NAVIGATING A ROCKY TERRAIN: A CASE STUDY OF A MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER‘S PRACTICES AND DECISIONS

by

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(Under the direction of Bob Fecho)

ABSTRACT

This study explored what practices a teacher negotiates expectations from authority figures with her own philosophical beliefs. Through the methodology of a single case study and narrative analysis, I focused on how a middle school teacher made her decisions as to what counts as purposeful and productive pedagogy within the given framework. Observations and interviews were my primary methods of data generation. The interviews provided explanations of how this teacher engaged in pedagogical decisions and practices. The interviews were informed by observations of her teaching practices and interactions in meetings. The understandings indicate how she creatively and respectively worked in this time period of standardization and lack of teacher autonomy. Furthermore, this study investigated the decisions and decision-making processes that add a specific example of how a teacher works with the convergence of expectations placed on classroom teachers.

INDEX WORDS: teacher practices, teacher decision processes,

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2011

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August 2011

DEDICATION

To Lily and the many teachers who have influenced my life

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Though only my name appears on the cover of this dissertation, a great many people have contributed to its production. I owe my gratitude to all of those people who have supported me and walked alongside me through this experience.

My deepest gratitude is to my advisor, mentor, and friend, Dr. Bob Fecho. I have been amazingly fortunate to have an advisor who gave me the freedom to explore my own ideas while at the same time the guidance to recover my stumbling steps. Bob always pushed my writing to a higher level. His patience and support helped me through each step of the dissertation process. I hope that one day I will become as good an advisor to my students as Bob has been to me.

My committee members, Dr. Peg Graham and Dr. Stephanie Jones, provided insightful comments and constructive criticisms at different stages of my research helping me focus my ideas. I am grateful to them for holding me to a high research and writing standard, thus teaching me how to become a scholar.

My unofficial committee member, Dr. JoBeth Allen offered much support and encouragement. Additionally, Carla Wilson Buss saved me an incredible amount of time by teaching me the tricks and intricacies of searching databases to find journal articles.

I am also indebted to Trevor Stewart, Beth Freise, Anne McLeod and Amanda Hodges for the many valuable discussions that helped me understand my research area better. I am thankful for them as they encouraged my writings and for carefully reading and commenting on countless revisions of this manuscript.

Additionally, I am grateful to the following staff at the University of Georgia for their various forms of support during my graduate study –Becky Hendren, Dee Palmer, Marianne Roberts, and Kimberly Whitten.

Many friends and family members have helped me stay sane through this stretch of graduate work. Their support and care for me (and Josh and Katie Beth) helped me overcome setbacks and stay focused on finishing. I greatly value their friendship and deeply appreciate their belief in me.

Most importantly, none of this would have been possible without the love and patience of my family. My husband has been a constant source of love, support, and strength. I feel that this dissertation is as much his as it is mine. My daughter offered to write my final draft, ~~–if~~ only I would help her spell the big words." Thank you both for the reminder to laugh and step away from work.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last few decades, politicians and bureaucrats called for educators to make decisions based on data and scientific evidence (Celio & Harvey, 2005; Ingram, Louis, & Schroeder, 2004). In 2010, I was a teacher in a local county where I was required to have data driven, standards-based assessments and instruction. In theory, this sounded like a good plan. However, the control and decisions often did not lie with me. I was emailed common assessments with a date to administer them. In addition to common assessments, our students were required to take twelve language arts benchmark tests aligned with a curriculum map that was to be adhered to at all times. The pressure to stay together was so great that at one point, if a teacher posted a grade for a standard all teachers in that subject area had to post a grade within 24 hours. Oftentimes, I felt like I was climbing on the edge of a cliff waiting to see if I would find a safe foothold or not. Would I get in trouble for reading an alternate story or deviating from the daily grammar practice outline? What would happen if the administration ever figured out that I was not on the correct place on the map?

Many of these questions began as I grew closer to a fellow teacher. I admired this teacher as she seemed to build strong relationships with students, parents, and administrators. In addition she seemed to be able to stay out of trouble and enact a thoughtful pedagogy within her classroom. Working with this teacher and the questions in the previous paragraph led to larger questions about the way teachers negotiate decisions about their practices within the classroom.

How do some teachers maintain autