; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Altering views of students and learning has resulted in re-envisioning the social component of learning in teacher education (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Flint, Zisook, & Fisher; 2011; Sykes, 1999).

A sociocultural view of collaboration. Vygotsky (1978) lays the groundwork to understand individual development within social, cultural, and historical contexts. In both the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) learning takes place in social and cultural contexts, where social interaction occur in communities of practice between experts (more knowledgeable others) and novices. Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasize that novices begin learning by observing members of the community and then slowly move from the periphery of the community to fully participating members.
Learning is driven through real and complex problems that allow learners to think and practice like experts in the field. Situated learning environments support active engagement, discussion, evaluation and reflective thinking (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Wenger’s (2000) framework views learning as a social process, where competence is historically and socially defined. Learning is defined, “as interplay between social competence and personal experiences. It is a dynamic, two-way relationship between people and the social learning systems in which they participate. Learning combines personal transformation with the evolution of social structures” (p. 227). Wenger’s conceptual framework is based on social-constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978), where learning occurs through interaction, scaffolded support from more knowledgeable others, and situated learning.

Each individual school context and community varies and has its own ideologies, shared beliefs and values, and norms that make meaning construction possible. Teachers are active participants in a social, political, and historical world—which is always shifting, dynamic, and transformable (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978).

Wenger (1998) reveals that in order to be an effective participant in society, the individual is acquiring new knowledge and becoming an active member of a community of practice. Within communities of practice, participants grow in professional advancement through social interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

A sociocultural perspective on teacher agency. In this section I review the notion of the cultural landscape of teaching where each school has its own unique particular culture. Then I introduce the framework of figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998) to explore teacher agency. However, I explain how teacher agency is part of a system of status and power where districts, schools, and teachers are part of this larger landscape over time and space.
**Cultural landscape.** Culture is all around us and often people may not recognize their everyday cultural practices. Often they are unaware of their own particular cultures because they are so entrenched in them and take them for granted. In order to understand human development, and in particular teacher agency, from a sociocultural-historical perspective, I examine the cultural nature of everyday life. Rogoff (2003) puts it this way, “This includes studying people’s use and transformation of cultural tools and technologies and their involvement in cultural traditions in the structures used and institutions of family life and community practices” (p. 10). Along the same lines, Hall (1997) reveals that each individual understands and interprets the world in different and unique ways. However, when people (like teachers in the culture of teaching) are a part of the same culture they are able to communicate because they share the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways. As teachers build up a shared culture of meanings, they also construct a social world they inhabit together.

As I view teacher agency, teachers are a part of a larger culture and within this culture there are practices that are learned, relearned, repurposed, and sometimes remade (Bourdieu, 1977; Ortner, 2006). Similarly, Bakhtin (1986) highlights the fact that utterances are not exact replicas of others, but these utterances are often re-voiced and reinterpreted, which form new meanings and understandings. Schools have particular cultures and are places where multiple cultures are fused. Just as students do not enter school as empty vessels waiting to be “filled,” teachers, too, come with past experiences, ideologies, and cultures of their own (Freire, 1999). However, cultural practices are not neutral; they are full of values about what is meaningful, appropriate, and natural to the identity of the particular community (Miller & Goodnow, 1995).
Although human beings come from divergent cultural worlds, the identity-making processes and the coming to understand cultural values and beliefs are quite similar (Rogoff, 2003). Human beings cannot be separated from culture, but at the same time culture cannot be independent of human beings. In other words, cultural values and beliefs are gleaned through social interaction and participation in a community where they transform and recreate cultures, which makes the notion of culture a dynamic, shifting, and ongoing process (Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Folk psychology provides a helpful framework for understanding the culture’s perspective on what makes human agents act on the basis of their beliefs and desires, strive for goals, overcome obstacles over time. Essentially this means a culture contains a set of norms, an understanding of interpretive procedures, and patterns of belief that are constructed through interaction with people (Bruner, 1990).

As people learn the cultural practices and can sift through the essential and optional features, they also develop values and a sense of belonging and identity within the community, figured world (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), or Discourse (Gee, 2000). As they take ownership, become members, and come to a shared quality of the practices, Miller and Goodnow (1995) note that there will be opportunities for the community to be “sustained, changed, or challenged by a variety of people” (p. 6).

**Figured worlds.** Recent scholars (Fecho, Graham, & Hudson-Ross, 2008; Flint, Zisook & Fisher, 2011) have utilized theoretical insights from Holland et al.’s (1998) figured worlds’ framework to explore elements of teachers’ dynamic professional identities and teacher agency. Holland et al.’s (1998) notion of figured worlds provides a lens to illustrate how teachers improvise and create spaces for their own agency in planning their instruction. Holland et al.
(1998) qualify figured worlds as “the coproduction of activities, discourses, performances, and artifacts” (p. 51). They further describe that the individuals involved in a figured world carry out its tasks and have “styles of interacting within, distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it” (p. 51). The elements of a figured world are meaningful and relevant to the members of it. The ability to sense the figured world becomes embodied over time, through continual participation. There are similarities to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice—where the novices begin learning by observing members of the community and then slowly move from the periphery of the community to becoming fully participating members. Thus, identities become important outcomes of participation in communities of practice analogous to the same notion that identities are formed in the process of participating in activities organized by figured worlds. However, a key difference between the two is that the notion of figured worlds is situated amongst the larger landscape and considers the larger power structure and hegemonic forces, where as the communities of practice model does not address the larger structure and focuses on the local forces.

**Status and power.** Lived worlds are organized around positions of status and influence and the cultural narratives that posit particular sorts of characters and their dealings with one another. Bourdieu’s practice theory (1977) illuminates the notion of fields, which is not an abstract idea, but a social reality that lives within dispositions mediated by relations of power, privilege and influence. “Figured worlds provide the contexts of meaning and action in which social positions and social relationships are named and conducted. They also provide the loci in which people fashion senses of self—that is, develop identities” (p. 60). From a socio-cultural perspective, identity is viewed as a fluid, socially, and linguistically mediated construct, one that takes into account the different positions that individuals enact or perform in particular settings.
within a given set of social, economic, and historical relations (Gee, 2000; Holland et al., 1998). This perspective views attachments or enactments of identity as generative and creative. They instantiate economic and social structures. As identity is viewed in this way, then the overarching use of “agency” is the “strategic making and remaking of selves” within structures of power (Moje & Lewis, 2007). Agency does not stem from an internal state of mind, but rather a way of positioning oneself—to allow for new ways of being and new formations of identities. Identities are shaped by social and cultural contexts, as social and cultural contexts are shaped by our identities as agency is asserted. Moje and Lewis (2007) elucidate identity, “The sort of attention to identity . . . is one that looks carefully at the macro as it shapes the micro, a focus that attends closely to matters of power and agency” (p. 6). It is vital “to better understand the way that performances of social identity are cloaked in the fabric of power and ideology and economics” (p. 8). I do believe that power resides in a higher macrostructure where hegemonic forces can often dictate an individual’s options where the individual must consider how to mitigate and navigate through the system. However, as people are involved in this complex process within the social worlds there is a juxtaposition in relation to identity and discourse that Bakhtin (1986) terms “create new ways of being.” Also, Holland et al. (1998) account for agency and improvisation within these “figured worlds.” They expand that identities are formed in the process of participation in “figured worlds” in which particular acts and outcomes are valued over others; however identities can be reconfigured by the improvisations of actors.

We must be aware of the power and ability that an individual has, yet we must also account for the larger power structures as they shape and are shaped by individuals in particular cultural contexts. Bourdieu’s (1977) analysis of practice reminds us that most social behavior is habitual and automatic, what he refers to as habitus. As practices get repeated again and again,
they come to be seen as part of a natural order. In Bourdieu’s perspective participants are ideologically positioned relative to one another and seek to protect their interests.

*The larger landscape: Over time and space.* Just as each particular school has a culture, the larger political system that drives districts, schools, and classrooms also has cultural practices and norms. These cultural practices again are not neutral, they are politically charged and carry the values and beliefs of those in positions of power and often are imposed on those below them, without considering their “figured worlds” and contextual differences. Against this backdrop, urban schools that are located in low-income areas are not privy to the plethora of resources, same opportunities, and affordances as schools that are located in affluent suburbs.

Holland and her colleagues (1998) reveal that oppressed people are often improvising ways within their position to create change and seek new opportunities. Distinct class differences in the U.S. raise the various structural factors of race, ethnicity, and gender to be considered. Teachers are not just products of our culture, not just respondents to the situation, but are critical appropriators of cultural artifacts that they and others produce (Holland et al., 1998). Pennington, Brock, and Oikonomidoy (2012) use agency and improvisation as a lens to illustrate how teachers improvise and create spaces for their own agency in settings where their expertise is not always valued.

Holland et al. (1998) expand on this notion of improvisation using Bourdieu’s practice theory:

Improvisations are the sort of impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as habitus, meet with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no set response. Such improvisations are the openings by which change comes about from generation to generation. They constitute the environment or landscape in which the experience of the next generation sediments, falls out, into expectation and disposition. The improvisations of the parental generation are the beginning of a new habitus for the next generation. (pp. 17-18)
These improvisations and productions are always being appropriated by people as heuristic means to guide, authorize, legitimate, and encourage their own and others’ behaviors. Individuals and groups are always forming and reforming themselves as persons through cultural materials and tools created in the immediate and the more distant past. Teachers develop through their changing participation in the sociocultural activities of their communities, which also change. This connects to communities of practice and inquiry groups within schools and as teachers participate in various groups they will evolve, change, and influence each other and the larger community of which they are a part of.

**Defining Key Terms**

In this section, I will provide definitions of collaboration in the literature, dissect notions of teacher agency, and explain identity within collaborative practices.

**Defining collaboration.** Lieberman and Miller (2008) argue that although contexts, issues, and concerns among schools may differ, one thing that is constant is schools cannot improve without people working together. Although an extreme persistence of the culture of individualism and isolation (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009; Lortie, 1975) exists, there has been a call for collegiality and collaboration for teachers (Clement & Vandenburghe, 2000; Hargreaves, 1995).

When it comes to learning from interactions with colleagues, there is value in developing interpersonal relationships (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Wenger, 1998). A social component undergirds teachers’ everyday interactions where teachers do not simply want resources given to them, but often seek out relationships with mentor teachers, coaches, and colleagues to ask advice, model instructional strategies, or co-construct lessons; these relationships are essential for learning and knowledge development (Putnam & Borko, 2000). On the other hand, there is
the notion of “eggcrate schools” (Lortie, 1975) that is prevalent where some teachers choose to
work and teach in isolation. When collaboration is interwoven throughout the school day (Borko,
2004; Parise & Spillane, 2010) and recognized as an integral component of teacher development
(Feiman-Nemser, 2001), the sharing of new ideas and practice take place in teaching teams (Flint,
Zisook, & Fisher, 2011) across grade levels (L’Allier & Elish-Piper, 2007); collegial interactions
can form across content areas (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001).

Instead of honing in on the individual as a solitary practitioner, professional growth is
emphasized through a community of learners in a school or work environment. This perspective
derives from the notion that learning does not take place in a social vacuum and that newcomers
are not simply sponges that soak up knowledge. Moreover, participants also bring multiple
experiences to the learning process and new information is gained through social interactions
with others. It is not a simple process where information is disseminated and the learner acquires
and digests all of the information. Collaboration creates a culture in which further learning is
stimulated and supported (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Hadar & Brody, 2010; Lieberman &
Miller, 2008).

Little (1987) reconceptualizes the role of collaboration and the impact of collegiality,
suggesting, “something is gained when teachers work together and something is lost when they
do not” (p. 492). She observed the possibilities and limits of collegiality among teachers in three
groups: studies of the professional “workplace”; studies of organized teacher teaming; and
studies of school improvement, teacher preparation, professional development, and the
implementation of innovations. Little found that serious collaboration, where teachers engage in
the rigorous mutual examination of teaching and learning was rare. However, she expands:

When schools are organized to promote joint action, the advantages of collegial work
groups are varied and substantial. Teachers’ work as colleagues promises greater
coherence and integration to the daily work of teaching. It equips individuals, groups, and institutions for steady improvement. And it helps to organize the schools as environments for learning to teach. (p. 513)

**Agency: Past, present, and future.** Agency has been approached and defined in various fields and has played an integral role in education since the Enlightenment era spurred by Immanuel Kant’s notion that education is the process through which human beings develop their rational capacities to grow in independent thinking, which forms the basis for agentic and autonomous action. Biesta and Tedder (2007) view agency from an ecological perspective, where agency is achieved, not possessed—it is not some kind of power that individuals possess and utilize in any situation they encounter. This concept of agency highlights that people always act by means of an environment rather than simply in an environment. In this sense, the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors.

In Paul Willis’ (1977) seminal study, *Learning to Labor*, the English lads were entrenched in the working class culture carrying the cultural traditions from their parents. As they looked into their futures, they rejected middle-class trajectories because they lacked agency, in that they didn’t have the resources, as Bourdieu would say “cultural capital,” to succeed and attain upward mobility. Similarly, Ecclestone (2007) describes agency from the lifecourse perspective where one’s past influences and experiences, engagement with the present, and orientations towards the future are inextricably tied together. Therefore, agency is rooted in past achievements, understandings and patterns of action, and is not something that people possess as an attribute but something they “do” in various contexts. In the same vein as Emirbayer and Mische (1998), I view agency in three-dimensional ways—a configuration of influences from the past (iterational), orientations towards the future (projective), and engagement with the present
(practical-evaluative). In these terms, agency is always located between the past (iterational) and future (projective). They emphasize the importance of context and structure where agency is seen as the temporally constructed engagement with different structural environments.

In Ann Ferguson’s (2001) ethnographic study, *Bad Boys*, structural inequalities, contributed to the labeling of African American boys as “school boys” or “troublemakers.” These boys were marginalized and because of their struggle with poverty, stereotypes, and identity, they did not have agency over their present circumstances and therefore did not alter their future trajectories, which perpetuated the cycle of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977).

**Setting the scene: Teacher identity.** Similarly, as I define teacher agency I consider a teacher’s past and present experiences and contexts as well as the structural factors that are at play. As I explore teacher agency, aspects of teacher identity must first be considered. A host of research has investigated the construction of teacher identity (Alsup, 2006; Twiseltnown, 2004), linkage between identity and agency (Franzak, 2002; Leander & Osborne, 2008), and the overlap of personal and professional identities (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; Hoveid & Hoveid, 2008). I view identity in line with Cooper and Olson (1996) who purport, “teacher identity is continually being informed, formed, and reformed as individuals develop over time and through interactions with others” (p. 80). We live in a society and culture of negotiated identity, one where we continually construct, reconstruct, revise, renew our visions and perspectives of self amongst the shifting backdrop of our surroundings and contexts. Gee (2000) presents the complexities of multiple identities and how these identities are tied to the workings of historical, institutional, and sociocultural forces. Teachers also have a professional identity that they must negotiate in relation to students, the parents of students, colleagues, administration, and the general public. It is not an identity that is constructed alone, but in constant relation with others. Therefore the
development of a teacher’s identity is a complex and dynamic process. Beauchamp and Thomas (2008) recognize the importance of identity in teaching and view it as a constant reinventing and dynamic process. When defining identity from a sociocultural perspective, teacher identity is viewed as both past influences on the teacher and ongoing interactions and learning from teacher development (Olsen, 2008; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). I am in agreement with others (Hargreaves, 1994; Lasky, 2005; Woods & Jeffrey, 2010) who suggest that identity is complicated; there is a shifting and reshaping nature to identity that is dynamic, nuanced, and constantly changing.

**Tying it together: Teacher agency.** Clandinin and Connelly (1996) conceptualize the knowledge context within which teachers work in terms of a professional knowledge landscape. They reveal that the landscape in which teachers work and live are comprised of two extremely different places: one behind the classroom door with students and the other in professional, communal spaces in dialogue with others. Teachers have a fine balancing act as they meld these two complex spaces to inform, shape, and reshape each other. Beauchamp and Thomas (2008) assert, “Professional identity comprises the notion of agency, or the active pursuit of professional development and learning in accordance with a teacher’s goals” (p. 177). They continue to highlight that when teachers are aware of their identity and in performance within teaching contexts, there is a sense of agency (empowerment to move ideas forward or to reach goals or even transform the context). As a result, a heightened awareness of one’s identity may lead to a strong sense of agency. Ortner (2006) notes that agency and social power are closely linked, so when viewing teacher agency it can not be divorced from structural factors since key social divisions shape opportunities for access to economic, social, and symbolic forms of capital, thereby framing possibilities and restricting social mobility. Levinson and Holland (1996) also highlight this notion through the concept of “the cultural production of the educated person”
which illuminates the interplay of human agency and powerful structural constraints. They emphasize the notion that teachers are culturally produced in schools, yet as educated persons in this environment, they also “culturally produce cultural forms” (p. 14). Teachers have to negotiate and maneuver through school and district policies/mandates and the larger political landscape as they plan, instruct, and assess as well as attend to the individual needs of their students.

Lasky (2005) contends the appropriate unit of analysis for understanding human agency is people doing things together in social settings with the cultural tools available to them. In this model, individual agency to create change in a context is possible in the ways people act to affect their immediate settings through using resources that are culturally, socially, and historically developed. Thus, when teacher agency is viewed in this way, it is always mediated by the interaction among the teacher, tools, and structures of the school/context. Shaped this way, teacher agency is part of a complex dynamic; it shapes and is shaped by the structural and cultural features of society and school cultures.

**Collaboration as a Form of Professional Development**

Open-mindedness is the keystone of what we call a democratic culture. We have learned, with much pain, that democratic culture is neither divinely ordained nor is it to be taken for granted as perennially durable. Like all cultures, it is premised upon values that generate distinctive ways of life and corresponding conceptions of reality. . . . It demands that we be conscious of how we come to our knowledge and as conscious as we can be about the values that lead us to our perspectives. It asks that we be accountable for how and what we know. But it does not insist that there is only one way of constructing meaning, or one right way. (Bruner, 1990, p. 30)

Bruner (1990) argues that the constructivism of cultural psychology is an expression of democratic culture. In our current political landscape, with the pressures of NCLB and the short timeline on student growth (where students are expected to drastically improve to meet AYP),
teachers do not have the autonomy, nor the opportunity to come to an understanding of their own values and beliefs in teaching and learning because often these choices have already been made for them. Shirley (2009) reveals that teacher autonomy is a major challenge for teachers in the post-standardization era. He (2009) proposes that teachers challenge and overcome traditional teacher cultures of unquestioning solidarity and to adhere to the 20 years of solid research on teacher inquiry and leadership (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Little, 1999). Teachers gain more professionally when they have opportunities to contribute to their own professional development, learning, and growth (Lieberman & Miller, 2008).

Professional development: A democratic and social approach. It is clear that teachers are teaching in differing areas with diverse student populations of immigrant children, diverse languages backgrounds, and varied socio-economic statuses. It is imperative that teachers are equipped with the knowledge of students’ cultural contexts so that they can connect the instructional materials to the students they are working with (Dyson, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Moll & Gonzales, 1994). I view collaboration as an authentic and meaningful avenue for teachers to explore and investigate their own host of beliefs in teaching and learning housed within their specific contexts with their particular students in mind.

Indeed, while the field of research on teacher learning is relatively young, we have made a great deal of progress in the last 20 or so years. For example, we have evidence that professional development can lead to improvements in instructional practices and student learning. (Borko, 2004, p. 3)

There are few supporters of conventional approaches to professional development because of the lack of effect on student learning and of usefulness to teachers. Workshops and conferences often lead to no significant change in practice when teachers return to their classrooms, and this dissatisfaction with traditional “one-shot workshop” approaches may be reason for a much needed paradigm shift (Hargreaves, 1995; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Smylie, 1995).
Professional development is described as “dynamic . . . ongoing, continuous, and embedded in teachers’ daily lives . . . [it is an] array of complex, interrelated learning opportunities” in Desimone’s (2009) review of various professional development studies (p. 182). In her review, she identified five critical features for teacher learning: (a) a content focus, (b) active learning, (c) coherence, (d) duration, and (e) collective participation. Then she created a conceptual framework for evaluating the effectiveness of professional development in three main areas: (a) increased teacher knowledge or skills/changes in attitudes or beliefs, (b) changes in instruction, and (c) improved student learning. The reciprocal relationships in her path model “allow testing both a theory of teacher change and a theory of instruction” (Desimone, 2009, p. 185).

Little (1987) defines professional development as “any activity that is intended partly or primarily to prepare paid staff members for improved performance in present or future roles in the school districts” (p. 491). Along similar lines, Burke (1994) characterizes professional development as “an ongoing, systematic growth process for professional school employees. It is designed to improve professional performance for the benefit of students. Professional development helps all involved achieve organizational goals through the application of acquired knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 202). Perhaps then, when referring to classroom teachers’ professional development, these definitions of professional development extend to any learning opportunity that can improve their practice and efficacy, in order to bolster student achievement. When teachers are in charge of their own professional development they form various collaborative groups.

Communities of practice. As noted earlier, communities of practice are based on underlying socio-cultural theories of learning (Bruner, 1990; Rogoff, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978).
Learning takes place in practice (doing), in community (belonging), in identity (becoming), and in meaning-making (experiencing), as an interconnected process (Wenger, 1998). Teachers and students are active participants in the culture of schooling (Bruner, 1990; Dewey, 1967; Rogoff, 2003). They bring their own perspectives, identities, and ideologies as they develop relationships with one another and interact with the curriculum. Teaching in today’s times is politically charged and full of constraints for teachers. In essence, the culture of each school is co-constructed by its participants and has its own particularities and unique traits. Hence, communities of practice are meaningful and dynamic sites where teachers are able to negotiate their identities, construct meaning, and problematize their belonging at the local and global levels. Participating in these communities of practice is essential for teachers to take charge of their learning. In this section, I flesh out specific communities of practice that are examples of professional development.

**Professional learning communities.** Professional development is not simply about revealing and disseminating best practices, but must be situated amongst the culture of the community, school, and students. Professional learning communities (PLC) are best defined as “ongoing groups . . . who meet regularly for the purposes of increasing their own learning and that of their students” (Lieberman & Miller, 2011, p. 16). Bubb (2003) elaborates that “the professional community emphasizes the development of shared values and a mutually supportive culture in which teachers take joint responsibility for student learning” (p. 603). All learning communities vary in form and context (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lassonde & Israel, 2010; Lieberman & Miller, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006), yet they share some fundamental core beliefs and values—based on the idea that educators can learn from each other (Levine, 2010). At the core of PLCs is the dialogic nature where teachers can actively communicate and make
meaning together—the notion of dialogism where one’s words and voices may be re-voiced or reconstructed by others (Bahktin, 1986; Tannen, 2007). Learning communities create and maintain an environment that fosters collaboration, honest talk, and a commitment to the growth and development of individual members and to the group as a whole (Lieberman & Miller, 2011).

Hadar and Brody (2010) studied a professional development project with teacher educators that met in PLCs. The purpose of this study was to reveal the teachers’ understandings of how their participation in the PLC furthered their professional development, specifically in the realm of the teaching of critical thinking. There was movement from isolation to collaboration throughout the project where the PLCs provided knowledge on how to teach critical thinking, offered an opportunity for participants to reflect on their teaching, and provided a format for meeting new colleagues.

**Inquiry groups.** Inquiry groups may differ based on who implements them and what the goal/purpose is; however the common thread is that they are centered around teachers’ learning from asking questions and finding the solutions together (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Dewey’s (1938) model of inquiry is aligned where learners face a problem, observe and experiment with solutions, and then act on logical viable solutions. Dewey (1938) contends, “All inquiry proceeds within a cultural matrix which is ultimately determined by the nature of social relations. The subject matter of physical inquiry at any time falls within a larger social field” (p. 487). Inquiry groups differ from PLCs where the purpose is for teachers to investigate an inquiry or question together (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Levine, 2010; Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, & Hathorn, 2008). This allows teachers to investigate, pose, and respond to queries about policies or practices that are contextualized and specific to a school’s culture and teachers’ needs (McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2001).
Fairbanks and LaGrone (2006) studied a Teacher Research Group (TRG) where the purpose was to engage teachers in deeper inquiry and ongoing reflection with respect to practices within the teachers’ specific contexts. They noted,

Perhaps the most important lesson from this study centers on the ways that the teachers’ situational knowing becomes available for analysis through groups, such as the TRG, because such analysis illustrates how exploring questions deepens and enriches understanding and sets the stage for transforming practice. . . . Through such processes, teachers learning and teaching is transformed. (p. 18)

Nelson, Deuel, Slavit, and Kennedy (2010) observed science teachers who were engaged in collaborative inquiry. The teachers were committed to examining student thinking and investigated how their teaching impacted students’ learning. However, even in environments where collaboration is encouraged throughout the school day and when time is allotted for teachers to meet together, two factors have been found to hinder deep conversation—a traditional school culture of congeniality and teachers’ inexperience with evidence-based dialogue.

**University-school partnerships.** Teachers can participate and belong to more than one community of practice. University-school partnerships offer teachers job-embedded, researched-based professional development and create on-going professional networks (NWP & Nagin, 2006; Whitney, 2008). The National Writing Project (NWP) summer institute is locally situated within a university and is also a nationally affiliated organization. For over 30 years, NWP welcomes K-college level teachers to a 5-week institute that focuses on daily and professional writing and offers professional development on the teaching of writing through demonstrations, book study groups, and writing groups. The NWP model talks back to the traditional isolated in-service workshops with little autonomy and collaboration. It is based on democratic ideals where teachers’ constructed knowledge and voices drive the professional development activities. There is a strong respect for the teaching profession and these attributes of NWP put the professional
back into professional development (Lieberman & Wood, 2003). Participants often claim after the summer institute that their lives were changed or that they experienced transformations (Lieberman & Wood, 2003; McCarthey, Woodard, & Kang, 2011; Whitney, 2008). There are also opportunities for fellows to sustain relationships with other fellows and teacher consultants once the institute is completed.

McCarthey et al. (2011) studied urban and rural teachers’ access and perceptions of professional development in writing and they found that the urban teachers had more access to professional development in writing and specifically to opportunities connected with the university. The teachers that had access to working with a university collaborator found this to be the most meaningful form of professional development because they valued the modeling of lessons, meetings with a small group of teachers, and the organic co-construction of lessons. Teachers appreciated the sustained relationship they had developed with the university collaborator and that job-embedded professional development was provided.

Ball, a university professor and collaborator, collaborated with Rundquist, a third grade teacher in math instruction for 4 years (Ball & Rundquist, 1993). They met once a week to discuss content, curriculum, students, and various other topics—not only did they develop a professional relationship, but they also shared their personal identities. Their time together provided ongoing collaboration that matured over time. At times they experienced points of divergence, yet this cognitive dissonance added a layer of complexity and understanding to their teaching.

In the new paradigm shift, professional development is focused on social organization (Wenger, 1998; 2000), meaningful relationships (Ball & Rundquist, 1993; McCarthey et al.,
2011), and job-embedded sustained professional development (NWP & Nagin, 2006; Parise & Spillane, 2010).

The role of teacher agency amongst the landscape.

Democratic culture is, by definition, vibrant and dynamic, discomforting and unpredictable. It gives rise to apprehension; freedom is not always calming. And, yes, it can yield fragmentation, though often as not the source of fragmentation is intolerant misunderstandings of diverse traditions rather than the desire of members of those traditions to remain hermetically separate. A truly democratic vision of knowledge and social structure would honor this complexity. The vision might not be soothing, but it would provide guidance as to how to live and teach in a country made up of many cultural traditions. (Rose, 1989, p. 238)

Mike Rose (1989) proposes that “the school is not a neutral objective arena” even the title of his book, Lives on the Boundary, reveals the acts of inclusion and exclusion the culture of school often produces (Collins & Blot, 2003). Rose (1989) brings a powerful set of proposals about literacy and culture to the fore—in order to understand the nature and development of literacy:

we need to consider the social context in which it occurs—the political, economic, and cultural forces that encourage or inhibit it. . . . The literacy curriculum is being asked to do what our politics and our economics have failed to do: diminish differences in achievement, narrow our gaps, bring us together. (p. 237)

Teachers play a major role in the culture of school, although, they may not have much “power” they are strategic players in weaving and mending the fabric of students’ learning and schooling experiences. In order to understand the complexities that are involved, I illustrate the interplay of various forces and contexts on the landscape of teacher agency.

Professional knowledge landscape. Clandinin and Connelly’s (1996) conceptualization of the teachers’ professional knowledge context as a landscape provides opportunities to talk about space, place, and time. Teachers’ professional knowledge landscapes are often filled with imposed prescriptions and other people’s ideals of how children learn. These notions may filter
into teachers’ lack of autonomy and agency to interpret curriculum, create further constraints on instruction, and contribute to static views of students.

**Isolated practice.** Often teachers are too isolated in their practice and as a result, they do not have a voice in decisions that impact their teaching. However, this isolation is a response to multiple hegemonic forces—top-down decisions implemented by administration and government policies, pressure to raise standardized test scores, and the implementation of scripted curricula. It can be compared to Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of social reproduction, where the working class lads think they are beating the system by dropping out of school and going to work at the factory (Willis, 1977), but really they are continuing the cycle where they don’t have capital and agency to attain upward mobility. In the same way, teachers may think by doing their own thing, closing the door, and bypassing the system, it is a way to exert agency—providing an opportunity to teach what they find meaningful and appropriate for their students. In actuality, they are perpetuating this cycle of teachers staying isolated in their practice with little impact and change on the dominant backdrop (Lortie, 1975).

On the other hand, when teachers can collaborate and look deeply at these issues, instead of dodging them, it can transform teacher involvement, viewpoints, student outcomes, and ultimately this perpetual cycle of the “lone-ranger” mentality. Darling-Hammond’s work (2000) on teacher education programs points to the importance of involving prospective teachers in inquiry early in their careers to enable them for career longevity. Indeed, this supports the notion that the professional teacher learns from teaching rather than one who has finished learning how to teach. I believe teachers are professionals and when they have time to collaborate and work with others in their specific context, seek opportunities for professional development in order to improve their practice, then student learning too will be enhanced. Franzak (2002) conducted a
case study of a student teacher’s identity formation through the Critical Friends Group concept. Through this collaborative inquiry based model, the pre-service teacher formed a multi-stranded teacher identity, developed a community that was engaged in purposeful work, and worked with colleagues to improve student learning. I argue this type of professional development is agentive where teachers are reflective, constantly learning, and reinvigorating practice for veteran teachers as well as invaluable for new/pre-service teachers.

**Literacy as a social practice.** Spillane and Miele (2007) note “The key to understanding practice is to understand how it arises from people’s ongoing attempts to negotiate their relationship with their situation—social, material, cultural, and historical” (p. 59). For literacy teachers—the focus of this study—there is a lot at stake where the standardization of literacy curricula and assessments are seen as the norm, and teacher quality is measured by student improvement, negating the larger picture and understanding or sociocultural and historical aspects of the development of practice. Pivotal and groundbreaking studies in anthropology (Heath, 1983), linguistics (Scribner & Cole, 1981), and education (Street, 1984) have contributed to the “social turn” in the 1970s and 1980s and contributed to this understanding of literacy as a social practice. In Street’s (2000) study with a community in Iran, he argued that literacy was not a set of functional skills, yet it was a “set of social practices deeply associated with identity and social position” (Street, 2000, p. 23). This view of literacy as a social practice considers historical, social, and cultural contexts. In this study, I take notice of the various contexts, roles, and social positions the students and the teachers are a part of to fully grasp and understand their literacy practices. Hence any official school activity is a situated enactment of a practice; that is, it’s a social happening, an event (Dyson, 2013; Street, 2000).
Public perception of teachers. A feature article in the New York Daily News titled, “Teachers are Key to Success,” described a teacher’s role as the single most influential figure in a child's academic life. The article showcased several teachers in a public school in New York City where teachers were making a difference and the impact on students’ learning and lives. We often hear stories like these, yet the larger public perception of teachers still has not changed. Nieto (2003) investigated this perplexing notion by interviewing teachers and creating inquiry groups to understand why teachers remain in teaching. She hoped to understand why teachers dedicate their lives to a profession that is honored in humanitarianism, but generally disrespected by the public in a climate increasingly hostile to public education.

The deprofessionalism of teachers is rampant in our society’s perspective of teachers (Beck & Young, 2005). Rose (1989) problematizes the “low-status of teachers” as he deconstructs the issues in public education (p. 7). Various studies corroborate teachers’ deprofessionalization as they consider how teachers’ knowledge, experience, and judgment are devalued in this era of high-stakes accountability (Sleeter, 2005; Stillman, 2011; Valli & Chambliss, 2007). Valli and Buese (2007) similarly point to the control-oriented policies such as accountability reforms that limit teachers’ autonomy and their capacity to respond to classroom complexities—an issue of particular concern for teachers who work with diverse students.

Political landscape.

Neoliberalism. Current educational reforms are a result of the rise of neoliberalism and capitalist educational practices (Beck & Young, 2005). Harvey (2005) argues that while the intellectual origins of neoliberalism reach back to the 1930s, its material origins stem from the late 1960s and 1970s. Neoliberal ideologies—very simply—aim at restoring schools to what
dominant elites, the higher class, perceive to be their traditional role of producing passive workers/citizens with just enough skills to render themselves useful to the demands of capitalism.

Giddens (1991) argues that in the current state of post-modern times, daily life is reconstituted. The basis of everyday life and interactions were built on trust between people, but now trust is devalued, and more invested in the process and abstract systems. We also live in a culture of high-consequences and risks—these developments have brought about the separation of time and space, and the “disembedding of social relations from the local contexts and their rearticulation across indefinite tracts of time-space” (Giddens, 1991, p. 18). These developments relate to education in terms of heavy emphasis on results, evidence, and accountability measures. Thereby, there is less concerned with the individual specific contexts, individual differences, and day-to-day social interactions.

**Context matters.** In response to high-stakes testing, reading and writing teachers across the U.S. are feeling enormous pressure to improve test scores. In their study of two language arts teachers’ instruction within differing contexts, Dooley and Assaf (2009) found an increased focus on achievement and accountability, especially in the urban school context. This study offers an in-depth perspective of two language arts teachers’ responses to NCLB given the law’s intense focus on reading achievement, high-stakes testing, and accountability for educational equity. Noguera (2003) suggests the lack of social capital can create disparities between suburban and urban schools, which can play an important role in the failure of urban schools. When it comes to the influences of high-stakes accountability systems, contexts matter. Urban schools are more likely to be targets of accountability policies and pressures associated with high-stakes testing. This is possibly due to the ethnically and economically diverse populations that urban schools serve where they have limited resources, a large population of ELLs, and
varied language practices. Darling-Hammond (2000) also highlights that teacher knowledge is one of the most influential factors in students’ success in schooling, yet urban school districts are promoting practices that ignore teachers’ knowledge because of the extreme pressures they are faced with. Dooley and Assaf’s (2009) work supports a growing body of research demonstrating that inequitable educational opportunities deny urban language arts teachers and their students the high-quality resources they need and deserve (Early & Shagoury, 2010; Lee, 2002; Stillman, 2011).

Curricular landscape. As most teachers are required to use the mandated curriculum they experience pressure to cover it in a set amount of time and if they don’t, they feel that they have fallen behind (Stillman & Anderson, 2011). This leaves limited opportunities and time to uncover and build upon students’ interests, questions, prior knowledge, and funds of knowledge (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Moll & Gonzales, 1994). In essence, teachers get caught up in implementing mandated programs, rather than utilizing programs and curricula as tools to facilitate learning. Moreover, teachers lack the autonomy to make daily curricular decisions on ways to build upon students’ interests and to capitalize on students’ contexts and cultures to make learning more meaningful and appropriate (Comber, 1984; Ladson-Billings, 1999). It is all the more challenging because these pressures and mandates are most impressed on teachers in urban low-performing schools with largely marginalized populations. Marginalized students are continually disadvantaged by promoting fragmented, skills-based, and/or scripted instructional approaches, which potentially increases the distance between their lived experiences, languages, and cultures and the curriculum (Noguera, 2003).

Cochran-Smith (1991) elucidate the limited opportunities teachers have as they work with a scripted and enforced curricula, “What is missing from the knowledge base of teaching,
therefore, are the voices of the teachers themselves, the particular contexts in which teachers work, the questions teachers ask of themselves and others, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the ways that teachers interpret experience as they strive to improve their own practice” (p. 2). In response to the current political and curricular landscapes, Stillman and Anderson (2011) offer ways in which teachers can manage instructional tensions and navigate through the “script” with fidelity.

Conclusion

I situate this study from a sociocultural perspective where I approach collaboration, literacy practices, teacher agency, and identity as an interplay of particular cultures, contexts, and ever changing individuals. Context matters where the professional knowledge, political, and curricular landscapes contribute to the work that teachers do. As I follow this theoretical framework, I point to the complexities involved in teaching and learning, as teachers are involved in their particular school culture, interpret curricula using their professional knowledge, and continue to grow and evolve in their practice with their students in mind. In this study, I attempt to understand how teachers are able to manage instructional tensions while holding onto their own values and beliefs, respond to the current political and curricular landscapes, and consider notions of power and inequities within the schools.
Chapter 3

Research Design and Methodology

I employed qualitative methods to tell the story of a group of teachers within their specific context to understand the complexities of teaching on a day-to-day basis. This project was a case study of a group of teachers to highlight their perspectives, lived experiences, and meaning making (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). I believe that a case study approach highlighted the nature of the culture in the school, as well as demonstrated how the teachers made meaning in their collaborative sessions and specifically in the focal teacher’s classroom for an extended period of time of 6 months. My aim was to practice “thoughtfulness”—to heed a mindful wondering, embody a caring attunement, and gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the everyday experiences of the participants in this study (Van Manen, 1990).

Role of the Researcher

My reflections on my past (e.g., pre-service teacher, fifth grade teacher, reading specialist, K/1 teacher, enrichment teacher) and present (e.g., doctoral student, parent of a child in the public schools, literacy methods instructor) roles and identities have brought me to this study. I am interested in understanding how classroom teachers can have agency and autonomy around curricular decisions, in particular surrounding literacy, as they are impressed with nation-wide policies/laws, district level mandates, and school based initiatives in this era of high-stakes testing. As I look to becoming a teacher educator, I also wonder how pre-service teachers can be best prepared to face numerous challenges with scripted curricula that is so called “teacher proof;” while problematizing ways they can best meet the needs of diverse students and learners.
I am an Asian-American female in my mid-thirties and taught a variety of grade levels in the K-6 spectrum for 7 years. Coincidentally, I began my own student teaching experience at this particular school over 12 years ago. Although I have not returned in the meantime, this school has always held a special place for me because I have memories of my own nervousness, anxiety, yet excitement as a pre-service teacher, starting my teaching career in this small urban and diverse environment. I do believe it is important to note my commitments to equity in public education, culturally minority students, and public school teachers. These areas are closely tied to my own personal past and present identities—as a child of an immigrant family with little linguistic and cultural capital and as a public educator who negotiated the standards, curricula, and test preparation in order to meet the diverse needs of my students—all while I experienced the negative public perception of teaching first hand.

I was planning to be along the median of the participant-observer continuum; however the teachers, students, secretaries, custodian, and teachers assistants came to see me as a regular in the school. I knew I was becoming a familiar face to the students when they would say, “You late,” when I arrived later in the day than usual or “What you always writing down?” when I would be taking copious fieldnotes or upon arrival the teacher’s assistant would direct me to where class was if they were doing a special activity. The students also came to me for assistance or often shared their writing or work with me. I became more familiar and “cased the joint” as I deliberately gathered notions of what was meaningful and important to the teachers in this space and time, as I observed the first days before school with the fourth grade teachers prior to data collection (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Like Dyson’s position in Mrs. Kay’s room in On the Case, I felt comfortable with the focal teacher’s instruction and I respected the instructional and relational choices he made with children and adults, so it was a smooth transition to observe him
(Dyson & Genishi, 2005). It was commonplace for the focal teacher to have observers, as he has had many student teachers, and he was very accustomed to working with adults. I will describe in later chapters how the focal teacher and I developed our own form of collaboration where he would often ask me questions, seek advice, and bounce ideas off of me when I would come into observe.

**Research Site**

**District.** Glenlake School District is a consolidated district located in a small urban community of the Midwest near a large state university. For the elementary schools, Glenlake School District initiated a choice program where parents can rank their top several schools based on a special theme that sets each school apart. The district used this choice program because of a race-based consent decree that was issued in 2001 due to equity issues, in particular concerning African-American students. In 2009, the district had successfully completed the terms of the consent decree, however the choice program is still being used. Because of the nature of the choice program, some schools are more heavily chosen than others and priority is granted when a school is located .4 miles from the home. Some parents have figured out ways to maneuver and navigate through the system to ensure their children will be in the school that they choose.

**School.** Frost Elementary School serves 400 students from kindergarten to fifth grade. The school’s choice theme was focused on reading as they highlighted a strong belief that the ability to read well affects every other subject and students had the opportunity to read to a literacy dog up until fall of 2013. However, as Frost was an under chosen school, they have now relabeled themselves as a technology school where students are empowered through critical thinking, academic and intellectual risk taking, and a refined sense of digital citizenship. For
example, the students have been learning a new coding program, supported by eToys, which is a university-school partnership and infusing technology throughout various content areas.

According to the 2012-2013 Illinois School Report Card there are 41% White students, 41% Black students (which is higher than both the district [34.9%] and state [18%] averages), 6% Hispanic/Latino students, 5% Asian students, and 7% Bi-racial students. Also, 74% of the children are considered low-income (which is the third lowest SES school in the district) and 19.1% of the students have IEPs (which is again higher than both the district [13.8%] and state [13.6%] averages). Although Glenlake School District has implemented the choice program in order to create more racially equitable schools and populations, Frost has majority low-income families and has a significantly higher percentage of students with IEPs in the district; many of the schools remain similar in their racial/ethic/SES make-up prior to the choice option. There are many factors to consider when creating equitable school environments, however, because some families have more capital and understanding of how the system works they are able to maneuver and negotiate through the system to ensure spots for their children in their first “school of choice.” In 2013, 41% of Frost’s students that took the ISAT met or exceeded, which is one of the lowest percentages in the district and may have contributed to why the district was closely monitoring Frost. Frost Elementary is not one of the top chosen schools, which reveals why the make-up of the school is the way it is. There was immense pressure for schools in Glenlake to meet AYP and a strong emphasis to improve literacy achievement, as Frost is a Title I school, it received federal funds to meet the needs of students who are labeled “at risk.”

**Participants**

The participants for this study are detailed in the following table (see Table 1).
Table 1

*Participants and Role(s) of the Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Gender</th>
<th>Role(s) of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al—Focal fourth grade teacher</td>
<td>European-American/Male</td>
<td>Trace focal teacher across contexts:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(focal participant)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• School-wide PD sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Collaborative sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Classroom observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Grade-level collaboration meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• 3 interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Weekly informal interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamara—Fourth grade teacher</td>
<td>African-American/Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth—Fourth grade teacher</td>
<td>European-American/Female</td>
<td>• School-wide PD sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Grade-level collaboration meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• 1 interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle—Principal</td>
<td>European-American/Female</td>
<td>• School-wide PD sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana—Literacy coach</td>
<td>European-American/Female</td>
<td>• School-wide PD sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal teacher’s students</td>
<td>(Noted in Table 2)</td>
<td>• Students that have been referenced in the collaborative sessions/grade-level collaboration meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Classroom observations and artifacts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The intermediate years of schooling become more academic with a heavy focus on the core subjects, where both teachers and students alike face added pressure to perform and succeed. I
observed the fourth grade teachers’ grade-level collaboration meetings and then focused in on
the focal teacher’s classroom. For this study, I traced the focal teacher across contexts. He
interacted with the other fourth grade teachers, principal, literacy coach, and his students. The
principal and literacy coach were involved in the grade-level collaboration meetings and school-
wide professional development opportunities. The grade-level collaboration meetings took place
twice a month, where the fourth grade teachers, principal, and literacy coach discussed specific
students, various assessments, and curricula. I received consent from all of the participants
before data collection (see Appendix A). Al’s student teacher, Aileen Lambert, and a teacher Al
collaborated with, Patty Li, were not main participants in the study, but they both provided
consent and agreed to participate in the study.

Al (focal teacher). The selection criteria for the focal teacher were based on: (a) literacy
instruction took place for 60-90 minutes each day, (b) teacher was comfortable being observed,
and (c) teacher had a number of years experience teaching (e.g., worked with various curricula
and involved in collaboration). Because I traced the focal teacher across contexts (e.g., school-
wide professional development, collaborative sessions, classroom instruction), I observed his
interactions with fellow teachers and students. As I observed in the focal teacher’s classroom, I
observed particular students more closely based on types of practices that were discussed in the
grade-level collaboration meetings, as well as specific students who were referenced or discussed
(i.e., “cadre”) in the meetings. I collected reading and writing artifacts and recorded interactions
that students had with the teacher and their classmates.

I had met Al when he was in his first years of teaching over 12 years ago during my
student teaching experience at Frost Elementary School. At the time, he was highly regarded by
the teachers in the building and known to have a looser classroom management style where he
facilitated more group work, allowed talking in cooperative groups, and was willing to try innovative and new practices. During this time I was able to observe his literacy block, and I recall that he chose not to have a teacher’s desk and had his materials in the middle of the classroom in a student’s desk while he taught circulating around the room. He also chose not to use the basal, but pulled various resources and altered the curricula. As I came to know Al during data collection, there were many of these similar characteristics about him over a decade later. He rarely sat down—he was always walking around the classroom and meeting with students. During literacy instruction, he also created many of his own lessons, pulled from numerous resources, and tried to build off of the students’ interests and questions. In the first interview he described his literacy instruction:

> Well, I’d like to think that my literacy instruction could be loosely described as balanced literacy where we’re doing whole class instruction, we’re doing guided, either a guided reading group or literature circles, where they’re doing, and I just did a guided reading yesterday, my first time this year, where the kids are also reading maybe books that are at their level or slightly challenging, at their own level with students at a similar level. Uhm, and, I’m a big believer in a read aloud time, you know, modeling good reading for kids, which I do everyday. Writing is a huge component of literacy, I don’t think it’s looked at as a separate piece, you know both in response to what you’re reading and also just in writing stories that cover different genres. I always try to talk about our reading time as part of our literacy time . . . and utilize the writer’s workshop type format, you know, where they are either working on their own or with a partner, peer work, peer editing, conferencing with me, ahhh, you know some of the same idea that go into a reading workshop, a balanced literacy.

Throughout the time I was in Al’s room, all of these components of balanced literacy (e.g., guided reading, independent reading, read alouds, writing, conferring) were a part of his literacy block.

**Kamara.** Kamara and Al have been teammates for 9 years. She has a reputation in the building of being quite vocal and having a great sense of humor. Something I heard quite often was, “that’s Kamara for you.” The teachers appreciated her ability to be frank and honest, topped
with some humor during tense meetings. Al also commented that Kamara was one of the most efficient teachers he knew—he was never able to wrap his head around how she was able to plan her lessons, get everything prepared and copied, and still leave school at 3 o’clock. It became a running joke between them that Kamara was out the door by the time Al was still cleaning, organizing, and planning for the next day. Kamara recently completely her Type 75 and was looking for an assistant principal position. She was the only African American participant and the only one who voiced that she didn’t think it was right to single out five African American or special education students and shared, “Well, I feel pressure with the push of me singling out five African American students in my class. I’m not comfortable with that because as their teacher, I want . . . to teach them all.”

Beth. This was Beth’s 28th year involved in education, but her first year teaching at Frost Elementary School. Her experience consisted of classroom teaching, working with Head Start, Title 1 reading support, program coordinator for an alternative education program, and on-line programs for home-schooled kids. Beth was a teacher’s assistant in a first grade classroom at Frost last year and she was also the only teacher teaching a 4th/5th grade split the year of data collection. Because of the nature of teaching two grade levels she struggled with teaching two grade levels of every subject and meeting the needs of her students’ varying levels. Not only did she face the challenges of teaching a split-level class, she also shared that it was challenging to collaborate because of her 4th/5th grades schedules:

My four, five split schedule does not match to the collaboration times, so the only group I can meet with that gets scheduled through the principal is fourth. I never meet with fifth grade because I have fourth grade students at that time, so I don’t collaborate much, I don’t have all of my kids gone at the same time, except once a week for library, so that’s probably been the hardest part of this. I don’t have time.
Although Beth had the most years of teaching experience of the participants, this was her first year teaching at Frost and she had to prepare for both fourth and fifth grades. She often vocalized she was overwhelmed and was having a hard time staying on top of everything.

**Michelle (principal).** Michelle was entering her fifth year at Frost Elementary School. Before her time at Frost, she was an assistant principal at one of Glenlake’s high schools, and her first administrative position was also as a principal at a high school in a neighboring town where she started her teaching career in one of the district’s elementary schools. When I met Michelle she accommodated and supported my research project immediately. She was also pursuing her doctorate at a local university and she noted that research and practice should work hand in hand. During Michelle’s tenure at Frost Elementary School it was an underchosen school and continued to not meet AYP. She was under immense pressure from the district to draw more parents and students to Frost, as well as facing many of the top-down mandates from the district, state, and federal government to raise test scores, implement scripted curricula, and improve teacher quality. I did not intend for her to be a major participant of the study, but her presence in the grade level collaboration meetings were undeniably important. She was referenced quite often by the teachers, and shortly after my data collection in late February Michelle left her position mid-semester. Parents and staff were shocked by her abrupt departure and questioned her timing, as it was just before the students took the ISATs. However, at the time of Michelle’s leave she commented about the staff and parents, “We had a really good relationship. We’re collaborative. I love them and I think it’s mutual.”

**Dana (literacy coach).** Dana was fairly new to Frost Elementary. She was the interventionist for one year and discovered she was enlisted to be the literacy coach on the first day of the 2013-2014 school year. The prior literacy coach was moved to an interventionist
position; because of these abrupt changes, teachers often didn’t know who was the current literacy coach and what the distinctions were between the two positions. For instance, in the fourth collaboration meeting of the year, Kamara asked, “Who is our literacy coach?” After the meeting, the fourth grade teachers said they could not believe that after a few months of school they still didn’t know who their literacy coach was.

Dana tried to attend the grade level collaboration meetings; her position included leading various meetings, deciding and planning the topic(s) of literacy-focused meetings, and offering input during discussions surrounding literacy. Her job was to work strictly with teachers and she expressed, “I think my main pressure is time. Just the fact that we are in a building where we have a lot of struggling kids, a lot of kids that are below grade level, and therefore really everyone needs the help, so it’s a time factor.” She gave first priority to push in and offer support to new teachers’ classrooms. Most seasoned and veteran teachers did not get support or have the opportunity to work with Dana. However, all of the teachers were required to have Dana push into lead two guided reading lessons for the classroom teacher to observe; in the third session the teacher taught a guided reading lesson that Dana observed and offered feedback. After all the teachers within a grade level had these three sessions with Dana, all of the grade level teachers and the literacy team were suppose to have a debriefing meeting to discuss how the sessions went.

**Focal classroom (Room 112).** Al’s classroom was diverse and predominately low-income. This is described in Table 2.
Many of the students have attended Frost Elementary School since they were in Kindergarten, so they knew each other very well, yet there were several students that recently moved and transitioned to Frost this year.

On the first day I observed, it was a hot and humid day and the students were bustling with energy. Al maintained a calm, collective, and laid back demeanor, even in the midst of the flurry of activities (i.e., the students separated their school supplies, reviewed the classroom rules and expectations, worked on getting to know you activities). In my observations, I never heard Al raise his voice. He spoke in an even and soothing manner; over time the students were well attuned to his voice and they developed a strong classroom community. He also allowed choice throughout the day. He developed mutual trusting relationships with the students where he gave them the benefit of the doubt. For instance, on the first day of the school he reviewed “Chose an Option.” On the white board he had “Choose an Option” with these choices written:

Table 2

*Demographic Information of Focal Classroom and School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Low-Income/Gender</th>
<th>Total Number (out of 22)</th>
<th>Percentage in Al’s classroom</th>
<th>Percentage in the school (2012-2013)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Race</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-Income</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-9</td>
<td>F-41</td>
<td>F-N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-13</td>
<td>M-59</td>
<td>M-N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
He used this time to talk through each option and where they could find the location for these choices. He changed the problem of the day daily and had a box for the students to put their answers in. He also showed where he housed the activity sheets for the week. The students enjoyed these activity sheets and ranged from coloring sheets, brainteasers, and pattern/puzzle sheets. He emphasized that these were quiet independent work options after they completed their daily-required work.

Cassie was the teacher’s assistant assigned to Al’s classroom for the majority of the day because there were six special education students placed in his room. Throughout the year the students, Al, and Cassie developed a strong bond. Cassie had a loud, outspoken, yet caring approach when talking to Al and the students. Although Cassie had a rather forward approach, the students came to understand her genuine care and thoughtfulness. For example, Cassie was the first person to defend Al in meetings and in front of Michelle. She also noticed when students had missing work and assisted them with it so that they did not have to miss recess. And at the end of the day she proactively filled out check in/check out binders for several of the special education students.

Later in the year, the teachers were required to pick a “cadre of African American or special education students” to hone in on and to move from the yellow to the green in AIMSweb testing. The district was using AIMSweb (www.aimsweb.com), an assessment and management tool for RTI (Response to Intervention). On their website it states that AIMSweb is “the leading assessment and RTI solution in school today—a complete web-based solution for universal
screening, progress monitoring, and data management for Grade K-12.” Key phrases like “tangible improvements” and “it’s data driven” and “helps create better outcomes for students” highlight the nature of the assessments taking place. AIMSweb claims to allow educators to screen all students using valid and reliable assessments and in turn they can make crucial data-driven decisions. In the earlier grades students were assessed in number and letter identification where accuracy and speed were measured. However, in the intermediate years, students were being assessed on their reading fluency, again placing strict standards for students’ accuracy and speed—R-CBMs (Reading, Curriculum Based Measurement) assessed students on the number of words read per minute. The teachers were to administer R-CBMs and progress monitor—assess student progress or performance, every week. The rhetoric that was often used to identify students who were or were not making adequate progress was movement from red (below grade level), yellow (at grade level), and green (above grade level). Students at the cusp of moving from red (below grade level) to yellow (at grade level) or yellow (at grade level) to green (above grade level) were often labeled “bubble kids.”

The teachers were told that it was required for the cadre of students to exhibit growth and if they did not grow the teachers would be held accountable. The teachers were encouraged by the administration to pick “bubble kids” for their cadres, so they could show the most growth. The cadre in Al’s room included: Markus, Javon, Timmy, and Kenny; which Al lovingly labeled his “special group.”

Data Collection

As teachers collaborate, work together amongst teammates, and are involved in different forms of professional development, their own students who are from diverse backgrounds are at
the fore. The focus of the study was to understand what was important and meaningful to and for the people, both teachers and students, involved in the specific context (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Eisner, 1991) I observed and gathered an understanding of the school’s professional development opportunities and dynamics, attended various forms of collaboration (e.g., grade-level collaboration meetings) for an extended period of time, and then observed the focal teacher’s literacy instruction. My goal was aligned with Max Weber’s notion of the task of the ethnographer as understanding the “webs of significance” that people spin. My observations, interviews, and interpretations of these webs of significance provided the basis for a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973).

**Data Sources**

I observed the school-wide professional development sessions, grade-level collaboration meetings, classroom teaching, and conducted semi-structured interviews with the fourth grade teachers, Al’s student teacher, and literacy coach in order to gather a deep and full perspective of the particular community. As I traced the focal teacher across contexts, I observed and examined Al’s personal and professional narratives and identities. I received consent before observing any of these professional development sessions, grade level meetings, and classroom instruction.

I hoped, like Westheimer (1998), in his now-classic study of two middle schools, to describe the attributes and observations of the school community, teachers, and students, rather than make generalizations. Westheimer’s study was not generalizing, nor did it focus on a model community, but he offered in-depth observations of two communities’ day-to-day practices, values, and beliefs. This study’s aim was to tell the story of this particular school, individual teachers, and teaching and learning in the specific context. The more time I spent at Frost Elementary School, the more Levin’s (2010)
words resonated in my mind, “Ethnographic methods of observation, including participant observation, can create richer, nuanced portraits of the norms, routines, beliefs, and trust fostered in specific professional communities. Such methods can also be used to explore the impact of interventions on teachers’ professional contexts” (p. 9).

**Observations.** Observations of professional development and grade level collaboration meetings, as well as observations of the focal teacher’s classroom literacy instruction were the primary forms of data collection. Various professional development sessions, grade-level collaboration meetings, and classroom literacy instruction allowed me to understand the particulars of the site and how they were “rendered meaningful places by the people who live there” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 19). I attended all the professional development sessions related to literacy and collaborative sessions (e.g., planned and unplanned grade-level meetings, data meetings, inservices) beginning in the summer to December 2013. These observations of professional development sessions exposed me to both the district’s and school’s professional development initiatives, as well as various curricula and programs that were supported and encouraged. For example, I attended the professional development night that was led by Sunday Cummins, a past teacher/literacy coach from the district. She wrote a book on close reading on non-fiction text and held three professional development sessions for the district. As I observed the teachers interact with one another in informal collaborative sessions, I took notice of and examined the particular ways in which they communicated and interacted with one other in order to understand their perspectives. Throughout my time at Frost Elementary School, I noticed that many of the unplanned meetings happened spontaneously and stemmed from a quick conversation in the hall or from being faced with an immediate need. The grade-level collaboration meetings provided a more formal setting and context where I observed and came to
understand the participants’ perspectives and experiences with the curricula, mandates, and specific students. These sessions were often led by Michelle or Dana, and they often came with a tight agenda that was filled with talk of data and test scores.

During the classroom literacy observations, I was attuned to the ways in which the practices and curricula discussed in professional development and collaborative sessions were or were not enacted in this space. Since the focus of this study was to understand the ways teachers negotiate mandates and curricula as they meet in various forms of collaboration, these observations provided opportunities to see how the curricula were enacted and the improvisations teachers made. I took fieldnotes and documented various aspects related to literacy routines and practices, curricula, pedagogy, students’ interactions with the teacher, as well as with one another during these classroom observations. I also tried to capture and understand if similar notions of collaborative practices were carried into the classroom (e.g., students meet in literature circle groups, social interaction during writing time, inquiry-based learning). The daily classroom observations took place during literacy instruction, which was for approximately 90-120 minutes from July 2013-December 2013. I selectively transcribed parts of the classroom observations—highlighting the important moments for deeper analysis, mainly the whole class discussions, guided reading sessions, and writers workshops.

During formal grade-level collaboration meetings and data sessions, I chose not to record the sessions because I had recorded the first data day (an initial meeting where teachers picked out their special “cadre” and reviewed test scores to create RTI groups), and I later found out a handful of the teachers and literacy team were very apprehensive about any recordings. Although I had their consent, the climate at Frost was extremely political and filled with tension because of the fear of teachers losing their jobs, being evaluated for anything they said, and feeling like their
were constantly under watch. The focal teacher did not see this as an area of concern, however to alleviate any fears and settle any nerves I decided to take copious and detailed notes versus recording these grade-level collaboration meetings. I attended seven grade level collaborations throughout data collection. However, all classroom observations were audiotaped through a small handheld device and I took field notes (field notes on the computer and also informal jottings on a notepad that were eventually added to the formal field notes).

**Interviews.** Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the fourth grade teachers, the focal teacher’s student teacher, and the literacy coach (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002). I tried to stay close to Kvale’s (1996) notion that “The research interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation” (p. 5). I transcribed the interviews verbatim, using Dyson’s (1993) conventions used in the presentation of transcripts (see Appendix B). I identified key themes and prepared questions a-priori to the interviews, yet I altered the questions depending on the depth, nuances, and complexities in the participants’ responses (see Appendix C). I followed the notion that the key to interviewing is also being an attentive listener, while at the same time noting key themes in order to ask clarifying questions and to elicit an authentic response. I attempted to listen to what was being “said between the lines” and formulated an “implicit message” (Kvale, 1996). I used the interviews to validate many of the notions that I gathered to be the teachers’ values and beliefs and to see if their perspectives were consistent with the data. My purpose through these interviews was to understand the themes of the lived experience from the participants’ worlds, specifically surrounding the nature of collaboration and the teacher’s agency in their school. There were three interviews with the focal teacher, one interview with each of the fourth grade teachers as well as one with the focal teacher’s student teacher, and one interview with the literacy coach.
All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. There were also numerous informal conversations and talks with Al before or after my observations. It was not uncommon for Al to pass me his newspaper readings, professional journal articles, and magazine clippings related to education when I walked in his classroom. He often saved interesting and thought-provoking pieces for me, so we could have conversations surrounding these politically-charged, educational issues. I decided not to interview the principal for several reasons. I wanted the teachers’ voices and narratives to be the center of the study and there were numerous occasions where Michelle’s presence, perspective, and position were heard through the data.

**Artifacts.** During the collaboration and classroom observations, I took pictures of, collected, and photocopied over 200 artifacts including pictures, handouts, materials, and documents used (e.g., picture of the focal teacher’s whiteboard during a reading lesson, focal teacher’s lesson plans, teacher created templates, review of new curricula, assessment data). I also collected and reviewed student artifacts (e.g., guided reading work, writing samples, *Daily Five* samples) to gain and develop a full picture of the instruction of the teacher(s). I also collected numerous handouts and materials that were distributed at grade level collaboration meetings, professional development sessions, staff developments, and district meetings to gather an understanding of the professional development that was valued within the school and district. The collection of these artifacts provided a lens for understanding how professional development was viewed at the school and district levels, as well as teachers’ perspectives and the daily “going-ons” at the classroom level.
Data Analysis

Bresler (2012) notes, “Just as qualitative research aims to capture lived experience, qualitative mindsets need to be cultivated through experiential learning” (p. 4). Through intense observations, inquiry, and analysis, I hope to peel the multiple layers that are involved in qualitative case study research. I started to analyze the data during collection—I used ongoing reflection and analysis as I observed in the field. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) recommend writing analytic asides, commentary, and in-process memos in order for the researcher to carry forward analysis contemporaneously with the collection of field data. I used these in-process memos to identify analytic themes, develop analytic insights, and to push my work with deeper questions to pursue. Dyson (1993) refers to Wolf (1992, p. 129), “Experience is messy.” She goes on to explain that our job as researchers is to search for “some coherency . . . not simply pass on the disorderly complexity of culture, but also to try to hypothesize about apparent consistencies, to lay out our best guesses, without hiding the contradictions and the instability” (p. 129). If I waited until the end to analyze the data—I would lose some coherency, much of this analysis took place in the midst of writing piles of field notes and transcribing classroom conversations and interviews.

I read and analyzed the data inductively through a socio-cultural perspective—emphasizing teachers’ collaboration as a social activity where meaning and change in one’s practice was made when teachers were able to enact and interpret the recurrent events of everyday life through interactions and collaboration with one another (Vygotsky, 1987; Watson-Gegeo, 1988). This process involved reading through the data in chronological order, organizing the data by participant(s) and/or varied type(s) of activity, developing overarching themes using emic terms (from the participants’ perspectives), creating and recreating smaller codes and
subcodes within themes, identifying and combining patterns, referring back to theoretical concepts to analyze how teachers’ participation in collaboration relates to their instruction while being guided by my research questions. By no means was this process linear, it involved the messiness of going back and forth to the data, identifying and reidentifying themes, creating and recreating patterns, and developing and redeveloping assertions (Lincoln & Guba, 1995).

After sifting through the open codes, I organized my data into more specific and focused codes around how (a) teachers draw from their past and present personal and professional experiences and identities during instruction, (b) the forms of professional development and formal and informal collaborations that filtered into the classroom, and (c) the larger impinging standards, values, and demands that played a critical role for teachers. In order to narrow in on the overwhelming amount of data I divided the data into three cycles of two months spans, and I inserted specific quotations and pieces of the data into these three larger codes. I then created sub-codes and labels (e.g., COLLAB-collaboration, NF-non-fiction, DISC-discussion, INQ-inquiry, NEG-Negotiation, MAND-mandates, T→D-top-down) under them. From there I continued to look for recurring patterns and themes within the three cycles.

Collaboration is being defined from the perspectives of the participants and grounded in the data collected, although I am aware that my own perspectives and past experiences informed the analysis (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). However, I attempted to make meaning of the participants’ perspectives and worlds by looking for major themes that connected to the research questions. As I analyzed the data, I generated assertions that were aligned theoretically and grounded in evidence, all while referring and checking back to the research questions. I was also in communication with others as it offered an opportunity for making meaning, where this communication enhanced the relationship between me, the researcher, and what was being
researched (Bresler, 2012). Additionally, Bogdan and Biklen (2003) assert, “Interpretation is not an autonomous act . . . Individuals interpret with the help of others . . . Through interaction the individual constructs meaning” (p. 27).

The following chart (see Table 3) illustrates the relationship between the data sources, data collection, and data analysis for this project.

Table 3

<table>
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<th>Data source</th>
<th>Data collection methods</th>
<th>Quantity/Frequency</th>
<th>Method of analysis</th>
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</table>
| Staff development and additional professional development | • Fieldnotes and transcripts from PD meetings  
• PD Artifacts and handouts                                                                  | • Scheduled for every other week for 1.5 hours  
• 7 sessions in total                                                      | I attended the all staff development meetings and any PD sessions surrounding literacy. The meetings were not audio-recorded (because of the staff’s sensitivity towards it), but detailed field notes and transcriptions of selected parts of the meeting were written, and artifacts were collected. Analytic memos of how teachers, principal, and literacy coach describe, interpret, and evaluate PD were written. |
| Classroom observations                           | • Fieldnotes, audio recordings, transcriptions  
• Teacher lesson plans  
• Handouts and artifacts (i.e., charts, graphic organizers, readings, etc.)           | • Scheduled for every Wednesday and Friday  
• 4 hours per week/6 months  
• 32 observations in total                                                          | Audio recordings were taken of all classroom observations of the focal teacher’s literacy instruction. Fieldnotes were written as jottings, details, and documentation of conversational turns, which were checked and extended through selected transcriptions (i.e., whole class instruction and discussion, guided reading instruction and discussion, etc.). |

(continued)
Table 3 (continued)

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<th>Data source</th>
<th>Data collection methods</th>
<th>Quantity/Frequency</th>
<th>Method of analysis</th>
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| Grade level collaboration meetings | • Fieldnotes  
• Transcriptions  
• Artifacts and handouts | • Scheduled for every other Monday for 45 minutes  
• 7 visits in total | These meetings were led by Michelle, the school’s principal and were scheduled during the fourth grade teachers plan time. The meetings were not audio-recorded (because of the staff’s sensitivity towards it), but detailed field notes and transcriptions of selected parts of the discussion were written, and artifacts were collected. |
| Interviews                | • Audio-recordings  
• Transcriptions  
• Field notes | • 3 interviews with focal teacher (approximately 1 hour each)  
• 1 interview with the 2 fourth grade teachers, literacy coach, and student-teacher (approximately 30 minutes each) | I met with each teacher to talk about her teaching background, beliefs about literacy, PD opportunities, and views on collaboration. The interviews were informal and usually held in the teacher’s classroom or the school library. The interviews were used to get their perspectives of key ideas that were coming up in the data set, as well as to confirm, clarify, or extend my understanding of the culture of collaboration in the building. |
| Curriculum resources       | • Curriculum teacher handbooks  
• Supplemental teaching resources | • *Making Meaning* (Scott Foresman, 2001)  
• *Units of Study* (Calkins, 2003) | I conducted a textual analysis of official curriculum, teacher created materials, and other related documents used by the focal teacher to understand the key ideas and philosophies of the each resource, especially its definition of literacy.  
I compared my analytic memos related to how teachers are negotiating the standards, their own values, and their students’ interests to these materials and resources. |
Summary

I return to the initial vignette where teaching cannot be viewed as a simple everyday practice—there are numerous social, political, and economic issues that teachers are negotiating. This study challenges NCLB and the proliferation of high-stakes, standardized testing and investigates the notion of purposeful ways to talk about children and schools in our democratic society (Rose, 2009). Using one-size-fits all examinations and scores as a basis for teacher and school quality and student performance is already setting up teachers, schools, and students from diverse backgrounds for failure (Johnston-Parsons, 2012; Popham, 2004). As the stakes are high, I designed this study to investigate how teachers are able to provide the necessary instruction as they wrestle with the demands of meeting AYP, improving overall student performance, and negotiating the basic skill instruction and scripted curricula.

I use Nieto’s (2003) inspiring and profound words based off of her work with teachers in What Keep Teachers Going? to tell the teachers’ stories:

My faith in the power of teachers . . . is not tempered by a deeper understanding of the limits of personal commitment and hard work on the part of individual teachers. While I know that there are certainly limits to what teachers can do, given the sociopolitical context in which they work and the rampant inequalities in educational access, I believe more strongly than ever in the power of teachers . . . teachers are not mere sponges, absorbing the dominant ideologies and expectations. . . . They are also active agents whose words and deeds change lives and mold futures, for better or worse. Teachers can and do exert a great deal of power and influence in the lives of their students. (p. 19)

It is the narrative of the participants in this study that I hope to tell and I depend on how they understand and interpret their particular context in order to answer my research questions. In the next three chapters, I present my findings on how the participants make sense of their world and context.

In chapter 4, I address the first research question: What is the nature of the focal teacher’s literacy’s practices within a school context? In this chapter the dynamics of the school and
classroom cultures are explained and providing the background of the focal teacher sets the stage for the following chapters. As the classroom culture is described the types of literacy practices that are valued by the school and by the focal teacher are fleshed out.

In chapter 5, the focus is on the research questions: What is the nature of collaborative practices in the school building surrounding literacy? and How does participation in collaborative practices relate to literacy instruction (e.g., interactions, material, organization)? The forms of professional development and collaborative opportunities that are offered to the teachers are described. I then dissect the two arenas of formal and informal professional development opportunities and what the teachers found to be most meaningful and valuable.

Chapter 6 narrows in on the research question: What is the nature of teachers’ agency over the literacy curriculum? I tie together all of the particulars of this study and hone in on how the focal teacher followed, altered, and negotiated the literacy curricula. This chapter fleshes out the challenges the focal teacher faced as he negotiated the official curriculum, his own values and beliefs, as well as students’ differences and interests as he planned the literacy curriculum.
Chapter 4

Case Study of Focal Participant and Focal Classroom

Culture is not static; it is formed from the efforts of people working together, using and adapting material and symbolic tools provided by predecessors and in the process creating new ones. (Rogoff, 2003, p. 51)

In this chapter I describe the focal teacher’s personal history and identity, professional background, and his classroom dynamics and literacy practices. All of these pieces contributed to the culture of this particular school and classroom. Exploring these contextual characteristics about the focal participant and focal classroom set the stage for later chapters to explicate the agency of teachers and various collaborative opportunities.

Who is Al Miles? Personal History and Identity and Professional Background

“A big career shift.” Prior to entering the teaching profession Al worked as a journalist for a newspaper and as a writer, reporter, and editor for a sport magazine for over 10 years in a large metropolitan city. Although he still loved to write, he explained that he got to a point in his life where he got frustrated with this line of work and decided he needed a change. He decided to enroll in a teacher education program because in the past, he was involved in hockey refereeing, officiating, and eventually became a certified instructor. He enjoyed developing relationships with the players and revisited these memories as he decided to change careers. He stated that he did “a lot of modeling, demonstrating, things that are very similar to what we [teachers] do on a day to day basis,” which spurred him into the teaching profession. As Al discussed teachers that impacted his philosophy of teaching, he mentioned a high school teacher that was:

very hands off as far as student-generated, inquiry-based learning; if I had to describe it where they were responsible, it was a history class . . . researching those topics, presenting and teaching to the rest of the class. So I think that was very intriguing to me, that format . . . that style of teaching and so, that’s something I’ve always remembered.
Besides this one teacher, Al felt that most of those who had influenced him were his colleagues. The other major factor that contributed to his learning and in becoming a teacher was his writing background from his previous career. He added, “I’d like to think it pays off in some way.” He also explained:

I think just having been in the work world . . . I had a family . . . had a steady job, coming to teach from the work world rather than straight out of school I think . . . makes a big difference in the perspective of the teacher . . . I think it really adds to, not just in how you teach, but how you relate to people and get along with families and rapport with kids.

**Teaching fourth grade at Frost Elementary.** Al taught fourth grade at Frost Elementary all 14 years of his teaching career. He was notorious for being the first teacher at school and often the last one to leave. His teammate, Kamara, often sarcastically commented that Al basically lived at school and highlighted how she had her plans and grading done for the week at the same time she knew Al was only getting started with plans, making copies, and getting organized. He often stated to me, “I must be doing something wrong. It just takes me so long!”

Al had strong relationships not only with his teammates, but with all of the staff in the building. He had a jovial, kind, and warm spirit. For example, the day before school started, a handful of teachers dropped into Al’s room to check in and discuss their struggles with Michelle, the principal. Paula (the current interventionist, who was the literacy coach the year before) noted how she was walking on eggshells around the principal. Al listened attentively, yet did not chime into the discussion. Also, when Kamara was having a challenging day with her students and an unpleasant encounter with Michelle, she came by Al’s room during one of our interviews to vent to Al for over 30 minutes. Al welcomed her, patiently listened, and offered helpful and empathetic advice. Additionally Cassie, the teacher’s assistant in Al’s room worked very closely with him and his special education students, as well as supported him with various elements of technology (Al openly admitted that technology was not his forte and needed Cassie to support
him). During a faculty meeting when they were celebrating colleagues’ achievements, Cassie made note of Mr. Miles for implementing more technology in his classroom (i.e., Chromebooks, Google Docs). Overall, Al was well liked, welcomed teachers into his classroom, and had strong relationships with the staff.

Al discussed his past teammates as mentors and role models. He felt there were many teachers in the building from whom he could still learn and asked them for suggestions and advice. However, there were also some teachers in the building with reputations of fudging the initial fall Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) scores and assessments and students not learning meaningful content in the classrooms. Al tried to stay clear of these teachers, but remained cordial and professional to everyone in the building.

Al’s wife was retired and she had the flexibility to relocate to the east coast where her family resided. They often considered moving and it was not uncommon for Al to consider teaching at other schools. Also, this past year he received an offer to teach in a neighboring school district; however, he chose to stay at Frost because he did not want to leave the school abruptly before the beginning of the school year. Although he had other potential positions, each year he decided to return to Frost.

**Blurring of the lines.** On my second observation in Al’s classroom, he mentioned that over the weekend he watched a clip of “The Lost Boys” on 60 Minutes and he was touched by how the Sudanese refugees faced and tackled overwhelming hardships and obstacles. He added, “They walked 300 miles to escape.” He said that he would like to show this to the students. This exemplifies how Al often used his own interests in politics, social issues, and current events as part of his instruction. He often brought in newspaper clippings and used these as springboards for discussion and written response. During the school year the teachers in the district were
working without a contract and Al brought in the newspaper where the teachers were on the cover page picketing; Al and the students had a lively discussion and debate about it. He usually read aloud and discussed *Times for Kids* articles on history and current events (e.g., assassination of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln’s quest to free the slaves, racial inequities). In one of his writing units (from *Units of Study*), Al altered the curriculum by having the students choose a stance on gun control to engage in a mock debate. Sociopolitical elements of his background seeped into his instruction and were intricately woven together. His past work experience as a journalist, writer, editor, and reporter were tied to his stance on these issues. He viewed part of his responsibility as an educator to ensure his students were aware of sociopolitical issues and pushed them to understand these topics through deep discussion.

“It’s high stakes.” In the 14 years that Al has been at the school there have been six principals and the administration has been constantly changing. He stated, “I’m surprised they don’t get better.” Many of the teachers were afraid of losing their jobs and there was immense pressure in the building for the teachers to “perform” by raising their students’ test scores and in Michelle’s performance reviews. Many teachers got mixed signals from Michelle and did not quite know how to interpret her actions and decisions. On the first day of school she dropped into Al’s room unannounced and made friendly announcements to students about wearing their school uniforms, coming to read “big thick ones [books]” to Sally (the literacy dog), and introducing the new assistant principal. As she left she commented, “We like hugs and we expect awesome things because you’re incredible learners. Alright, you all have a good year.” Yet, subsequent encounters in Al’s classroom were less frequent and unpleasant. She often placed strict timelines and deadlines on the teachers. For instance, during the first week of school she told the teachers that they must have *Daily Five* (a management system created by Boushey and
Moser, 2006, used during the literacy block that incorporated read to self, read to someone, read to teacher, word work, and write to self), books boxes and guided reading (using Jan Richardson’s model) implemented by the first two weeks of school.

Michelle also led the grade level collaboration meetings. She often came with a detailed agenda and disseminated information to the teachers. In the first fourth grade collaboration meeting of the year, Michelle passed out the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Module 1 Overview and honed in on the long-term targets. After she read through the standards, she stressed the “I can” statements and said,

Now . . . there’s so little time, so I really want to encourage you with whatever you do that you’re meeting these long term targets. You can teach reading through science, you can teach social studies and reading . . . so let this reading class be a part of your science and social studies, so you can give your kids a lot of literacy support.

She continued, “Remember that higher level teacher evaluation goes into when your students are able to take ownership of their own learning.” She often brought the teachers’ evaluations back to the discussion when they were talking about students’ performance and improvement on test scores. It became more apparent during the year that she was facing immense pressure by the district and was being closely monitored by the district office. For example, Michelle stated,

Absolutely, you will move your red/yellow (referring to AIMSweb testing; see Figure 1) kids . . . Julia (the superintendent) has said absolutely your African American kids need to move to the green . . . whenever you want to progress monitor kids, and we’ll be coming back and part of our growth model is to move these kids up . . . it’s going to be judged district wide by AIMSweb, not that I agree with it, but that’s the way it is. They are going to take the fall and winter benchmarks and that’s how they will determine if I’ve been successful and you’ve been successful.

She told the teachers they needed to pick a group of African American or special education students to focus on and monitor their progress. Kamara immediately interrupted and said, “I got a group of white kids that I need to move up, not black kids.” Michelle’s response was, “We need to do both, but district-wide we are trying to move up African American kids and special ed.
kids.” She continued to reiterate, “We don’t have luxuries anymore. It’s high stakes.” She concluded the meeting by saying, “Well low now is not as a big deal like low in winter . . . Everyday they need to be doing some kind of writing . . . using evidence base (SIC) to support the thought, details.” She then directed them back to the standards and told them they needed to review grammar, verb tense, and conjunctions.

Figure 1. AIMSweb reading chart for Al’s classroom.

At the close of the meeting Al commented to me that Michelle rarely follows through and said, “she talks a lot without saying a lot.”

A few weeks later, each grade level had a meeting reviewing data and test scores and preparing for the RTI block, known as “data day.” The fourth grade team—Michelle, Dana,
Paula, the special education teacher, and another reading interventionist—were present for the meeting. Michelle reiterated, “Today’s focus is special ed. and African American children.” Michelle again stressed that the fall scores have less weight by saying, “Be very deliberate about what they are writing down because that’s the accountability piece.” Each classroom teacher looked at the fourth grade instructional planning form (see Figure 2) and wrote down the names of students with data concerns and where they would fall in red, yellow, or green. Throughout the meeting the fourth grade team was encouraged to pick a cadre of African American or special education students that would show progress. Dana, the literacy coach, expressed, “Really think about kids that can show progress . . . you want them to be at grade level by winter.” And the other interventionist commented, “It would be helpful if they were a high yellow.”

![Figure 2](image-url)

*Figure 2.* Fourth grade instructional planning form was used for teachers to choose the cadre of African American and special education students to progress monitor.
As the teachers discussed their potential cadre, Kamara responded, “You know, it’s really sad because I have about five white students that need some tracking.” Paula jokingly replied, “Well, they don’t matter right now.”

Once again Michelle ended this meeting, saying “I need to see how you are progress monitoring these bubble kids, you will be evaluated on how they are performing, just like I will be evaluated on how you’re performing . . . so I’m transferring the heat.”

The next day, Al commented about data day in our interview, “The meeting the other day, the air was thick.” He elaborated that there were different levels of tensions and to top it off there were relational issues. The following week a teacher in the building let me know that a few of the people at the meeting were quite nervous and disgruntled about the data day session being audio-recorded. Even though they had given me consent they were afraid that it would somehow get to the district office. Paula and Dana already had their jobs switched on the first day of this school year by Michelle, and Paula specifically thought this would escalate to the point of losing her job. I assured all of them that this recording was only for the purpose of my dissertation and no one else would have access to it. However, because of the sensitivity and seriousness of the nature of the topics at hand, I decided not to audio-record any of the collaboration meetings and professional development days after that day. It seemed to assure them that their voices would not be recorded, so that it could not be traced back to them.

Shortly after all of these meetings, in early September Michelle made the executive decision that teachers were not allowed to take their students for recess in the mornings because students were too far from meeting AYP. This meant that Al’s fourth grade class would be in instructional time from 7:30 AM-12 PM, for 4.5 hours continuously because they did not have a break until lunch and their specials were the last class of the day.
At a faculty meeting on September 9th, Michelle focused on an article about reading at least 20 minutes a day (see Figure 3) and told the teachers that every single one of them should be using reading logs. She went on to say, “I’m not trying to micromanage you, but these reading logs are a must. Big difference what 20 minutes can do . . . an A student would have read an equivalent of 60 school days . . . so this is very powerful, I want every classroom teacher to copy it and distribute it to your parents.” The teachers agreed that reading more was beneficial for their students, but they struggled with the manner in which Michelle presented information to them. They felt belittled and Michelle also made assumptions about the students. She continued on, “it’s just a real big deal right now because our children are not reading; they are sitting in front of a big black tube.”

Figure 3. An article that Michelle passed out at the faculty meeting to mandate teachers to use reading logs.
It was not uncommon for collaboration meetings to be cancelled at a moment’s notice (i.e., 8/19, 10/14, 12/10). Al responded, “It’s understandable, but it also just speaks to the unorganized nature and ineffectiveness of a broken system.” He also went on to say how Michelle often sent careless emails and called some teachers the wrong name. All these comments revealed the lack of respect he had for Michelle and her lack of professionalism. He did not appreciate her tone, style, and approach with the teachers. More and more as the weeks and months went by, Michelle’s focus on improving test scores and lack of concern for the students and teachers irritated and upset Al and the other teachers. For instance, on November 5th Kamara came into Al’s room to vent about how Michelle saw one of her students crying in the back of the room. Michelle approached the student and explained that there is learning going on and scolded her, that there is no time to sit and cry because fourth graders need to focus on meeting AYP. Kamara went on to say it was unbelievable that she told a fourth grader that she needed to meet AYP, and that Michelle did not even ask the student what was wrong or why she was crying. Kamara further explained if Michelle had just asked her what was wrong she would have discovered that the student was disappointed she had a missing assignment and she was getting her materials together to get started on it. Kamara expressed that kids have feelings and emotions and she was giving her student space to cry and then move forward to do her work.

On November 20, 2013 at 1:30 PM Michelle sent this email to Al:

Just a gentle reminder that we are not doing recess, but implementing Brain Breaks instead. The other day, you had a student in the hall and she said that she had to "miss recess" because she didn't complete her homework. I understand that we may have different philosophies, but at this time with so many 4th grade students not making AYP, the focus must be focused and concentrated. I hope you understand.

Two days later Michelle popped into Al’s classroom after writing instruction:
10:06 AM

Al: Oh, Hi, Mrs.Gray, How are you?

Michelle: I was hoping to see a math lesson.

Al: A math lesson, ahhh—

Michelle: It’s on the schedule.

Al: Is it? Well, at about 10:20 we’re going to be, ahhh, starting—

Michelle: Is says you should be doing writing or math right now.

Al: Is that what it says on there. Okay, uhm—

Michelle: It’s okay I’ll just come back another time.

Al: Actually, well Dennis’ (a student with special needs) support can only be here at a certain time and we usually do that closer to 10:20 or so.

Michelle: So, what are we doing right now?

Al: This is our brain break right now.

Cassie: We’re catching up on work that we need!

Afterwards, Al was in utter shock and disbelief that Michelle would check into his classroom after having a full literacy block and progress monitoring and then proceed to question and berate him in front of Cassie, myself, and the students. Both Al and Kamara did not mind if Michelle had comments or feedback for them, but they were taken aback by the manner in which she handled things. They felt there was a lack of support, trust, and care for them and the students.

Later in December at a faculty meeting, Michelle commented “It’s a tight ship, we need to stay focused on our work.” She further explained that this was her way of saying that there are to be “no parties, no fluff, and they have things to work on.” However, the following week, Al had been planning a going-away party for a student that was moving back to New Zealand. Some
teachers thought Michelle was micromanaging the teachers and exhibited distrust with the teachers. She would often make comments about how hard the teachers worked and that they had a good first day back from winter break and that the students and teachers were right on track, but then proceeded to say they cannot have parties because it’s a “tight ship” around here. Several teachers felt that she showed a lack of respect for what they were doing everyday, their judgment, and work ethic. Although Michelle discouraged having parties, Al still chose to have the party for his student who was going away. He sifted through Michelle’s comments and advice, but he also was comfortable making the final decision to have a going-away party for his student. He also mentioned to me again that Michelle often talked a lot, but there was little follow through.

A few months after this study ended, the teachers, parents, and students were abruptly notified that Michelle would not be coming back as Frost’s principal. I met with Al for an informal meeting shortly after the news of Michelle’s departure and he shared, “It’s surprising how little information is being shared with teachers.” The teachers and parents were just told that she had left for personal reasons and will not be coming back. He also shared that the students did not even realized she was gone and noted that they probably would see the new interim principal more in one quarter than they saw Michelle in years. He also reflected on Michelle barging into his classroom and demanding to see writing or math instruction as the lowest point of the year for him. A week after our informal meeting, Al wrote me an email about the interim principal, “[The interim principal] is working out great. Gets things done with a gentle touch and a soft approach. Kinda nice. :-)”
The Focal Classroom: Room 112

The focal teacher used his literacy and cultural practices to make meaning in his classroom, school, and world. He drew from his past experiences, professional development, past profession, and personal interests during literacy instruction.

“Fly by the seat of my pants kind of guy.” Al assured me that he was thinking through a lot of issues and problems, but at times, if the moment was right, he would go with “it.” By “it” he meant if something was not in his lesson plan, but the students were invested in a discussion, he would continue on with the discussion and investigate their questions and interests. He would often multitask and move from one topic to the next and then revisit the initial topic. For instance, in early September the students read a non-fiction article on peppers where Al’s goal was to discuss various components of non-fiction. Yet, he also talked about various types of peppers to get them interested in the reading:

    Al:  Okay, now I don’t want to get you excited about lunch right now. But, on this page you will see a certain type of food. What type of food do you see?

    S:    Peppers.

    Al:  Good, someone said peppers. Just a little hint you can find this type of food pretty easily around town. Hold on, groans, noises . . . you got to keep it down. Page number is 25 and 26.

    Bri:  Southern Barbeque.

    Al:  Ahh, southern barbeque, or southwest.

    S:    Cattle.

    Al:  Okay, cattle that would be meat. Or anyone heard of Dos Reales, or I’m thinking . . .

    S:    El Toro.

    Al:  El Toro, yes. I’m thinking Mexican, Southwest. What’s one clue we are talking about Mexican, southwest type of food?
Derek: Pictures.

Al: Pictures, good. What else before you even start reading the story?

Jose: The sidebar.

Al: Whoa, a sidebar! That's like the most important thing I was going to say. What’s the sidebar?

Daphne: Like the information next to it.

Al: Right, if it’s in a box it’s probably really important and the author wants you to read it. What are the words that go with pictures?

Sam: Captions.

Al: Like here.

Sam: Caption.

Al: Caption. What’s the other thing that might tell you what it’s about?

S: The map.

Al: Good, the map. Mexico is down there. There’s pretty cool stuff to do. Anybody hear of the Grand Canyon? Anyone hear of the four corners, where you can keep your feet in four states?

Thijea shares about her dad’s travels and how he has been there.

Even before having the students read the text, Al wanted to discuss the important non-fiction text features the students should look out for. The class had talked about many of these features (e.g., pictures, sidebar, captions, maps) before and was familiar with reading non-fiction texts. He valued teaching these text features to assist them in reading non-fiction texts and at times they did not even have to read the article in it’s entirety if they were able to navigate the text using these text-features.

Al also wanted to engage the students in the topic, so he asked their thoughts on the use of peppers (e.g., Southern barbeque, Southwest, Mexican). It was common for Al to dialogue
with students on various topics and hear their stories, perspectives, and experiences on the topic at hand. In this instance, they delved into their experiences with peppers and Al allocated time for students to talk about the topic, so he could draw out their prior knowledge as well as get them engaged in the text. Al continued to give them the directions for the reading:

Al: The directions are not on this sheet. So, listen to what I am going to tell you. So, I told you we are reading 25 and 26, so when we are reading important non-fiction like this, I’d like you to tell me what a good order is to look at these pages. Page 26, there’s a caption. What else is on this list to look for? Caption, what else do you see on this list?

S: A map.

Al: Good, as Will said a few minutes ago.

S: Sidebar.

Al: Right sidebar!

S: Pictures.

Al: Right pictures. Look at these pictures! I don’t know about you, but I don’t really like these vegetables. Eggplant? Peppers, now peppers I kind of like. You know all peppers are not hot.

S: Green.

Al: Ahh, green pepper, red, orange. You gotta be careful with peppers, some sweet, but some are hot. What does text mean? Take your finger and stick it down on the page where you see an example of text?

As the weeks and months passed by, the students were rarely distracted or confused by this style of instruction where at times Al inserted tangents and random facts and allowed the students to dialogue for an extended period of time. Al did continue to provide a lot of information and at times raised seemingly random tangents and ideas, but the students were engaged and seemed to enjoy his style of teaching and learning. It became a part of the Room 112 culture where Al multitasked and the students also raised topics, asked questions, and made
suggestions. It was not uncommon for students to ask questions and Al would direct them to research the answer to their queries. He would suggest for them to research their questions on the Internet or lead them to encyclopedias and later as a class they would revisit the research once they found the information. This can be connected to how Al referred to his previous high school teacher’s use of discussion and inquiry-based conversations. In the first interview, he expressed that teaching through authentic inquiry-based questions was fascinating and engaging. There were countless times Al pushed students’ thinking and researched various students’ questions during discussion.

Classroom dynamics. During the initial weeks of school, classroom management became quite a challenge. After a month of school, in late August, Al was feeling overwhelmed and frustrated with his literacy block, transitions, and guided reading time. The students were often chatty; it seemed this was related to the fact that majority of their work took place at their desks, there was little opportunity for movement, and recess was no longer allowed. At times, the students got restless if they moved from subject to subject all while sitting in the same place. Additionally, Al would frequently pass out tickets that students could save to purchase items from his treasure chest and candy when students were following and meeting expectations. Al’s intention was to instill positive reinforcement and reward the students who were following directions and acting as role models to the other students. However, at times these rewards may have created more of a focus on behaviors, rules, and incentives versus an internal motivation to learn and grow. After one of the first guided reading lessons on August 23rd I received an email from Al with the subject heading, “Guided Reading Fiasco:”

Hi Grace:

At the risk of boring you senseless (for which I apologize in advance), would you mind me making a few observations about Friday's attempt at guided reading?
If you recall, we started with the whole-class reading of the 'beached whale' story itself. I was somewhat shocked at how suddenly engaged they became in that story . . . I was very encouraged with that discussion.

Then, of course, it all kind of unraveled. I feel as if we have pounded away at management issues of how to move about the room, what they should be doing, etc . . . And I may still be working toward a more strictly-defined *Daily 5* format, but does it matter as much WHAT they are doing if they should fully understand at this point the expectation for HOW they should be doing it?

[One thing I know is frustrating me is that I have so many kids being pulled out that when they come back at these varying times, whatever I am doing is immediately sidetracked, and they need to be incorporated in whatever we are doing at that moment.]

I know I've missed a piece of management instruction somewhere that would lead to this level of chaos, so please feel free to offer any feedback or thoughts from what took place. I'd welcome the chance to discuss that and/or more *Daily 5* implementation if you would be up for it.

This email indicated that the “beached whale” story was Al’s breaking point where he knew something had to change during the literacy block. After this session he took it upon himself to contact Patty, a third grade teacher in the building, who had implemented *Daily Five* effectively.

As he reflected on this guided reading lesson he realized that the students were not meeting expectations whether they were meeting with him in a guided reading group or working on independent activities, they were distracted and not getting the most out of the literacy block.

**Care.** Al had a genuine interest in getting to know his students. Although he was at times constrained to follow the curriculum, the students knew Al cared for, invested, and developed strong relationships with them and they responded well to him. However, at the start of the year they did try to take advantage of him. For instance, in mid-August when Al was doing a read aloud, *Boundless Grace*, they were having a discussion on Grace’s father not being around while some students were engaged and making connections to experiences with their own fathers, Al paused and waited for students to settle down and get back to the discussion. Then Al removed a student for being a distraction and making inappropriate choices; he did not focus on him, but
calmly asked the child to leave. Shortly afterward, more students were distracted and drawing in one another’s books and then another student starting dragging his chair very loudly. At this point, Al calmly stopped the lesson and said:

Alright, you have obviously shown, 12-13 of you that are looking like students, but the 3-4 students that have shown us that they cannot handle it . . . now we are going to do about a half hour of worksheets. Close your journals and go back to your desks and get ready to work. Now if you don’t want to work or do worksheets, get ready to get a pink slip. I will be filling those out . . . The only thing you should have on your desk is your pencil, math workbook, and the sheet I’m giving you.

Al was quite upset and felt that there was nothing more he could do. He believed that there was no point in continuing with the lesson when students were being disrespectful and not following expectations. A few minutes later he asked the class to write a letter to him if they thought he was being “unfair, unreasonable.” He said:

Try to imagine what it’s like to be in someone’s shoes. If you’re thinking how awful this is and that you shouldn’t be treated like this . . . if you’re thinking like this, put yourself in my shoes. When I was trying to read the story, trying to ask questions, after doing that, if you think I’m treating you unfairly, I’d like you to write a note and tell me that.

He maintained a calm demeanor and stayed patient even when he was upset and frustrated. Throughout the next weeks and months the students started to see Al’s genuine care for them as they developed relationships. It was unheard of for Al to raise his voice or speak in a demeaning way to students—he not only expressed the golden rule with students, he actually practiced it in his relationships with adults and children alike.

**Mutual trust.** As mentioned in the introductory section, Al decided to enter into the field of teaching because he valued getting to know his hockey players on a deeper level and through these relationships he was then able to coach, model, and demonstrate techniques. Al was vulnerable and honest with the students, demonstrated in the excerpt above where he was frank about what was upsetting to him—that the class was not making respectful choices. Yet, he also
welcomed the students to respond and write to him if they felt that this was unfair. This is an example of the how Al tried to create a democratic classroom and the students recognized that he did not just tell them what to do, but he wanted to hear their perspectives and was willing to change if they offered suggestions.

He started off the school year showing them his writer’s notebook (see Figure 4) and often shared his own writing with students and exposed areas of his life (i.e., funny stories, embarrassing events, serious happenings) with the students.

Figure 4. Al’s writer’s notebook that he wrote in and used to share many excerpts of his writing during mini-lessons.

In a mini-lesson on commas, Al started with his writing on the smart board. It was handwritten and in his writing journal. He jokingly mentioned for the students not to judge him for his writing topics, as he was embarrassed about them. This type of sharing and humor set up the class for a vulnerable, open, and free environment where no one felt judged or looked down upon. Because Al modeled exposing personal and often embarrassing stories with the class, when it was time for the students to present their writing they did not have any fear or embarrassment. There was a safe classroom culture developed that was established on mutual
trust. As he shared this writing, he told them he omitted his commas, so as he read it aloud, he
wanted them to locate where he needed commas throughout the piece.

Al: Let’s see where we can put a comma . . . “Vacations with my family were
always eventful.” Now, there’s a period. Do periods do the same thing as
commas? Well, periods are like stop signs, whereas commas are like pauses.

Jayden: You should have done a comma.

Al: I agree that’s where my comma should be. “Hours of endless fun. Yeah right.”
Any pause there? Any place for a comma? Mia?

Mia: In between yeah and right.

Al: Right, there’s a pause there. “Sleep, a hard thing to do at times like that. Well, it
would happen . . . one time we went to a McDonalds.” Do you have McDonalds
in New Zealand, Thijea?

Thijea: Yes

(Ss listed off other countries that have McDonalds.)

Al: How often do you go to a McDonalds?

S: Everyday.

Al: Wow, everyday, I’m not sure how I feel about that. I would eat fries everyday,
but it may not be the best for me.

Derek: I heard that, you know that show that that guy ate McDonalds like every meal
for everyday and I think he died.

Aileen: I don’t think he died.

(Ss got very excited talking about what fast food restaurants are near where they live.
Some students said they live next to a gas station or various restaurants.)

After this mini-lesson, the students then reviewed their writing focusing on commas and
periods. Even in this excerpt there are moments where Al goes on a tangent about if there are
McDonalds in New Zealand and allows the students to go on to discuss random facts about
McDonalds and what restaurants are near their houses. To outsiders that were not familiar with
this sort of dialogue, it may have seemed pointless and a waste of time. However, Al valued
allowing students to express themselves and giving them space to raise discussion points. And often this is where he got ideas for future lessons.

As he got to know the students, he established trust and rapport with them by using humor. He had a playful and joking side to him that made students feel comfortable around him and eventually where they trusted him. This next excerpt from a guided reading group, where Al was practicing reading strategies and working on point of view, demonstrates Al’s sense of humor and his strong relationships with students. Al asked if any of the students could make connections to the main character and Markus humorously pointed out Al’s ability to laugh at his own jokes:

Al: Do you know anyone that laughs at their own jokes?

Kenny: That’s creepy.

Timmy: My granddad.

Al: Who’s someone who laughs at their own jokes, is it because other people—

Kenny: Don’t.

Markus: You laugh at your own jokes.

(Everyone laughs.)

Al: I do? Are you saying my jokes—

Markus: Well, I’m not—

Al: Well then what exactly are you saying? (joking tone)

Markus: I’m not saying your jokes are bad, it makes everybody laugh, but you do laugh at your own jokes. It is funny.

Al: Well, I’m glad you finished up that way. What are you trying to say about my jokes?

Markus: They is funny.
Al appreciated Markus’ humor and laughed at his comments about his humor. The students felt comfortable with Al and because Al too used sarcasm to develop relationships with the students, this type of banter was commonplace in the classroom culture.

Al also had a way of making students feel comfortable, accepted, and open, which led to a strong classroom community. He gave students opportunities to express their thoughts and engage in conversations where their thoughts, opinions, and ideas were welcomed and they had the freedom to engage in dialogue. This is an excerpt of a frank discussion after one of the first sessions of Daily Five:

Al: Boy that was amazing, Ms. Cassie you should have been in here, I didn’t hear anything. Did you hear any noise at all? Do you mind going around and passing out a piece of candy (addressing the student teacher, Ms. Lambert)? Wow, I saw a couple people working at the door working silently doing word work. We’re doing a mini-celebration for wonderful work during our 15 minutes of Daily Five. What else did you notice that went so great? I just pointed out that I saw a couple people doing wonderful word work at the door. Ellen?

Ellen: I saw people working with less talking and it helped us be able to focus.

Al: I agree with Ellen, I saw people working with less talking and I know my group at the back table was able to work because of the wonderful job everyone was doing. Any other things anyone noticed, not so good, or good, any comments. Bri and then Markus.

Bri: When it as time to stop, people stopped what they were doing.

Al: Kay, people stopped right away. They stopped, they didn’t wait too long, they stopped right away and wrapped things up. Markus, go ahead.

Markus: Well, at first you all were kind of loud at the computers and when Mr. Miles said keep it down, asked you to be quiet, you all quieted down. Y’all did great.

Al: Nice, you’re right when you’re at the computer, you’re wearing headphones, so they couldn’t hear, but like Markus said, when I came over what happened? Total quiet, nice job. Alright, let’s do one more round, I don’t know if we can beat what we just did, that was pretty fabulous, 10 out of 10.

In this excerpt, Ellen, Bri, and Markus felt comfortable sharing about what they found to be good qualities of the Daily Five session. It was common for Al to ask for the students’ opinions,
thoughts, and perspectives on various topics all throughout the day. He established a strong classroom community, treated the students with respect, and developed relationships with his students. This was visible, later in the year when Al and Cassie had organized a going away party for a student that was moving back to New Zealand. The students were also involved as they brought in food and drinks for her. The classroom developed a mutual trust.

**Literacy Practices of Room 112**

Although, the majority of the literacy block was filled with academic literacy practices (e.g., meeting in guided reading groups, practicing reading strategies, writing essays), there were spaces and points of intersection for students to flexibly explore their own interests. In a time where rigorous academic literacies are most valued and consume the majority of the school day, students in Room 112 were able to bring in their everyday literacy practices, engage in oral discussions and performances (e.g., opportunities for reader’s theatre, presentation of writing, debates), create comics and fiction stories, and enact play (e.g., a student created a mock contract and had his friend sign it in order to be a part of a club).

*Academic literacy practices.* Al’s literacy block was typified by discussion from the start of the school year he encouraged discussion and conversation about various topics (e.g., setting up routines, getting to know you activities, discussing vocabulary words). Al often read aloud to students and he chose engaging and interesting texts that would draw out discussion. For example, in September Al read a book *Mary on Horseback* by Rosemary Wells. The book was about Mary Breckenridge, a 20th century nurse and heroine who helped many families that were sick in rural Appalachia during the 1920’s and 1930’s. He elicited deep discussion through asking them questions and contrasting their current day-to-day lives to the experiences of these
people from earlier decades. In the following excerpt Al had reviewed the Question Answer
Relationship (QAR) strategy developed by Raphael (1986) with students as they distinguished
various types of questions (e.g., right there, think and search, author and me, on my own). This
strategy teaches students to be consciously aware of whether they are likely to find the answer to
comprehension questions directly in the text, between the lines, or beyond the information
provided in the text (Raphael, 1986). He read aloud parts of the book and he paused to pose
questions and get responses from students:

Al: Okay get ready to go . . . alright now, if you remember we were talking about a
place long ago, that you probably wouldn’t want to live there in the 1920s. Why
was it a place that you . . . there were some things going on there that might
want you not to live there. Yes, what were they?

S: No roads.

Al: Oh my gosh, there weren’t any roads! How could there not be roads? What else
was going on there that would make you not want to live there? Bri?

Bri: There ain’t no hospitals!

Al: Right, there’s no hospitals, no doctors or nurses and there’s no electricity, I
don’t even know if there is running water for God’s sake. You have your
questions sheet. So, now, remember when we are asking questions about
reading, what have we been saying about the kinds of answers to your
questions? You’re coming up with questions where the answer is—right—
where?

S: Right there.

Al: Right there, meaning right on the—

S: Page.

Al: Of the book. Right, where the answer is right in the book. Or you can come up
with a question where the answer is not on the page, the answer is more in your
noggin, your coconut, brain, kay? Alright, but they are all good questions,
doesn’t matter what kind you come up with. So you’re going to need to come up
with two questions, okay, if your question has an answer that is right there on
the page what are you going to put on your sheet?

Ss: In the right there.
Al: If you have a question where the answer is more from your noggin, your coconut, your bowling ball, your head, then—where are you going to put that question?

S: You put it in author and you.

Al: Right, you are going to put it in the author and you or author and me section.

(Al continued reading where they left off.)

Al read: “When mama saw four men carry Pa home with his leg crushed . . . the men tried to put Pa down, one of them got the horse doctor down in Crypton . . . we’ll have to take the leg off!”

Al: A bone saw, meaning that’s a saw that’s used a lot for what?

S: Cutting bones.

Al: Cutting bones off, arms, legs . . .

Ss: Eeehhh, yuck!

Al: Okay, right, why are they usually doing that? Because remember what Bri said, they don’t have any—

S: Hospitals.

Al: Hospitals, doctors, medicines, nurses. This is true, this is what happened 80 years ago in that part of the country. Markus?

Markus: How did they know how to use it?

Al: Ahhh, great question. How do they know how to use a bone saw? If they’re not a doctor, right? Or a nurse, or somebody, they are using it for that reason, that’s a good question. Now do you think the answer is going to be right here? Probably not, but I liked that.

Al had a non-threatening and welcoming way of asking questions and getting the students engaged and interested. His responses tended to be non-judgmental, elaborative, and humorous (e.g., “Oh my gosh, there weren’t any roads! How could there not be roads?” “I don’t even know if there is running water for God’s sake.” “If you have a question where the answer is more from your noggin, your coconut, your bowling ball, your head, then—where are you going to put that
question?”). He also offered the students affirmation (e.g., “Ahhh, great question. How do they know how to use a bone saw?”). It was also common for Al not to focus or correct a student’s dialect, yet he stayed focused on the conversation. For instance when Bri says, “There ain’t no hospitals!” Al responds, “Right, there’s no hospitals, no doctors or nurses and there’s no electricity, I don’t even know if there is running water for God’s sake.”

He used non-fiction texts daily to talk about text features and lure the students into the reading by choosing topics that were interesting to them. The students often had deep, critical, and meaningful questions and Al was not afraid to use the class time to discuss and delve deeply into these topics. For instance, in mid-August he had the students read a piece on snakes and fill out a WOW sheet (see Figure 5) as he emphasized non-fiction text features and practiced various reading strategies through discussion:

Al: Now, if you look at the WOW sheet it should look kind of familiar. We use this as a way of coding when we read a story. If this makes you think, “I wonder” what does that mean? What is the story making you think?

Destiny: I wonder what . . . I wonder what a dog will be?

Al: Ahh if you heard Destiny you would hear she’s asking a question . . . first of all what I like to do with interesting non-fiction, before I start the actual reading, I want everyone to take the actual snake story, look at the back of the first page, there’s only a few pages. I want to look at the parts of the story. Do you have your story in front of you? There’s a title, (points to Red on Yellow KILL a Fellow!). Obviously, there are pictures of snakes. There are parts of non-fiction. What do we call the words that go with the pictures? There’s a name for those words. One of the most important parts of non-fiction. They are called, CAAA-PPPTIONS. Look at this box, “You’re bitten . . .” What do you do? SO this is a good example. IF something is in a box, it’s.

S: It’s secret.

Al: It’s secret, or it’s important. If you see a box you want to look at that.

Al: What else are you noticing?

Cassie: (is sitting next to a student) There are little dots by certain readings.
Al: Hmmm, dots, captions, you might see certain boxes . . . So we've look through non-fiction, why do we want to do this? Sam?

Sam: Well, it gets us prepared.

Al: Ahh what a good word choice. It’s get us prepared. Sometimes you’ll see words under the title, I’ll call this my subheading. What’s the title of this story? It’s kind of a story.

Jose: Red on Yellow, Kill a Fellow.

Al: Ahhh, usually the smaller headline, what’ the baby headline? The smaller one. Jose?

Jose: Get snake smart before heading into the wild.

Al: Here’s another strange saying, Red on Back Venom Lack. Why these strange sayings? If while we’re reading, you think of a “WOW, I didn’t know that” or you think “Hmm,” or maybe you already know something. Well we are going to fill out the sheet.

Figure 5. Al’s referred to this as the WOW sheet, where the students were to fill out new information as they read a non-fiction article on snakes.

Al and the class continued the whole class discussion on this non-fiction text on snakes. He instructed students to look for new WOW information and reviewed non-fiction text features (e.g., captions, boxes, subheading) as students posed questions about how to determine if snakes
are venomous or poisonous, how to take care of a snakebite, and how people have snakes as pets. This excerpt ties back to how Al valued using discussion and inquiry-based conversations because of a past high school teacher’s inquiry-driven approach on real non-fiction topics that resonated with him. There were countless times Al pushed students’ thinking and researched various students’ questions during discussion. Non-fiction was Al’s preferred genre and Al’s student teacher, Aileen recognized this after her 8 weeks in the classroom. She said,

I think he does a great job using non-fiction, I have never seen a teacher use more non-fiction in the class than he has. I think that’s definitely important, especially incorporating the close reading . . . I think fourth grade is kind of a great time to learn it. They are starting to get more of all these complex texts and they are learning about not specifically just what they are saying, but specifically learning to read between the lines, and make inferences. So, definitely close reading is something that he has used, not even from that workshop but even before that he was using it.

**Guided reading.** Not only did Al value whole class discussion where he taught reading comprehension strategies, he also met in daily-guided reading groups to provide targeted reading instruction. The district was implementing Jan Richardson’s model (see Figure 6) for the guided reading lesson plan. They had a full day in-service on using her guided reading model the day before school started and they had three sessions with Dana where she modeled two guided reading sessions using Richardson’s model and the third lesson she observed the teacher leading a guided reading group.
Figure 6. Jan Richardson’s guided reading lesson plan that the teachers were mandated to use.

Al tried to meet with two-three guided reading groups a day, but usually he met with two groups within a literacy block. The groups were divided by reading level and he mainly used non-fiction texts. In the guided reading groups, he usually reviewed a reading strategy that he had practiced with the entire class with a text at their reading level. In this excerpt from October 16th, Al was working with his cadre of African American students that he was progress monitoring on making “I wonder” statements on a *Time for Kids* article on training dogs:
Alright, this I wonder sheet, we’ve been practicing questioning everyday. We’re only going to do two (crosses out the bottom question/answer).

S: We’re only doing two.

Al: Cross out the bottom. Do you know what I’m already seeing a good job of? What’s important when we’re reading a story? What do you see Javon doing? What do you see him doing that is so important?

S: He’s looking at the dog.

Al: He’s looking ahead. Has he started reading the story? No, but he he’s looking at the important parts of the story. What’s an important part of the story?

S: The name of the dog.

Al: Ahh, a caption, words that go with the story. What’s another important part of a story like this? What else do you see that is important?

S: The pictures.

Al: Ahh, the pictures. The pictures. What else do you see?

Kenny: The dude in that back tunnel thing.

Al: What about it?

Javon: Well, without the dogs they, the people who work, without the dogs, ahh, they wouldn’t be—

Al: These people wouldn’t be getting the help that they need. Right? What do you call this up here? That’s the, what part of the story?

S: Oh, it’s the subhead--

Al: Subhead or title, right. Kay, who can read the green for us cause that’s even more important on page 4?

S: That’s called the—

Al: The subhead, right there, the baby headlines. Who can read right there where it says, “A new school for dogs.” Markus why don’t you read that?

Markus: (reads) “A new school for dogs is training their animals to use their smell to save lives.”

Al: Kay, does that tell us more information that the big headlines?
S: Yes.

Al: It does, that’s why it’s so important to read that ahead of time. Reading a few parts before you start the story.

After discussing the text features (e.g., captions, pictures, subhead) the students read the rest of the text independently and then Al visited each student to read quietly to him and he also asked questions about the text. This is an excerpt of his conversation with Timmy about the text:

Al: Okay, stop there, see this word here ‘identify,’ so why are these dogs helpful? What can they do for you?

Timmy: They can find you if your trapped?

Al: What else?

Timmy: They can sniff out bombs.

Al: What else can they do?

Al tried to push the students thinking to delve deeper into the text by asking questions like “What else?” and “What else can they do?” He proceeded to ask Timmy more questions and he brought the whole group together and the group shared their “I wonder” statements. Al modeled this by saying, “I wonder how dogs smell peanuts and how this helps kids with allergies?” Markus said, “I wonder if a dog can smell cancer?” Kenny shared, “I wonder if Jake is fully trained or not?”

Al ended this session by reviewing why they were practicing asking questions. He told the class, “While you’re thinking, think about why is it important asking questions while we read? Why is that important?”

Kenny responded, “Because it helps us learn more and understand what we read.” Al stressed the importance of students being metacognitive about their reading and not only reading the text, but actively pairing their prior knowledge with new information they were gaining through the text and discussion.
**Writing workshop.** Al used the mandated curriculum, *Units of Study* to set up his writing workshop. He wrestled with using this curricula because he felt it was “long winded,” but each of his units was flagged with numerous post-its and marked up because he had read through the books numerous times. He was able to align the lessons to the needs of his class. He started each lesson with a mini-lesson, which often included some of his own writing. For example, on October 16th Al was doing a lesson from Calkin’s *Raising the Quality of Narrative Writing, Adding Scenes from the Past and Future*. Instead of using the writing example in the lesson, he shared a piece of his own writing when he went on a trip to see horses on an island near Virginia. The students were captivated by a few pictures of the horses he put on the smartboard and he provided some background information about his trip and the horses.

Al: They are just wild. But they are very sweet, their coats are very shiny. I was really surprised how light they look. Especially what I liked is their hair, what do that call that, their mane. Their mane and the tail. So, it’s like they’ve been brushed. (clicks on another picture). Long hair and very straight and shiny and pretty (clicking through the 3 three pictures). He also was looking for a bag to sniff through . . . Alright, eyes up here, ears open, just for a minute or two of paying attention because you need to know what I expect for the story . . . For today, I want you to look at what you’ve written and I want you to find a spot in your story to do something. And here’s what you’re going to do with that half sheet I’ve given you. So, I want you to add to your story, but in a certain way. I want you to find a spot, somewhere where you have already written, that you can add a few sentences of either past or future. Now, let me explain what I mean by that.

Al: Alright so here’s my story so far: “We were packing up our paddleball stuff and geez, my daughter Karen said . . .”

Al: Now dialogue, right, is that exactly what my daughter said, word for word? No, I don’t think so, but this is the best I can remember it. And remember when you write dialogue you can make it up.

Al: (reads) “We were all hoping to see the wild horses we heard so much about, but no luck . . . Hey check it out and sure enough here came one of them and one behind him. I felt such nervousness and hoped it wouldn’t get the best of me.” Meaning I wouldn’t run or yell or something like that, like you know some people do.
Al: Like that one woman did, he didn’t like that. But, fortunately he calmed down because she stopped swatting.

Al: (reads) “Honey, I think you want to get out of there . . . Fortunately . . . I remember what the guy had said, don’t move suddenly, don’t pet them or swat them . . . Before I knew it he was right at my side. He had his nose in my . . . ”

Al: Okay, so, what do I mean by future or past? So, this is what I’m going to put. I’m going to think up a few sentences that have to do with something. And again I’m going to make up this part of the story probably, something that may have happened before or in the future, I do remember I was thinking, do these horses like being wild or do they prefer to be—

S: On a farm?

The students were very engaged during this lesson and after reviewing and modeling the strategy of past and future in his own writing he wrote his new text on the board:

I thought about how these horses survived (PAST) that shipwreck. Will this guy run out of food soon? (FUTURE). I suddenly felt kind of sorry for him.

Al reviewed the expectations for the rest of writer’s workshop, students looked at their own stories to integrate this strategy into their own writing, while Al circulated to assist students. After independent writing, students had the opportunity to read their writing aloud.

Al tried to make writer’s workshop interesting and non-threatening as he modeled his own stories and writing instead of using the pre-made examples in the curricula. He faithfully read through the curricula, yet he was also able to recreate, interpret, and reconstruct it with meaning and attention to his students’ needs. He knew many of his students liked horses, so his story and pictures were an immediate attention grabber for them. He said, “I want you to find a spot, somewhere where you have already written, that you can add a few sentences of either past or future” which was the main objective of the lesson in Calkin’s Raising the Quality of Narrative Writing. Yet he reconstructed the lesson by appropriating the lesson to what would interest his students and by sharing his own examples of how he applied this strategy into his own writing. He also recreated and interpreted the lesson when he added the section on dialogue,
“Now dialogue, right, is that exactly what my daughter said, word for word? No, I don’t think so, but this is the best I can remember it. And remember when you write dialogue you can make it up.” Al was a journalist before entering into the teaching profession and teaching various components of writing was important to him. He had taught dialogue in the past to students and noted it had the power to make their writing come alive and added another dimension to it. In this excerpt he again stressed that they may not remember the exact words, but they could write it as best as they could remember it or they could even make it up. Mini-lessons based on his own writing that loosely followed the curricula and where he also reconstructed the lessons by adding in other elements of writing was common in writer’s workshop.

**Everyday literacy practices.** Al sought to bridge the divide of academic literacies and out of school everyday literacies (Hull & Schultz, 2002). Likewise, the students also participated in literacy as a meaning-making endeavor. Although Al used the curricula he was able to maneuver it so that students had flexibility with bringing in their own everyday knowledge, culture, and meaning-making strategies (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 2001). Al created space for the students to be a part of the decision making process for academic work.

Al also had a sociopolitical bent to his instruction. He wanted to make a difference and have an impact on their actions, not only their learning. For example, the students had participated in a reader’s theatre on Martin L. King on August 28th and afterwards they got into a heated discussion about the injustices and inequities African Americans faced in this time period. Students grew accustomed to engaging in debates and raising hot topics in class out of curiosity or because they didn’t understand why these things were going on in the world.

At the start of a persuasive writing unit, Al chose to model how to present both sides of the arguments on gun control. This topic originated from a student who initiated the conversation
on how Martin L. King got shot. So, Al echoed this topic by discussing both sides and perspectives, which then ensued into debate on gun control and eventually became the example for their position essays.

Insights into why he engaged students in debates emerged during interviews with Al. He explained why he showed the “The Lost Boys” clip,

Well, I think that our [teachers’] purpose is as much to inspire and motivate, as it is to inform. And especially in our situation being in a multicultural and diverse, as we are, I think that was really appropriate. And also to give them more of a world view. I mean they know so little about what happens outside of their space. To know that there are people who have never seen ice or a car.

When I asked Al the reasoning for showing the newspaper clipping of the teachers picketing for a fair contract he responded,

I think it’s very useful, but essential that we work current events into what we do here. I think that within reason, on a case by case basis, it’s important for fourth graders to open their minds to what’s happening and I like to be a devil’s advocate when possible to hear what they have to say and then take, you know, an alternative position, just to get them to think critically, for critical thinking purposes.

Many of Al’s instructional approaches and literacy practices stemmed from his own values, beliefs, and perspectives on social and political issues. Al’s sociopolitically constructed practice appeared open to contestation and change (Ivanic, 2004). Al was concerned with writing for real world audiences and for authentic and meaningful purposes to create social change. When Al shared “The Lost Boys” clip he hoped the students would change their perspectives and attitudes and through it apply it to their own lives. His purpose for discussing current events was to expose them to real happenings taking place in their community as well as in the larger society, and to elicit critical thinking on these topics where they could problematize what stance they would take.

Performance. Students engaged in several discussions about Martin L. King’s life, beliefs, and death. These discussions were layered with sad emotions and angry responses to why
he was killed. Al saw their engagement and investment in this topic and chose to have the
students act out a reader’s theatre on Martin L. King’s life. In addition because more than half of
Al’s class was African American or bi-racial, this topic was directly related to issues of racism
that many of them faced. Many of the students were lively and expressive in oral performances.
For instance, Javon informed Al, “I’m a good actor” and all throughout the year he would advise
Al on how he should fluctuate his voice with more emotion when he read aloud. Al knew that
Javon, as well as many other students in his classroom thrived and benefitted from performance
and storytelling. Throughout the reader’s theatre, Javon would shout, “That’s bogus!” when King
faced racism and discrimination. Javon played the role of adult Martin in the reader’s theatre;
when he read the “I Have a Dream” speech it brought shivers up my spine. He had such strong
oration and elocution that when he articulately said, “Free at last, free at last, God Great
Almighty, we’re free at last!” Al and the class clapped, cheered, and gave him a standing ovation.
Al made spaces in the day for all students to feel successful and pinpointed areas of strength that
were not strictly bound to data and test scores.

**Play with language.** During the *Daily Five*, students had flexibility with how they were
using their “write to self” time. Several students chose to continue working on their essays for
writing. However, some students chose to use this time to write comics, co-create books, and
compose new writing. All styles of writing and genres were valued in Al’s classroom and he
encouraged students to explore various genres. The essence of play in these writing activities
allowed creation of imaginary worlds and situations (Vygotsky, 1978) where they infused their
own meanings, voices, and intentions. Katie used her “write to self” time to create comics where
she paired images with texts in a sequential order (see Figure 7). Sam was creative and co-
constructed a comic book with his friends. They would add to the story and pictures together.
Instead of discounting their writing, Al encouraged them to work collaboratively and build onto each other’s ideas (see Figure 8). Additionally, during free choice time, Sam mimicked and created a common everyday credit card slip and had his friends sign it to symbolize a binding contract. He was appropriating his understanding of the common everyday practices in his world into the classroom setting. He was provided space to have these opportunities to play with language and creatively apply his understanding into his own context (see Figure 9).

*Figure 7. The cover page to Katie’s comic series on “Bananna Dood.”*
Figure 8. A group of students’ collaborative chapter book on superheroes.
Figure 9. Sam’s appropriation of a binding contract.
**Pop culture.** Even when students were practicing their reading strategies Al came up with the idea of using comics to read between the lines. He felt that comics were a medium that students enjoyed, exposed them to the newspaper, and used to fully infer the author’s intended meaning and purpose (see Figure 10). He found ways that connected to students’ interests and tried to connect to their social contexts. Al also provided flexibility for writing topics and students drew from their own lists when starting new topics. Students often wrote about superheroes, magical creatures, or popular television and movie characters. Al didn’t discount these topics, yet he encouraged students to embellish and add onto their stories because they were of interest to them. Dyson (1997) refers to this talk and writing about topic related to popular culture to the “children’s peer-governed or unofficial social world” and often they were not welcome in the “official teacher-governed one.” However, in Al’s classroom he welcomed students’ “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1977) on these various topics that they valued and brought into the official classroom culture.
Figure 10. Al created inference challenges out of comics to engage students as they practiced their reading strategies.

Summary

In all professions context matters, but especially in teaching. The more teachers recognize the particular contextual characteristics that make their classroom and school cultures unique and one of a kind, the more able they will be to teach their diverse students. The culture of the district, Frost Elementary, and Al’s classroom shaped students’ opportunities to learn. The demographics, socioeconomic status, and the immense pressure the school faced were all factors that contributed to the culture at Frost Elementary. There was also a dynamic interplay between Al’s personal and professional experiences, as well as the individual characteristics of his colleagues and students. Teachers, classrooms, and schools are small pieces of a larger system and this was
evident at Frost Elementary. The district faced pressure to meet AYP, which was in turn passed onto the principal and then onto the teachers, and eventually was filtered down to the students. Although teachers are often viewed as the problem and are in the crossfires of the larger political system, Al was able to negotiate the official and unofficial spaces during his literacy instruction in his context. His literacy block was filled with academic literacy practices because of the top-down pressures and mandates he faced, but he was also able to open up space for everyday literacy practices, the unofficial spaces where students had freedom and choice to explore and play with language (Dyson, 1997). Al’s classroom was rich in sociocultural differences and each student brought a varied perspective that was welcomed and valued by Al. However, in the larger system these individual and cultural factors were often ignored. In the next chapter, I will go into detail about the collaborative opportunities at Frost Elementary School.
Chapter 5

Searching for Collaboration

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)

Collaborative Opportunities at Frost

The term “collaboration” was tossed around often at Frost. When the grade level teachers referred to their sessions that met bi-monthly during their planning times with Michelle and the literacy team they labeled them “grade level collabs.” Teachers would throw the phrase to their students, “collaborate on your work,” when they would allow them to work in partners. However, this term looked different depending on the participants within the context at Frost. There were both the formal collaborative spaces and informal types of collaboration that Al appropriately labeled, “casual collaboration.” In this chapter, I describe the formal and informal professional development and collaborative opportunities that were available to the Frost teachers, I also analyze the tensions that surfaced due to the power dynamics and interplay between the various players involved. Then I take a deeper look at what forms of professional development and collaboration informed Al’s literacy instruction and filtered into the classroom.

Formal Collaborative Opportunities

The formal spaces for professional development and collaboration were district in-services where a speaker shared a specific skill or strategy related to literacy instruction, as well as faculty meetings, staff developments, and grade level collaboration sessions held at the school.
Frost professional development and in-service days. On the day before school started there was a district wide in-service for all teachers with Jan Richardson. Dana, the literacy coach, often reviewed the guided reading material from Jan Richardson throughout the year at staff development meetings. In October, Sunday Cummins came to present work on close reading. Al attended both of these in-services and referred to them throughout the year.

Jan Richardson. Jan Richardson and her consultants (http://www.janrichardsonguidedreading.com) came to the district to present various strategies for teaching guided reading groups. All of the teachers received a copy of The Next Step in Guided Reading: Focused Assessments and Targeted Lessons for Helping Every Student Become a Better Reader by Jan Richardson to develop their guided reading lessons. They held the initial district in-service for all grade level teachers and then throughout the year there were more sessions specifically for the primary teachers. In one of the August grade-level collaboration sessions Michelle commented,

Jan is coming tomorrow for first and second. We think they [the district] are targeting 1, 2, and 3 and they are hoping to frontload it, but we are not there yet, we need to make sure you get what you need. You need to make sure you are leading your groups with integrity, if you’re not doing it you need to see Paula.

Although the intermediate teachers did not attend any other workshops with Jan, they were still expected to follow Richardson’s guided reading template and use the various strategies and skills during guided reading groups. Dana also revisited Richardson’s model (see Figure 11) in several staff development meetings, and referred to it when she came into the classroom to model leading guided reading groups.
**Rubric for Fluent Guided Reading Lesson (Levels N+)

This rubric can be used for self-evaluation, observation, or coaching.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom Environment</th>
<th>Evident (✓)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Materials were organized and handy; table was free of clutter.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other students were working independently in reading, writing, or literacy activities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher was not interrupted by other students in the room.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Introduction** (Not more than 5 minutes):  
Teacher gave a short introduction or get statement. **Today you will read…**

- Students quickly previewed the book or portion of text being read that day.
- Teacher introduced new vocabulary (no more than 5 words).
- Teacher used the four steps to efficiently define the new words:  
  1) Teacher gave a definition.  
  2) Teacher connected the word to the students.
  3) Teacher related the word to the book.  
  4) Students talked to each other and related the word to personal experiences.
- Teacher modeled strategy (if necessary).

**Reading With Teacher Prompting** (At least 10 minutes):  
Students read silently unless teacher was working with them.

- Book was at the appropriate level (slightly challenging).
- Students took notes while they read (according to the strategy focus).
- Teacher may have listened to some students read orally, if appropriate.
- Teacher prompted individual students for vocabulary and/or comprehension.
- Teacher monitored individual students’ comprehension by reading written responses and asking questions.
- Students took anecdotal notes on students.

**Sharing and Discussion** (5 minutes):  
Students shared written responses while teacher facilitated the discussion.

- Discussion lifted students’ understanding of the text.
- New vocabulary defined in the text was discussed.
- Students added two words to their New Word Lists.

**Total Lesson Time: 20 minutes**

**Comments:**

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*Figure 11. Jan’s Richardson’s rubric for fluent guided reading lesson.*
The principal stressed that the teachers should implement Richardson’s lesson plan, meet with students in guided reading groups according to their reading level, and use her assessments and resources during the literacy block.

**Sunday Cummins.** Sunday Cummins ([http://sunday-cummins.com](http://sunday-cummins.com)) was a classroom teacher, literacy coach, and reading recovery teacher in the district before she attained her doctoral degree. She became a consultant after she wrote a book, *Close Reading of Informational Texts: Assessment-driven Instruction in Grades 3-8*, and the district invited her back to work with the intermediate teachers in the district. She came for two optional evening sessions and then came again in January for a 3-5 grade level in-service day. The first two meetings were with selected teachers who were interested in learning about close reading before the main professional development sessions. Al was especially looking forward to her return because he worked with Sunday in the past and referenced the impact she had on his teaching multiple times in interviews, as well as after using a strategy she taught him. During the first session in January, Sunday brought up the work she did with Al on non-fiction in the past to the larger group.

At the initial meeting Sunday emphasized the need for more non-fiction in the classroom as extended units of study, as well as the need to use close reading across the content areas in accordance with CCSS. Sunday provided a gradual release model during her sessions and because she would come to the district three times during the school year, as well as providing more sessions the following school year, she wanted to ensure the teachers got more than a one-shot workshop. She wanted to provide more continuity, build upon each session with the teachers, and problematize potential problems and questions that may have surfaced after they tried to teach close reading. Sunday hoped for the teachers to relate these ideas to their practice. She ended her session asking, “What are you thinking about close reading and your practice?” At the
closing, she offered these questions to ask their students regarding close reading: “What do you notice? What makes you think so? What’s in the text that makes you think that?” She also charged the teachers to think about, “What are the implications to your practice? What are the repertoire of skills needed for close reading of informational text?”

After the initial session, Al shared that he enjoyed the session saying, “you will be seeing a lot of this now when you come in.” He expanded “I’m all about using informational text and teaching the text features, but haven’t done it with the ultimate purpose of getting to the main idea.”

**Staff development meetings and faculty meetings.** Every other Monday after school there was either a staff development meeting or a faculty meeting. These meetings lasted approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes. I attended four staff development meetings and two faculty meetings. At staff development meetings teachers were presented a new topic, approach, or teaching tool. For example, the reading team shared how to use the AIMSweb online database. Dana presented additional support and resources for guided reading groups or they investigated CCSS on writing in small groups. In contrast, faculty meetings were more focused on in-school concerns and issues. For instance, at the two faculty meetings the teachers worked on group norms to develop the school culture and morale. At another meeting there was a district representative who came into speak about working with students with emotional and behavioral issues; another time the district maintenance supervisor came to address building ventilation concerns because several of the staff members got sick from the deteriorating air quality in the building.

Overall, the staff did not enjoy attending the staff development meetings or faculty meetings. At the November faculty meeting there was a definite tension in the air as they were
critiquing themselves and the school culture through the Adaptive Schools norms inventory categories. The main point of this activity was well intentioned, yet it was taking place at a time when the teachers were overwhelmed with improving AIMSweb scores, setting up RTI blocks, and facing top-down pressures. As they were asked to discuss their school culture, negative comments and frustrations surfaced, like “Are we really going to get these 25 minutes back again?” Another teacher made a comment that they all have so many things on their plate with AIMSweb data that sometimes these school-based issues got pushed to the side. Ironically, as they talked about how to improve the school culture and make it a more collaborative professional learning environment, teachers were very disgruntled and unhappy with being at this meeting and unwilling to participate and change. Lieberman and Miller (2004) note that in collaborative environments, teachers have opportunities to develop a sense of belonging, shift in identity, and growth in leadership. However, Frost’s school culture was not at this point because the teachers were seen as empty vessels that were being filled with information instead of colleagues who had much to contribute and offer to one another.

**Fourth grade collaborative sessions.** These sessions were the meetings that took place every other Monday during the teachers’ planning time. The grade level teachers, Dana, Paula, and Michelle were usually present. Sometimes the special education teacher would drop in for part of the meetings. The purpose of these meetings was for teachers to meet by grade level to discuss issues, events, and curricula with Michelle and Dana, as well as review and implement new goals for the grade level. These meetings were intended to be professional learning communities (PLCs) where teachers could come together to plan, discuss, and collaborate similar to DuFour and Eaker’s (1998) and Lieberman and Miller’s (2011) model of PLCs. Moreover, as they were labeled “grade level collabs” they were intended to be learning communities that
fostered “collaboration, honest talk, and a commitment to the growth and development of individual members and to the group as a whole” (Lieberman & Miller, 2011). However, these grade level collaboration meetings were often filled with top down decisions, influences, and pressures. Michelle created the agenda that was usually related to progress monitoring, testing, and the cadre of students (see Figure 12). Tensions were created because of Michelle’s frequent comments, “I’m very clear on holding you accountable, because I am being held accountable.” Instead of the teachers contributing to the topics of discussion, Michelle came with a ready-made agenda of what she wanted to share and discuss with the group. Often the goal of this collaboration meeting was to disseminate information, expectations, and responsibilities to the teachers. For instance, Michelle offered a challenge:

> Your cadre of kids, SPED or African American, how you personally will make sure these kids will be in the green and I want you to stay true to this, my expectation is that you will be successful. And it’s not just able being successful on the test, unfortunately that is the venue . . . but they just need to learn.

She transferred information and pressure that she was receiving from the district to the teachers.

In the first September grade level collab, Michelle raised the issue that students should be exposed to grade level texts even though they were not at instructional level during guided reading:

Kamara: I have kids that are reading at a level 12 or 14 [referring to 1st grade level DRA scores], I don’t see the importance of providing a grade level text . . . of course with my students at a 30 or 40 [3rd-4th grades DRA reading levels] that makes sense.

Michelle: So, work with Paula and get what you need on that. But keep in mind, on AIMSweb it’s on grade level.

Beth: And I will be affected poorly on that.

Michelle: I understand that, but they are assessed at grade level.

Kamara: Well, if they are increasing, even at grade level they should be improving.
Figure 12. An example of Michelle’s agenda, “Agenda for Literacy Collaborations” from October 28.

Michelle: But it’s important that they see grade level texts . . . this will be a reflection on you and me, and it’s important for them to see that they need to be up to speed.

AI: What about your guided reading group?
Dana: That’s when you use their instructional level.

AI: That’s what I thought.

Paula: But we just had a conversation that maybe use a higher level to boost them.

Kamara: But they are going to be exposed to grade level texts all day in science, social studies.

Michelle: But I think Paula has a good point, I want to see them challenged. They need to be uncomfortable, that they are having to work with this and until they are feeling a need to grow, they gotta stretch and get out of their comfort zone and I’m really concerned and we need to see some very strategically planned guided reading group, that Jan Richardson group.

In the session, Dana and AI both vocalized that the Richardson model calls for using books and readings at the students’ instructional reading level during guided reading so that they are able to fully comprehend text and practice a variety of reading strategies. Kamara even furthered this point and said students were exposed to plenty of grade level texts throughout the day in various content areas during whole group instruction. However, Michelle still expressed “they gotta stretch and get out of their comfort zone, and I’m really concerned and we need to see some very strategically planned guided reading group.” She thought the teachers should raise the bar for students and use grade level texts during guided reading because this is what they will be reading on the test. She consistently stated that the students will be exposed to grade level texts on “the test,” yet she did not follow the research and Richardson’s model that argues that students should be reading at targeted instructional level during their guided reading groups.

After the meeting, Al mentioned, “Do you sense any expertise in that meeting? . . . I just shake my head and can barely keep a straight face . . . it’s unfortunate because it’s a disservice to the students and families.” Often the teachers indicated that the top-down pressures paired with Michelle’s limited knowledge about curriculum put them in uncomfortable positions with little autonomy to make curricular decisions for their students.
**Dana’s sessions.** Michelle had made it a requirement for Dana to push into every classroom teacher’s room for three sessions. She modeled two guided reading sessions using Jan Richardson’s model and then observed the teacher leading a guided reading group with the same group of students. Once Dana pushed into all the grade level teachers’ classroom, the teachers had a debriefing session with Dana about how the process went, areas to improve on, and helpful tools.

In Dana’s first guided reading session with one of Al’s guided reading groups, she started with reviewing key vocabulary that would be in the reading. She had the vocabulary words written on strips of paper and had the students preview the words and make predictions. During this time Al was distracted by the rest of the class and was walking around instead of paying attention to the session. Later Al asked me what I thought about her modeling and he did not seem impressed by her effort to get the students to preview the words and her guided reading lesson. Dana returned a few days later to meet with the same group and she had them pick out main vocabulary words from the reading to tell a summary. Al seemed bothered because Dana used a strategy he already has been using from Sunday Cummins at the start of his teaching career. Later Al shared with me, “Amazing, you use vocabulary words to tell a summary. I have only been doing that for 12 years.” In the final session Dana observed Al’s guided reading instruction with the same group. She observed and told him that he did a good job and gave him another copy of the Jan Richardson guided reading template. She did not say much beyond “good job” and the 4th grade team never debriefed with her about their guided reading lessons, because they were never able to arrange a time that worked for all of their schedules.

Later Al realized that it was a formality for Dana to push into every classroom, so that she could observe and offer professional support to several teachers in the building who were not
implementing guided reading groups or in Michelle’s words, “were not leading them with integrity.” After Al realized that he was observed simply as a formality, he said in an interview:

At first, I bristled a little . . . I think at first I was a little sensitive to the fact that she felt that she had to observe and then teach a guided reading lesson in everyone’s room, even with someone such as myself who has done it for as long as I have, but I think that’s a mistake in approach because as teachers you’re really headed down the wrong road. If you’re feeling like what you should never be critiqued or observed and so I changed that immediately and I changed that to what could I learn from this and I think it’s important to have this attitude of what could I have done differently, you know even if I’ve done it and succeeded at that lesson X number of times for 14 years, that could have made it go different, go better. And, so I looked at it better, and there were things I picked up. Like for instance, she did things with vocabulary that I normally wouldn’t do. She looked at some vocabulary words and she just emphasized vocabulary specifically more than I would in a guided reading lesson, so I really tried to embrace that more, rather than be sensitive to it . . . Oh yeah, a lot of teachers wouldn’t, but we all need to look at ourselves.

Although at first Al struggled with Dana’s pushing in, he later came to realize he, too, could benefit from more professional development and support. He reflected on his initial response to Dana’s lessons and realized he was being closed-minded and judgmental.

**Informal Opportunities: “Casual Collaboration”**

In terms of meaningful professional development Al often shared that he appreciated time to talk with teachers, “Anything that affords teachers to talk amongst themselves, what they are doing in their classrooms, how things are going, a chance to talk to peers and colleagues, and anything involving a modeling, demonstration.” He tagged the term “casual collaboration” when discussing more informal opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. When discussing his fourth grade team he shared, “Like, I think we’re good at casual collaboration, probably ahead of most, like what’s working for you, what isn’t, where are you?” Al benefitted from these informal collaborative opportunities and information and ideas he gained from his colleagues often surfaced in the classroom.
“Redefined” literacy time. As described in the earlier chapter, Al was having a difficult time with the management of his literacy block. He was feeling overwhelmed with differentiating instruction, leading guided reading groups while providing meaningful learning for the rest of the class, and progress monitoring his cadre of students. He had been in conversation with Patty, a third grade teacher at Frost about setting up Daily Five, a management system that he had heard about at several conferences; Michelle had also mandated that every classroom should have Daily Five set up within the first two weeks of school. Although, he knew about Daily Five, it was challenging for him to figure out how to set up the structure in his classroom effectively. After Al’s email with the subject heading, “Guided Reading Fiasco” he sent me that was described earlier in chapter 4, Al faced a crossroad and knew something had to change during his literacy block. He reached out to Patty because he heard she had seamlessly set up Daily Five since the beginning of the school year in her classroom and the students had responded well to it. They engaged in a quick conversation about it in the hallway and she said she was more than willing to help him set up the stations, offer practical tips, and walk him through what the structure should look like. Al and Patty’s “casual collaboration” corroborates Borko’s (2004) description of the myriad of contexts for learning,

> For teachers, learning occurs in many different aspects of practice, including their classrooms, their school communities, and professional development courses or workshops. It can occur in a brief hallway conversation with a colleague, or after school when counseling a trouble child.” (p. 4)

A few days after their initial conversation Patty came into Al’s room after school to set up tumblebooks (a website through the public library that offers free audiobooks) for the listening station. She shared that instead of listening to books on tape or CD, students could listen to books through the local public library on the computer. She explained to him how to use it and that he could have the students write a response or they could simply listen to it. She left quickly
to head to the staff development meeting saying, “Another station set up!” Al and Patty continued to dialogue via email about setting up the structure and answering any of Al’s questions.

Throughout the next month Al’s literacy block was drastically altered. Instead of the students working on random haphazard worksheets to keep them occupied and busy, he gradually implemented read to self, read to someone, read to teacher, word work, and write to self. He also shared multiple times with me about how Patty was a key support to make this change happen, “Totally, if I had not talked to Patty I would not be doing what I’m doing with Daily Five.” In an interview he shared:

After talking to Patty in the beginning of this year it’s totally opened my eyes to what Daily Five could be, but I still have quite a ways to go, but at least I have a better idea of what the purpose of it is. This year I think, has been a big shift for me. If I had not talked to Patty I would not be doing what I’m doing with Daily Five, the synergy of Daily Five and guided reading. But, that’s what I mean talking with a colleague, those informal talks about how’s it going . . . what’s working, what isn’t, it’s enlightening.

He was open to new ideas, collaborating with colleagues, and implementing new programs into his instruction. After he was successfully able to set up Daily Five he made a comment to me,

I’ll tell ya Ms. Kang, that Miss Li [Patty], next time you see her tell her she has revolutionized my literacy time. Revolutionized might be a little strong, she has redefined . . . When I think of all the years I’ve banged my head on a wall trying to do it a harder way!

**Drop ins.** It was not uncommon for Al’s colleagues to drop in and hand him an activity or worksheet that they thought he would be interested in. He also did the same for his teammates if he thought that it would benefit them. He tried to be at similar points in his instruction as his colleagues, but at times it was difficult because of the lack of grade-level planning times. During
our first interview, Beth walked into Al’s classroom and he said, “Hi Beth, you need me for anything?” She replied, “No, just something I thought you could use too.”

Although, Al’s team rarely had time to discuss the daily happenings and plan together, they were supportive of each other. Even when Kamara was having a hard day, she dropped into Al’s room to talk about an incident with a student and Michelle and get advice from Al. Additionally, when Beth was having a challenging time with teaching a science unit, Beth and Al met after school to discuss the science kit; he discussed how he was going to teach the unit, and they bounced ideas back and forth. In an interview Al commented about his team,

Yeah, I’m not currently in a situation where I’m administering or coordinating collaboration, but at least for our team, our degree of casual/informal collaboration is very effective. But there are times where I would like to just sit down for 20 minutes and meet with these guys more than we do, and believe me I’m not a big meeting guy . . . but I would like to meet more . . . I also think it would be helpful to meet with the team below ours and above ours. And that’s important for expectation level and continuity.

Although Al would have preferred to have set times to collaborate with his team (which was the intention of the grade level collabs) and other colleagues these drop ins were more organic and authentic ways to insert collaborative conversations into the current climate of Frost.

Our own collaboration. After the weeks and months of observing in Al’s classroom and attending meetings with him we formed a mutual trust and respect for one another. I tried to distance myself from the data and to separate myself from the events, but Al had a natural and authentic manner of asking for my opinions and suggestions. Al saw my regular observations and interviews as opportunities for discussion and conversation about the current political climate in education, to exchange ideas and suggestions in areas he was having difficulty, and relating curricular choices he was facing in reading and writing. It was commonplace for Al to ask, “What do you think about this?” When he was asked what he gains from taking a student teacher he responded,
Well, I definitely think they are at the cutting edge of techniques, theories, and systems that being in the [university] classroom day to day, that classroom teachers may not know about and hear about. And a big reason I have student teachers is because I like to pick their brains on what they are learning and talking about and see how applicable that is and how practical that is.

He viewed taking a student teacher or allowing a researcher to come into his classroom as opportunities to grow in his own practice and refine his teaching. When I received consent from Al to conduct research in his room he had no hesitation and immediately responded that he would like to contribute to the educational landscape in whatever way he could.

After a month of school and upon receiving Al’s email about his struggles with guided reading we dialogued via email about how to set up *Daily 5* and how to provide more meaningful activities for the other students during guided reading groups. I had suggested that he ask Patty because I knew she had set up *Daily Five* effectively; Al had mentioned to me before that he valued the work she was doing in literacy and if possible he hoped to observe her. After each *Daily Five* session Al bounced ideas off of me and would often ask me to relay anything I noticed. Having another adult in the room was an opportunity for him to have an extra set of eyes to see things that he may have overlooked. After a few sessions of *Daily Five* he said to me, “I can’t get to Ms. Li’s [Patty’s] mountaintop quite yet, but I’m trying to pace myself.” He appreciated any dialogue and feedback that I could offer.

When Al faced areas of difficulty he posed questions to me. For example, he was struggling with his students peer conferencing and he said he knew Lucy Calkins encouraged it, but he didn’t know how to implement it effectively. We dialogued about the benefits and struggles with peer conferencing and he shared that his main concern was that the students tended to waste time and were not using their time well during peer conferencing. We talked about making the pockets of time shorter and doing “turn and talks” or a 5 to 10-minute session
versus giving them the entire literacy block. He agreed and said he was going to try that later in writing today. Later that day Al had the students read each other’s writing in partners and offer feedback in a shorter burst and he shared, “Destiny is still on the carpet working on her story when she is usually strutting around the class with attitude, but she is very focused and engaged now in her story.” He reflected that the peer conferencing may have contributed to her engagement; he expressed that he came to a realization that all students learn and process things differently and he needed to give them space for this.

Due to the in-depth nature of this study and the sheer amount of time I spent with Al we naturally developed a professional relationship and friendship. We formed our own community of practice with norms about conversation and dialogue that we established. We seamlessly had frank and honest discussions because I observed his teaching and attended all of his grade level and faculty meetings he didn’t have anything to hide or prove to me. Frequently when I arrived for an observation, Al greeted me with professional readings that he thought I would enjoy and editorials and newspaper clippings that were linked to our prior conversations (see Figure 13). Additionally, It was not uncommon to find these notes (see Figure 14) left for me when I arrived.
Figure 13a. Professional readings that Al would make copies for me that related to prior conversations we had.
Figure 13b. Professional readings that Al would make copies for me that related to prior conversations we had.
Figure 13c. Professional readings that Al would make copies for me that related to prior conversations we had.
Moreover because Al did not have anyone to have these discussions and conversations with about his classroom, our own collaboration became a place to turn to ask questions and have an ear to articulate what he was going through. For instance, after several weeks of implementing *Daily Five*, Al faced a roadblock where he shared that the students needed more accountability. He immediately came to me and asked how he could address this. He shared that they aren’t able to tell him what they did in the 15-minute cycles. We discussed having an accountability system for the students during *Daily Five*. After our conversation he created a log sheet to measure what they were working on during each block of time and setting up guidelines where they need to visit a different station each block (see Figure 15). Within the next several
days, Al had implemented some of these changes and was continuing to problematize the accountability piece.

Figure 15. Log sheet where students checked in the various stations they visited during Daily Five.

In essence, Al and I developed our own professional learning community (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lassonde & Israel, 2010; Lieberman & Miller, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). We shared fundamental core beliefs and values and there was dialogue where were we made meaning together—where our words and voices were being re-voiced or reconstructed (Bahktin, 1986; Tannen, 2007).

Summary

The formal collaborative opportunities mirrored those of the ever so popular “one-shot workshop” and embodied many top-down, sanctioned activities and decisions provided by the
district. On the surface there appeared to be numerous professional development and collaborative opportunities, but many of these did not play out because of the context, pressures from administration, and the lack of teacher input. The teachers in this study wrestled with these formal spaces because they were informed by their own unique classroom circumstances, individual frustrations, and professional knowledge that were not considered. The agenda and discussion in the grade level collabs were led and determined by Michelle so little collaboration actually took place. The teachers in this study longed to cultivate professional communities of practice, yet the formal collaborative spaces did not allow for these relationships to form.

However, it was in the informal collaborative opportunities that teachers found space where they valued each other’s classroom knowledge and expertise, shared ideas that were successful for them, and raised concerns and difficulties they were facing. As they continued to build on each other’s knowledge they further developed their relationships with each other. Slowly in the informal spaces, Al developed job-embedded, organic, and meaningful ways to build on his practice and teaching. The collaboration that came out of these informal spaces (e.g., Al’s conversations with Patty, drop ins, our own collaboration) became forms of professional development that filtered into Al’s literacy instruction. Through these informal spaces for collaboration Al became more reflective, as well as reflexive in his teaching and learning (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). He was able to problematize struggles and issues he was having with his management during his literacy block, bounce ideas off his colleagues, and wrestle with challenges in peer conferencing and Daily Five. All of these surfaced in his literacy instruction, whereas the formal professional development opportunities did not nearly have the same impact.
In the next chapter, I will expound on how Al was or was not able to exert agency over the literacy curricula. I explain how at times he was able to navigate the hefty mandates and negotiate the literacy curricula to meet the needs of his diverse student population.
Chapter 6
Following, Altering, and Negotiating the Script

Talk of what ‘successful’ children should know—the listing of grade-by-grade, even term-by-term, ‘standards’ to be met and test scores to be achieved—has drowned out talk of how children learn and, most relevant for this book, who they are, that is, their humanity. This humanity is realized in we-ness, so to speak, in children’s relationships with others. (Dyson, 2013, p. 5-6)

Teachers and students alike at Frost Elementary experienced daily the high-stakes pressures through the mandated use of scripted curricula, application of CCSS, and imperative of growth in progress monitoring their special “cadre.” In sum, teachers were stuck in a challenging space and for a novice teacher it would be nearly impossible to combat these pressures and not simply follow the script. Moreover, preservice and beginning teachers in urban, high-needs schools are faced with overwhelming pressures in this era of accountability (Stillman & Anderson, 2011). Yet, Al was able to maneuver his way through the hefty mandates, scripted curricula, and overwhelming assessments. With this in mind, Al still had to adhere to district policies and school requirements, but he was able to sift through the necessaries and the “negotiables.” While I do not argue that Al was without areas on which to improve, I do want to recognize that teachers often receive the blame for students’ lack of achievement or other problems that are beyond their control. I agree with Apple (2003) who argues, “education was not a neutral enterprise, that by the very nature of the institution, the educator was involved, whether he or she was conscious of it or not in a political act” (p. 1). Because Al had a wealth of teaching experience, received tenure, and knew the particulars and culture of the school and district he had more capital than other teachers; he exercised agency to combat some of the top-down pressures and mandates.
In this chapter, I dissect various ways Al worked with the “script” (Stillman & Anderson, 2011; Yoon, 2014). Scripted and prescribed curricula limit teachers’ flexibility and autonomy with delving deeper, encouraging creativity, and asking critical questions with the content. The current political climate emphasizes standardized, paced and prescribed teaching and learning in order for schools and classrooms to be regulated. Often embedded in these scripts are the norms and acceptable ways teachers and students participate in schooling (e.g., testing, mandated curriculum, curricular decisions). Currently teachers are viewed as distributors of someone else’s ready-made scripted answers rather than as constructors of knowledge (Yoon, 2014). There were times Al was bound to the script and had difficulty finding any wiggle room and then there were opportunities where Al could negotiate the script and work around certain parameters and mandates. First, I will describe how Al followed the assessment script and how both the teachers and students were evaluated.

**Following the Testing Script**

There were times in Al’s classroom when he strictly adhered to district policies. For example, when Al administered AIMSweb readings and progress monitored his cadre of students he followed the assessment script. First of all, he was unfamiliar with administering AIMSweb and in second, he felt the top-down pressures from Michelle and the district to improve his students’ scores.

**Progress monitoring.** On the Fridays he administered the AIMSweb assessment, R-CBMs (Reading, Curriculum Based Measurement), which assessed students’ reading fluency, there were rigid standards for students’ accuracy and speed. The students were strictly assessed on the number of words read per minute. The teachers were to administer R-CBMs and progress
monitor, assess student progress or performance, every week; at these times, Al’s literacy block looked quite different from that described in chapter 4. Al seemed a bit scattered on these days as he was compiling the individual readings for his cadre, organizing his assessment materials, and managing the rest of the class. The amount of seatwork often increased on these testing Fridays. Although the timed reading for each student was only one minute, in order for Al to have these assessment materials organized and prepared and to have activities and worksheets for the rest of the class it took him the bulk of the literacy block to administer the tests.

The nature of this assessment is based on accuracy, time, and speed. AIMSweb is a universal screener—meaning that it is norm-referenced in order to compare students across schools, districts, and states. Each week Al was to administer AIMSweb assessments for each student in his cadre and post the data onto the online system, so the literacy team and Michelle had access to see how these students were improving. These strict standards and mandates were impressed not only onto the teachers, but onto the students as well. They felt the pressure to improve their scores, which they internalized as reading faster. Unlike a running record, AIMSweb looked strictly at fluency, so it did not account for many other layers (i.e., decoding, comprehension) involved in the reading process.

When Al was asked about his thoughts on progress monitoring and data driven instruction he responded:

I think it has its place. I do believe we’re getting too far down that road in some respects and I am one to complain along with other teachers about teaching to the test for assessing, but I don’t have a better idea. So, I try to limit my complaints . . . I think teachers need to be held accountable, I think schools need to be held accountable, so I can see the purpose behind it, although I think it’s unfortunate. Now, if used in the right way, data collection and assessment I think is worthwhile, to guide instruction.
Because Al didn’t have a better alternative to progress monitoring he was compliant in administering AIMSweb. When asked if his instruction to his cadre of students was different he answered:

I wouldn’t say that my instruction is different; I just try to have more contact with that group of four than the others. And I don’t see any way around that at least until mid-year when they are tested. So in the meantime, I’m not happy about it, but I think I am going to have to work with them at the expense of others. You know, others will be left behind at least for the meantime.

**Top-down pressures.** Because of the amount of pressure that Michelle was receiving from the district, Al knew he could not bypass the system. Michelle frequently made comments like, “I’m transferring the heat,” or “I’m clear on holding you accountable, because I am being held accountable, so I’m bringing it down on you,” or “your cadre of kids, SPED or African-American, how you personally will make sure these kids will be in the green.” Not only because Frost had not met AYP for 3 years in a row, but also because Frost’s population was heavily African-American and low-income, teachers were receiving even more pressure from the district to increase their tests scores and progress monitor their African-American and Special Education students. The consent decree still remained a huge factor in the district, and the district’s solution to addressing the needs of African-American and low-income families was to use AIMSweb data. This was the only assessment that was used to progress monitor the special cadre of students. The use of this test data not only limited the definitions of literacy, it also disregarded cultural factors. Because all the students in Al’s cadre were African-American boys, it created a noticeable chasm and separation that was determined by race. This was not unique to Al’s classroom, but pervaded the school and district. Teachers were unable to hone in on particular cultural and individual factors when sweeping generalizations were already being assumed of the African American students. Moreover, the pervasive use of this data sheds light on the
hegemonic forces and power dynamics that were at play and demonstrates how certain racial
groups were being targeted (Noguera, 2008).

Although he did not necessarily agree with progress monitoring, singling out a cadre of
African-American or Special Education students, or monopolizing instructional time from the
rest of the class, Al knew that this was a non-negotiable issue and he did not have the autonomy,
nor power over these decisions. With the various hegemonic forces at play he did not have the
agency to veto or negotiate when it came to the testing script. Although Al jokingly said, “others
will be left behind,” this comment is in line with the authors of Many Children Left Behind: How
the No Child Left Behind Act is Damaging our Children and our Schools. Meier and Wood
(2004) write,

Overreliance on testing diverts attention and resources from more promising school
improvement strategies like smaller class size, creative curriculum reform, and
collaborative professional development. High stakes tests push struggling students out of
school, and encourage schools to adopt developmentally inappropriate practices for
younger children in an effort to “get the ready for the tests.” Overuse of testing can also
encourage cheating scandals and make schools and students vulnerable to inaccurate and,
at times, corrupt practices by commercial testing firms. (p. 58)

Altering the Script

As Al reviewed, planned, and prepared for literacy instruction, he was able to critically
look at the standards and prescribed curricula to best meet his students’ needs and interests.
Similar to Stillman and Anderson’s (2011) recommendation on using the prescribed curricula as
mediating tools rather than goals, and guides, not rules. Al was able to alter the curricula. He did
not feel bound to the curricula and overall he was able to appropriate the curricula based on his
students’ reading levels, prior and background knowledge, and interests. He also heavily
considered the “we-ness” between students’ relationships that Dyson (2013) referred to when planning instruction. When I asked about his literacy curricula, he said:

*Good Habits, Great Readers,* you know there are book sets for guided reading that go along with that, there are whole class anthologies and books that we’re using as well. I, of course supplement a ton with other book sets in the collections that I’ve gathered over the years. And I have to supplement . . . but I like to say that I like non-fiction more, not more but if I had to guess I probably use nonfiction more than a lot of teachers do, especially with the achievement, literacy gap that we are facing, where so many kids are without the experiences and the background knowledge that I think non-fiction can really help in that area. So I try to use non-fiction on a regular basis. For writing, *Units of Study* by Lucy Calkins, has been for years our mandated official writing program in the district. I would put any money that at least at the intermediate level vast majority of teachers in the district do not use *Units of Study*. They are on their own and do, I don’t know what they do, what they feel is appropriate when it comes to writing instruction . . . but I do Lucy Calkins as best as I can, as often as I can.

When asked about flexibility he shared, “I think we get a lot of flexibility in how we teach our literacy curriculum. They want us to be using *Good Habits and Units of Study*, but how we do that is—up to us.” Al was able to improvise the literacy curricula as he had agency to author his instruction in his figured world within the larger structure (Holland et al., 1998).

For instance, Al regularly used the picture books suggested by *Good Habits, Great Readers* for read alouds (i.e., *Boundless Grace, Mrs. Katz and Tush, The Old Woman who Named Things, The Bat Boy and his Violin*), yet he rarely looked at the teacher’s manual during the read aloud because he created his own discussion questions, practiced reading strategies that were appropriate for his students, and followed the students’ comments and interests during discussion. Al read, studied, and marked up the teacher’s manual and curricula thoroughly (see Figure 16).
Figure 16. Good Habits, Great Readers teacher’s manual that Al marked up and “studied.”

After practicing a reading strategy or skill during the read aloud, Al would continue to zero in and reiterate the same strategy or skill during guided reading groups.

Addressing the needs of his cadre. Interestingly, Al’s cadre of African-American boys was gifted and had strengths in oral storytelling and expression. Additionally, Al’s used conversational and performance style storytelling during literacy time so it had become part of the classroom culture. Bakhtin (1986) notes, “In literacy practices, children not only enter into locally valued ways of using written language but also of relating to, and being with, other through that medium” (quoted in Dyson, 2013, p. 22). This was true of Al’s literacy practices where literacy could not be reduced to a set of textual features and rules and solely based on
speed and accuracy. As Dyson (2013) writes, “Any official school activity is a situated enactment of a practice, that is, it’s a social happening, an event” (p. 22).

Al’s cadre were often the students that raised issues and brought up areas of interest with the class where they drew from their own diverse resources and experiences. When Timmy was curious about issues related to gun control, he was the student that raised it in class. This led Al to take a completely different route in his future lesson planning because Al felt the query was so authentic and engaging to the class. Markus frequently had the ability to make the class laugh and make connections to the reading to his own life. He was the student that was mentioned in a guided reading group lesson about using sarcasm in reference to Al’s ability to laugh at his own jokes. He had a way with words that most fourth graders often haven’t fully grasped. Javon was the student that would often tell Al that he needed to read with more emotion and would coach him on how to get into character when reading aloud. He also played adult Martin L. King in the reader’s theatre where the entire class, including Al and Cassie gave him a standing ovation for his elocution and expression. Kenny was one of the leaders of the co-writing during Daily Five and took pride in reading his writing aloud during author’s chair. Although these oral pieces were not credited in the assessment script, Al made room for them in his literacy instruction. He did not adhere to the narrow definitions of literacy that negated cultural factors, yet he was able to exert agency by allocating time and space and also showing that he valued their various ways to express and respond to literature.

**Negotiating the Script**

Al felt that Units of Study was a challenging curricula for teachers to use and this is why he also felt many teachers in the district chose to abandon it. He expressed:
Wow, especially the writing, and I someone with a writing background, I can’t imagine. This was, *Units of Study* was the single hardest curriculum in any subject area that I’ve seen come through this district in the fourteen years that I’ve been here. Uhm, I can only imagine . . . just from day one to be handed *Units of Study* and be told, “starting tomorrow this is your writing curriculum.” The presentation of it was not efficient, I don’t mean so much in rolling it out, but the materials are written in a way, I mean there are good elements to it, excellent elements, but in a very user-unfriendly way. It’s very text heavy, very dense . . . these long lessons, and you can help yourself (he brought the books to the table). These lessons are very burdensome to read, to understand, and to interpret for the classroom. There needs to be from day one an abridged, how to guide, something to help teachers sift through *this mess* . . . so it’s very hard to implement as it’s written, as it’s presented to us. You know, it’s just really a pain. Or a supplement, something on the side to get to the important parts in a quick easy way and I don’t think that exists.

Al was able to refer to the curricula as “a mess” and “a pain” and noted how challenging it was because he carefully read, examined, and studied it (see Figure 17) to the point his manuals were falling apart.

*Figure 17. Al’s *Launching the Writers Workshop* manual (from *Units of Study*) with his detailed and copious notes.*
In addition to Al’s highlighting and note taking, he also negotiated the curricula as he read through it, used it over the years, and came to understand what was helpful and appropriate for his students (see Figure 18). He did not simply digest the information as is, he thought through what worked for him and what would be meaningful for his students, which differed year to year. As he taught these lessons he tried to figure out what would be the best order and flow for the particular unit.

Figure 18. Al’s personal negotiation of the curricula.

When I asked him what helped him with Units of Study through the years he said, “I just think from doing it several times over, I’ve learned what works for me and what doesn’t and I think that’s the case with a lot of this curricula, teachers need to figure it out, but with this one in particular.”
**Teacher agency over the literacy curricula.** Al was able to exert agency to negotiate the literacy curricula and alter the curricula to the needs of his students. Again, Al had a sociopolitical bent to his instruction. He incorporated local news and controversial issues into his instruction and opened it up to discussion with his students. This was clear through numerous displays (e.g., “The Lost Boys” writing activity, discussion about the newspaper article about teachers working without a fair contract, gun control debate) in his literacy block. Al was very aware of the current events taking place and brought them into the classroom. Not only was he teaching students about the political state of schools at large and the overall system, he was also pointing them to resources related to current events to learn about what was going on in the community, state, and world. The gun control debate ensued after a discussion about John F. Kennedy and Martin L. King’s assassinations. The students were very intrigued by this topic, so Al decided to pursue this further as they started their *Breathing Life into Essays* (Calkins & Gillette, 2006) unit. Calkins and Gillette (2006) encourage teachers to start this unit with a comparison of the narratives they have written to larger essays they will investigate. They say:

> We write lots of things—songs and speeches and picture books and essays—we write in lots of ways. Today we are going to begin writing in a radically different way. Instead of writing stories, we will write essays. Instead of writing about small moments, we will write about big ideas. (p. 2)

They go on to say the teaching point is to “Tell the children the story of a writer who first observed, then pushed herself to develop insights, and then recorded those insights” (p. 2). However, instead of doing this Al altered, negotiated, and exerted agency over the curricula to appropriate this lesson to the interests and understanding of his students. He introduced the new unit and provided background information (see Figure 19) on gun control. Although he did not follow the script, he still adhered to the larger notion of “instead of writing about small moments,
we will write about big ideas.” He brought the lesson back to this central teaching point—that essays include writing about big ideas.

The next day he talked about both sides and perspectives of gun control and had the students break up into small groups to use sentences starters on the gun rights conversation (see Figure 20) to fully understand both sides. Then they came back as a class to discuss their thoughts on gun rights and if they changed their thinking after the small group discussion (see Figure 21). Calkins and Gillette (2006) offer their own mini-lessons, stories, and strategies, yet Al chose to build off of prior discussions to engage them in the new essay unit. As he negotiated the curricula he was able to provide authentic unscripted space for meaning making through joint activity and construction (Rogoff, 1990). These negotiations also corroborate Stillman and Anderson’s (2011) suggestion of “providing unscripted spaces where students can make meaning on their own terms and draw more openly on their full linguistic toolkits” (p. 29).

Figure 19. Background information on gun rights.
Figure 20. Sentence starters on the Gun Rights Conversation.

- "I think . . . ."
- "For example . . . ."
- "This is important because . . . ."
- "This gives me the idea that . . . ."
- "What surprises me is . . . ."
- "This makes me realize . . . ."
- "This connects with . . . ."
- "Many people think . . . ., but I think . . . ."
Figure 21. Discussion questions after the small group discussion.

Al was not just a product of the school culture, he was a responder to the situation and “critical appropriator” of the cultural artifacts that he and his colleagues and students produced (Holland et al., 1998). Al exerted agency through improvising the literacy curricula and creating spaces for the students’ interests (Pennington, Brock, & Oikonomidoy, 2012). Although this many not have been valued by the administration, through this process of improvisation he was forming and reforming himself through cultural materials and tools created in the immediate present and the more distant past. Al developed through his negotiation and changing participation in the sociocultural activities of his classroom.
Summary

In our high-stakes accountability driven times, it is clear that district, state, and national policies impact literacy instruction. Not only do teachers experience the accountability pressures, which causes them to follow the assessment script, they also often adopt reductionist notions of what literacy instruction looks like, or they engage in practice that opposes their professional values and beliefs about effective and meaningful literacy instruction. It is all the more challenging because these pressures and mandates are most impressed on teachers in tightly monitored “low-performing” schools where they serve historically marginalized populations. In essence, teachers get caught up in implementing mandated programs, rather than utilizing programs as a tool to facilitate learning. Moreover, in this era of standardization many teachers lack the autonomy to even make daily curricular decisions on ways to build upon students’ interests and to capitalize on students’ contexts and cultures to make learning more meaningful and appropriate.

In this study, the teachers faced extreme pressures, yet because Al had capital in terms of his teaching experience, tenure, and knowledge of the school and curricula; at times he was able to alter, negotiate, and exert agency over the curricula. Al exhibited his own agency over some of the mandates he faced and tried to combat many top-down decisions based on his past professional experiences, wealth of teaching experience, and past and present professional development opportunities and collaboration. Al developed agency overtime as he negotiated his identities and voices that developed through personal and professional interactions with others. Al and his colleagues experienced the interplay of human agency and numerous structural constraints, where they had to negotiate through the larger school and district mandates and political landscape as they planned, taught, and assessed (Levinson and Holland, 1996).
agency in this study was mediated by the interactions among the teachers and students, curricula, and structures of the school/context. When viewing teacher agency as part of a complicated system, we see how it shapes and is shaped by the structural and cultural features of society, school, and classroom cultures.
Chapter 7

Summary and Implications

Teachers imaginative enough to be present to the heterogeneity of social life and to what has been called the “heteroglossia,” or the multiple discourses, of the everyday may also have strong impulses to open pathways towards better ways of life . . . Once granted the ability to reflect upon their practice within a complex context, teachers can be expected to make their choices out of their own situations and to open themselves to descriptions of the whole. (Greene, 1994, p. 12)

I conclude as I began, focusing on the work of teachers within their specific and particular contexts and complex cultures. Because of standardization, hefty mandates, and pressures of meeting AYP teachers are often told what to teach, how to teach, and what to assess, which narrows the agency and expertise of teachers. I chose to conduct a case study to narrow in on the particulars, nuances, and specifics of the events at Frost Elementary School surrounding the notion of collaboration. Through this case study, I attempted to tell stories of teachers being bound to strict and hefty mandates, as well as opportunities where teachers were able to navigate and veer from the script.

In this chapter, I review the major findings of this study and provide implications for practice and ideas for further research. Although this is a case study of a particular school and teachers, the literature supports the vital role of teachers within the everyday pressures and larger political backdrop that teachers are facing today (Cohen & Barnes, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2010, Ravitch, 2013; Yoon, 2013). I use my theoretical framework to investigate the three themes that guided this study: identity, agency, and collaboration. Then I relate how this study connects to the literature at large, as I discuss possible ways to recreate the perception of teachers, rethink collaborative spaces, and reconceptualize the role of the researcher. Last, I conclude with how this study has influenced my future research.
Summary of Findings

The narrative of the teachers and students is the one I would like to tell. Yet, it can be tricky and a challenge to interpret others’ perspectives with the possibility of misrepresenting them. I have used the case study approach for a group of teachers to highlight their perspectives, lived experiences, and meaning making (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Emerson et al., 1995). I intended to provide a careful examination and interpretation, grounded in data with integrity to the participants’ perspectives of how the teachers made meaning (Emerson et al., 1995; Geertz, 1973). Thus, I present my findings using the three main themes that guided the research questions: identity as a social construction, agency as a dialogic practice, and collaboration as a social practice.

Identity as a social construction. Drawing from a socio-cultural perspective where identity is viewed as a fluid, socially, and linguistically mediated construct, I consider the different positions that individuals enact or perform in particular settings within a given set of social, economic, and historical relations (Gee, 2000; Holland et al., 1998). The identities of both teachers and students are socially constructed. Yet, adults can have more histories and experiences connected to their identities because they have a longer span of time to draw from. These histories, stories, and experiences in and out of school contribute and complicate a teacher’s identity in and out of the classroom. As teachers come to school they bring their ideologies, values, and beliefs and these undergird their identities.

As Al reviewed the writing curricula and planned for the next writing unit his past experience of working as a journalist contributed to his lens of interpretation and negotiation of the curricula. He often raised the lack of instruction on grammar and conventions. He did not want to focus on conventions, but at the same time he also saw the importance of following the
rules of writing. When he shared his own writing with the students he considered the writing process and his audience and attributed his interests in these issues to his own writing background. Also, in Al’s earlier years of teaching, he worked with Sunday Cummins and several university teacher collaborators who came into his classroom to model instruction to offer more embedded professional development. He regularly referred to the mark they left on his perspective of balanced literacy instruction as a whole, leading guided reading groups using non-fiction texts, and setting up writer’s workshop. Whenever he used some of the strategies or lesson ideas from them he was compelled to tell me about it.

Identities are not static, yet they are constantly evolving, changing, and growing. Al continued to evolve and grow in his practice and identity as he engaged in conversations with colleagues, participated in professional development opportunities, and dialogued with students. Al conversed with Patty about his literacy management system and after adding *Daily Five* to his literacy block he felt that it redefined his instruction. He did not see himself as a master teacher where he had little room to grow and change his practice. He was open to new ideas and moving towards better instruction for his students. He reflected on his initial negative response when working with Dana, the literacy coach, and he quickly realized that he did not have room to grow and to better his practice. Even in our own conversations he knew the importance of peer response and conferencing, but he did not know how to implement these strategies. After discussing them, he tried out having the students meet in partners to review their writing with one another. Afterwards he felt that it was extremely beneficial for certain students. He realized that even though he may not have enjoyed the peer conferencing process it was beneficial for others.
Although Al had opportunities to reconstruct and reconfigure his identity, he had the capital to do so because he worked at Frost for over 10 years and had more power as a white male in a building that was predominantly populated with women. In the larger structure, there are forces that dictate an individual’s options to navigate through the system. He expanded his identities as he participated in new figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998) and he was able to “create new ways of being” (Bakhtin, 1986). As teachers participate in these figured worlds they form, reform, and expand their identities, which may or may not be valued in the larger power structure where teachers then confront issues of agency.

**Agency as a dialogic practice.** This research portrays the ways elementary teachers develop agency over time through dialogue, conversations, and working with colleagues. If identity is viewed as generative and creative within economic and social structures, then the overarching use of “agency” is the “strategic making and remaking of selves” within structures of power (Moje & Lewis, 2007). I return to the idea that agency does not stem from an internal state of mind, but rather is a way of positioning oneself—to allow for new ways of being and new formations of identities. Al’s identities were shaped by, as well as he shaped the social and cultural contexts he was involved in.

As I recognize agency must be viewed within the larger power structure, I highlight agency as a dialogic practice, where teaching involves a back and forth negotiation of identities and voices that develop over time through interactions with oneself and others (Britzman, 1991; Moje, & Lewis, 2007). Britzman (1991) advocates for a dialogic image of teaching situated in relationship to one’s biography, present circumstances, deep commitments, affective investments, social context, and conflicting discourses about what it means to learn to become a teacher. She (1991) states,
With this dialogic understanding, teaching can be reconceptualized as a struggle for voice and discursive practices amid a cacophony of past and present voices, lived experiences, and available practices. The tensions among what has preceded, what is confronted, and what one desires shape the contradictory realities of learning to teach. Learning to teach is a social process of negotiation rather than an individual problem of behavior. (p. 8)

Bakhtin’s (1986) theory of dialogism posits that utterances are “link(s) in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances” (p. 69), yet “all our utterances are filled with others’ words, varying degrees of ‘our-own-ness’” (p. 89). In a sense, utterances are not duplicates, yet they can be reworked and refined from both reflections of the past and projections of the future, which form new meanings and understandings. Hence these webs of meaning are intricately constructed through social means, grounded in interaction as individuals appropriate and re-appropriate cultural practices. Al was aware and attuned to the ways that his decisions and moves in teaching resided in a larger macrostructure where at times he was able to act on his own values and beliefs or at other times they dictated his options on how to navigate the system. However, over time he was able to negotiate and mitigate his way more fluidly.

**Collaboration as a social practice.** Similar to classroom communities, teachers develop their own shared practices and experiences with one another in teacher communities (Wenger, 1998). However, in the Frost grade level collaboration meetings the teachers were often silenced and unable to have authentic conversations and assert authority. Just as learning is inherently social and children learn with and through others (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky; 1978), teachers too gain from these opportunities to grow professionally with one another (Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Wenger, 1998). Al craved opportunities and simply time to discuss with his colleagues what they were teaching, ways they problematized similar issues, and how to best meet the needs of his students. Al created his own opportunity to collaborate with Patty on making shifts in his literacy block, which initially took place as a passing conversation
in the hallway. Instead of having PLCs where dialogue and conversation were the focal points, the teachers were required to participate in collaboration meetings where they were impressed with top-down demands and sifted information on assessment and progress monitoring.

Implications

Recreating the perception of teachers. I redirect us to the initial vignette about the conversation of “bad teachers” and how teachers tend to be the easiest to blame and quickest fix to a complex problem. Although scholars agree (Cohen & Barnes, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2013) that high quality teachers can be the agents of change in educational reform and student improvement, one of the challenges is that teachers are not given the opportunity nor space to enact what they believe to be best for their students because they are often treated like second class citizens that have been stripped of any autonomy and freedom in the classroom. Teachers are professionals and should be treated like professionals. Ravitch (2013) notes, “The education profession must become more professional, not less so. In a professional environment, professionals have the autonomy to do their work and are not expected to follow scripted programs or orders written by nonprofessionals” (p. 276).

Instead of administrators and teachers opposing one another, it would be a more productive and meaningful time if they were working toward the same goal. This is not to say that teachers do not need accountability, yet there is a delicate fine balance between accountability and of trust that is necessary. However, when school cultures do not value the work teachers do they tend to go back to the notion of “eggcrate schools” (Lortie, 1975), and teachers shut their doors and teach what and how they feel is best for their students in secret. In this study, the focal teacher exerted agency in this way, where he closed the door and
appropriated the curricula to the needs and interests of his students. Moreover, this points to the poignant and pivotal role an administrator can have on a school’s culture. Administrators that have a mutual respect for teachers can create drastic shifts in schools’ collaborative cultures. If school cultures were more collaborative, where administrators supported their teachers and treated them like professionals instead of second guessing them, they are likely to have much more cohesive and seamless professional development.

**Rethinking forms of collaborative spaces.** This study emphasizes the need for professional development that is dynamic, built on trust, and centered on contextual understanding. When there is mutual trust established between the administration and the teachers, teachers are offered time and flexibility to collaborate with their colleagues. Agentive teachers with a critical lens long to have opportunities to investigate a new area of inquiry or start a teachers’ study group in a particular area, yet often they aren’t given the time or space to have these productive conversations and engage in dialogue with their colleagues.

The forms of professional development visible in Al’s instruction were the learning experiences where he worked with professionals and colleagues grounded in the classroom context. Research supports professional development that offers collaboration that is interwoven throughout the school day and recognized as an integral component of teacher development (Borko, 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Parise & Spillane, 2010), yet it is still common for decontextualized one-shot workshops with information being disseminated are still prevalent in contrast to what we know are best practices—teachers actively being involved in the process of creating and constructing knowledge. I cannot agree more with Greene’s (1994) words, that if we allow teachers to release their imagination, “Once granted the ability to reflect upon their practice within a complex context, teachers can be expected to make their choices out of their
own situations and to open themselves to descriptions of the whole” (p. 12). It is a complicated process of knowing how much freedom, choice, and autonomy teachers need, and this can be challenging for the administration to consider. However, when teachers are viewed as professionals who have valuable teaching experience, offer insight that only comes from working with their students day in and day out, and understand how to tailor curricula to the needs of their students, then teachers’ input and knowledge become essential components of developing meaningful professional development. School cultures that value teachers’ perspectives and expertise create collaborative cultures where teachers are continually learning to teach (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Hadar & Brody, 2010; Lieberman & Miller, 2008).

Reconceptualizing the role of the researcher. The more time I spent in Al’s classroom and school, the more my role and responsibility of the researcher seemed to change. At first I was apprehensive about getting too involved in the study, I wanted to stay a distant observer and remove myself from the data. However, as the study continued, the main participant sought out my advice from my past experiences, as well as asked for feedback as I was another set of eyes and hands in the classroom. Al also sought out a space to have meaningful collaborative conversations and discussions that were not available in his school because of the regimented nature of the grade level collaboration sessions and the tight structure of the day. He saw our conversations as a time to capitalize on having a like-minded educator in his classroom and to grow in his instruction. As a researcher, I saw it as my responsibility to engage in the productive, inquiry-based conversations that pushed his teaching, as well as to offer other insights that he may not have considered. It’s always a challenge to locate participant(s) for a research project, but perhaps if there were more ways researchers could contribute and give back to the their participant(s), they would see the advantages and benefits it could offer as well.
**Directions for Future Research**

This dissertation study focused on the work teachers do against the political backdrop and hefty mandates they are faced with. Although, the educational landscape is filled with standardization and rhetoric like “we must meet AYP” and “progress monitor kids to bump them from yellow to green,” this is also a time, more than ever, where students are coming from linguistic and culturally diverse backgrounds and teachers are the individuals that spend the bulk of time with them. A few directions for my future research revolve around this idea of working with students from various cultural communities, which is often ignored from the perspective of high stakes testing, NCLB, and Race to the Top.

**Pre-service teacher training and coursework on cultural diversity.** As I spent time in Al’s classroom, I noticed he viewed having a student teacher in his classroom as a way he could contribute to the educational landscape. He also viewed this as an opportunity for him to grow and learn from a student that was involved in a rigorous education program in her final year at the university. She often raised issues that she learned in her coursework related to working with students with diverse language backgrounds, varied socio-economic status, and students from diverse races and ethnicities. There have been numerous pivotal studies (Delpit, 2006; Dyson, 1989; Moll & Gonzales, 1994) that hone in on the various communicative practices of cultural communities. Often the language ideologies of school marginalize the practices of minority communities. Especially in this era of standardization where students are expected to speak, write, and read the same standardized information there is often a disconnect between curricula, instruction, and children’s diverse language backgrounds. In a time where teachers’ input and knowledge is discredited, I am interested in how pre-service teachers make sense of the
standardized knowledge that they will be mandated to teach while problematizing the language variation and cultural backgrounds that are represented in diverse classrooms today. I would also be interested in following a pre-service teacher into his/her coursework, especially those focused on language and cultural diversity. I would be interested in following the student teacher into his/her placement to see how he/she is able to negotiate and practice this content in the placement.

**In-service teachers’ understanding of students’ cultural background and literacy practices.** Veteran and experienced teachers that have been in the field for over 20-25 years have a wealth of knowledge to offer to the students and schools. However, within this span of time the population of students has drastically changed. I would like to problematize how teachers are able to work with communities that have culturally and linguistically diverse populations. I would be interested in understanding the perspective of in-service teachers and the forms of in-services and professional development they have in working with diverse populations. Teachers’ practice continues to change and evolve as the student population changes, as well as we are entering, or rather we have entered into a digital era where students come in with technology skills and knowledge that may surpass that of the teachers. I would like to highlight the funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez’s, 2001) students bring into the classroom and how teachers’ literacy practices support and capitalize on students’ cultural backgrounds, language variations, as well as cultural tools.

**Digital tools in the 21st century.** As I collected data at Frost Elementary, the implementation of more digital tools and resources became prevalent because of a few teachers that had a strong interest in this topic. Slowly the teachers were adding various programs and initiatives (e.g., Google Docs, coding, digital storytelling) into their literacy program. Students
were engaged in this process starting in Kindergarten and it was changing the perspective and face of literacy instruction at all levels. I am interested in how these digital tools and resources contribute to urban classrooms where many students do not have access to these resources at home. Also, how teachers meaningfully implement digital tools in 21st century learning to be not only users of technology, but producers is of interest. These future research endeavors build on my broader research interests of investigating teachers’ practice, teacher education and development, and children’s literacy practices amongst the larger backdrop of culturally diverse communities.

Conclusion

Disneyworld is the theme park of all theme parks and what sets it apart from all the other parks is each attraction tells a story. The story unravels as you participate in the ride and engage in the attraction, which allows the participant to have a full understanding of the narrative of the attraction. In the same way, this dissertation was an attempt to take the reader on a ride of a narrative of a teacher, his colleagues, and students. This particular story is full of complexities particular to the teachers and students at Frost Elementary School.

I do see myself as a teacher advocate and believe in the work that they do, but this is not to say there aren’t “bad teachers” in the public school system today. However, I believe scripted mandated curricula, top-down pressures, and the overwhelming number of assessments contributes to the lack of teacher autonomy and agency. It is not only the teacher that is a part of the issue at hand, yet the larger system that in which the teacher plays a small role. In sum, if teachers, principals, and district administrators are collectively able to be a part of a larger conversation it would lead to a more constructive and meaningful reform movement. In the same
way I believe if children are given the space to construct and create meaning, teachers too if
given more opportunities have the potential to construct and transform curricula, dialogue in
inquiry based conversations, and initiate and create change in the students they teach.
References


Appendix A

Transcript Conventions

Transcript conventions include the following (Adapted from Dyson, 2013, p. 182):

- Parentheses enclosing text contain notes, usually about contextual and nonverbal information [e.g., “(start writing on the board, whispering)’”].
- Brackets indicate that speakers are talking at the same time [ ]
- Two dashes indicate that the speaker has paused and is waiting for a response (--).
- A capitalized word or phrase indicates increased VOLUME.
- An italicized word is stressed.
- Colons inserted into a word indicate that the preceding sound was elongated (e.g., “Ri::ght!”).
- Ellipsis points ( . . . ) indicate omitted data.
- Conventional punctuation marks are used to mark ends of utterances or sentences, usually indicated by slight pauses on the audiotape.
Appendix B

Consent Forms

Focal Teacher Consent

Date

Dear Teacher’s Name,
You are invited to participate in a research project that focuses on understanding teachers’ experiences with professional development opportunities and collaborative meetings. My name is Grace Kang and I am a doctoral student studying literacy and language in the College of Education at the University of Illinois. This semester, I am beginning to work on my dissertation and the focal point of this inquiry is to understand teachers’ perspectives on literacy in the current political backdrop, as they come together in various forms of collaboration, negotiate their own identities, and then how this filters into the classroom. My study is being conducted under the direction of my advisor, Dr. Sarah McCarthey.

With your permission, I would like to interview you and observe your collaborative meetings for this project. I am interested in learning about your experiences with professional development and various forms of collaboration and how it informs your literacy instruction. I will prepare questions, but you are free to skip any that you prefer not to answer. The interviews will last anywhere from 30-60 minutes and can take place at a location of your choice. I will audiotape the interviews and transcribe them once they are completed. Audiotaping during the interviews is an important component of my project to help me when writing. You can turn the audiotape off at any time during the interview. I may also ask you to bring professional development and curriculum materials to help elicit conversation.

I would like to observe your classroom during literacy instruction, as I am interested in gaining an understanding of how your collaborative sessions and professional development inform your specific context. If you agree to me observing, I would like to visit your classroom two-three times a week over the course of five months during literacy instruction (about 60-90 minutes per visit). My observations will not interrupt your daily classroom instruction. I will take notes and audio record my observations.

This project will become part of my dissertation and also may become part of a journal article or a conference presentation. In any publication or presentation, pseudonyms will be substituted for any identifying information.

Your participation in the project is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. Your choice on whether you participate will not impact your job or status at school. Responses to this request will not affect your relationship with the University of Illinois. The benefit to your participation in this project is that you are helping me understand teachers’ experiences in professional development and collaborative sessions, as well as representing teachers’ positions, values, and beliefs in our educational landscape.
Please sign and return one copy if you consent to allow me to conduct interviews with you and/or observe in your classroom. The second copy is for your records. If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me either by email, or telephone. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Sarah McCarthey, at (217) 244-1149.

Sincerely,
Grace Kang             Sarah McCarthey  
Doctoral Student       Professor          
(847) 858-6034         (217) 244-1149    
gracekang77@gmail.com  mccarthe@illinois.edu

I, ____________________________ have read and understand the above information and voluntarily agree to participate in the research project. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

I agree to participate in interviews   (circle one)   Yes    No
I agree to audio-recording during interviews (circle one)   Yes    No
I agree to participate in observations   (circle one)   Yes    No
I agree to audio-recording during observations (circle one)   Yes    No

__________________________________
(Print) Your name

__________________________________ (Your signature)

______________________________ (Date)

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls will be accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.
Teacher Consent

Date

Dear Teacher’s Name,  
You are invited to participate in a research project that focuses on understanding teachers’ experiences with professional development opportunities and collaborative meetings. My name is Grace Kang and I am a doctoral student studying literacy and language in the College of Education at the University of Illinois. This semester, I am beginning to work on my dissertation and the focal point of this inquiry is to understand teachers’ perspectives on literacy in the current political backdrop, as they come together in various forms of collaboration, negotiate their own identities, and then how this filters into the classroom. My study is being conducted under the direction of my advisor, Dr. Sarah McCarthey.

With your permission, I would like to interview you and observe your collaborative meetings for this project. I am interested in learning about your experiences with professional development and various forms of collaboration and how it informs your literacy instruction. I will prepare questions, but you are free to skip any that you prefer not to answer. The interviews will last anywhere from 30-60 minutes and can take place at a location of your choice. I will audiotape the interviews and transcribe them once they are completed. Audiotaping during the interviews is an important component of my project to help me when writing. You can turn the audiotape off at any time during the interview. I may also ask you to bring professional development materials to help elicit conversation.

This project will become part of my dissertation and also may become part of a journal article or a conference presentation. In any publication or presentation, pseudonyms will be substituted for any identifying information.

Your participation in the project is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. Your choice on whether you participate will not impact your job or status at school. Responses to this request will not affect your relationship with the University of Illinois. The benefit to your participation in this project is that you are helping me understand teachers’ experiences in professional development and collaborative sessions, as well as representing teachers’ positions, values, and beliefs in our educational landscape.

Please sign and return one copy if you consent to allow me to conduct interviews with you and/or observe in your classroom. The second copy is for your records. If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me either by email, or telephone. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Sarah McCarthey, at (217) 244-1149.

Sincerely,
Grace Kang Sarah McCarthey
Doctoral Student Professor
(847) 858-6034 (217) 244-1149
gracekang77@gmail.com mccarthe@illinois.edu
I, ____________________________ have read and understand the above information and voluntarily agree to participate in the research project. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

I agree to participate in interviews (circle one)   Yes   No

I agree to audio-recording during interviews (circle one)   Yes   No

_________________________________  
(Print) Your name

______________________________  (Your signature)

__________________________  (Date)

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls will be accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.
Administrator Consent

Date

Dear Administrator,
You are invited to participate in a research project that focuses on understanding teachers’ experiences with professional development opportunities and collaborative meetings. My name is Grace Kang and I am a doctoral student studying literacy and language in the College of Education at the University of Illinois. This semester, I am beginning to work on my dissertation and I am interested in learning more about how teachers’ professional development and collaborative sessions inform their literacy instruction. My study is being conducted under the direction of my advisor, Dr. Sarah McCarthey.

With your permission, I would like to attend any schoolwide professional development workshops or school improvement days related to literacy for my project and if possible interview you. I am interested in learning about how teachers’ own learning and professional development endeavors inform their classroom instruction. I will audiotape the sessions, which is an important component of my project to help me when writing. I can turn the audiotape off at any time if there are confidential matters being discussed.

This project will become part of my dissertation and also may become part of a journal article or a conference presentation. In any publication or presentation, pseudonyms will be substituted for any identifying information.

Your participation in the project is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. Your choice on whether you participate will not impact your job or status at school. Responses to this request will not affect your relationship with the University of Illinois. For this project, we do not anticipate any risk greater than normal life. Please sign and return one copy if you consent to allow me to conduct interviews with you. The second copy is for your records. If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me either by email, or telephone. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Sarah McCarthey, at (217) 244-1149.

Sincerely,
Grace Kang    Sarah McCarthey
Doctoral Student    Professor
(847) 858-6034    (217) 244-1149
grackang77@gmail.com    mccarthe@illinois.edu
I, ____________________________ have read and understand the above information and voluntarily agree to participate in the research project. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

I agree to participate in interviews (circle one)   Yes    No

I agree to audio-recording during interviews (circle one)   Yes    No

______________________________ (Your signature)
______________________________ (Date)

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls will be accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.
Parent/Guardian Consent

Date

Dear Parents/Guardians:
My name is Grace Kang and I am a doctoral student studying literacy and language in the College of Education at the University of Illinois. This semester, I am beginning to work on my dissertation and I am interested in learning more about how teachers’ professional development informs their literacy instruction. I will be observing your child’s classroom during the fall semester. My study is being done under the direction of my advisor, Dr. Sarah McCarty.

I will observe your child’s class during reading and writing a few times a week over the course of a few months. I will take notes and audiotape during the observations, but no names will be used in the notes and I will not interrupt what your child, or classmates may be doing. To understand the teacher’s decision-making, I may also look at and copy samples of student work. I will remove student names on work samples to protect each child’s identity. I do not anticipate any risk greater than normal life since your child is just doing his/her daily activities.

The information collected from these observations will not contain any names and will be seen only by the researcher. The project results could be used in an academic report, in an article, or presentation at a conference. In order to protect your child’s identity, the real names of participants and schools will not be used in reporting the information. One benefit of this project is that I will be able to see the ways your child’s teacher applies their own learning and professional development to classroom literacy instruction. We do not anticipate any risk through participation in the final project.

At the end of this letter, please indicate whether you agree or do not agree to your child’s participation and audiotaping during observations. Please return this letter to your child's teacher by (date). If you have any questions about the project please contact us by e-mail or telephone.

Sincerely,
Grace Kang     Sarah McCarty
Doctoral Student    Professor
(847) 858-6034     (217) 244-1149
gracekang77@gmail.com    mccarthe@illinois.edu

I do ☐ do not ☐ (check one) give permission for my child_________________________(name of child) to participate in the project described above.
I agree to audio-recording during observations (check one)        Yes ☐ No ☐
I agree to reviewing student work samples (check one)        Yes ☐ No ☐

(Print) Parent’s name
If you have any questions about your or your son or daughter’s rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls will be accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu
Student Assent

Hi. My name is Grace. I’m a graduate student from the University of Illinois. I would like you to know that I will be observing and spending time in your classroom soon. I would like to watch your teacher as she/he teaches reading and writing. I will use a small tape recorder (show the student) to record your teacher during my observations. If it’s ok with you, I would like to look at some of your work. This will help me understand how your teacher helps you learn.

After spending time in your class, I would like to write up a paper. I will write about the ways that your teacher helped you and your classmates learn. When I tell other people about my study, I will not use your name, and no one will be able to tell who I’m talking about. I may also talk about it at a conference and write other papers too.

If you don’t want to be included in the final project, you don’t have to be. I won’t be upset, and no one else will be upset, if you don’t want to be in the study. If you want to be in the project now but change your mind later, that’s okay. You can change your mind and stop at any time. If there is anything you don’t understand, tell me and I will explain it to you. You can ask me questions about the project. If you have a question later that you don’t think of now, you can call me or ask [your parents/teacher] to call me or send me an email.

Do you have any questions for me now?

Would you like to be a part of my research project?
Appendix C

Interview Questions

Teachers

Teacher background

- I am interested in learning about you. Can you share with me a little about your background (e.g., years of teaching, interest in becoming a teacher, specialty/content focus, etc.)?

- What made you want to be a teacher? Was there a specific/particular experience/memory that made you want to be a teacher?

- Where and for how long have you taught?

- Did you have a teacher that you looked up to or is there a teacher who you aspire to be like?

- Where did you receive your teaching certificate?

- Are they any other major factors that contributed to your own learning and in becoming a teacher?

- Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Literacy

- Tell me about literacy instruction and learning in your classroom. Describe a typical day in your classroom.

- I am interested in knowing a bit about the literacy curricula you use with your students (basal, texts, curricula). Can you tell me a little about what it is like (for reading and writing)?

- How much flexibility do you have with how you use the literacy curricula?

- When did you feel comfortable using/altering the curricula?

- What sort of pressure do you feel from your school, district, or anyone else on what or how to teach?

- How do you meet the needs of your diverse learners through using required/mandated curricula?
• How does assessment play a role in your literacy curriculum? In your teaching practice?

• What kinds of pressure do you feel to prepare students for state testing, meeting AYP, and benchmarks?

• Share with me about the types of literacy assessments you give to your students. Can you show me a few examples?

• Can we look at a few pieces of student work together? Share with me about this student’s work (e.g., strengths, areas in need of improvement).

**Professional Development**

• What types of Professional Development (PD) are offered through the district (surrounding literacy)?

• What has been the most valuable form of PD for you?

• What types of interaction, collaboration, or meetings do you have with any colleagues or teachers regularly?

• How do you define/view collaboration?

• Are you involved in meaningful collaboration at your school?

• Have you participated in any other forms of PD independently, not associated with the district?

• Are there areas of the PD that you find useful and/or relevant to your instruction/your students?

• Is there a colleague/teacher that helps you and informs your instruction?

• Are there areas/forms of PD that you would like more information about or more time for?

• Is there anything else you would like to share with me to help me understand your experiences with collaboration and/or PD?
Literacy Coach

Professional Development

- Can you share with me the district’s goals for professional development surrounding literacy?

- Describe to me the kinds of professional development experiences the teachers are participating in?

- Are there any workshops/inservices concerning literacy for this school year at the district or school levels?

- How often do you attend teachers’ grade level meetings? What role do you play in these meetings?

- How do the literacy coaches/reading interventionists collaborate with the teachers?

- What particular literacy practices/specific programs have been implemented at your school that you support?

- How do you define/view collaboration?

Curriculum

- Tell me about the district’s literacy curricula.

- Are there literacy programs/curricula that is used at your school that is not a part of the district curricula?

- Are teachers able to negotiate what is taught during literacy or do they teach from the same materials/curricula/programs?

- How is this literacy curricula selected?

- Is there anything else you would like to share with me that could help me understand the literacy curricula or professional development as it’s taking place at your school? Thank you for your time today.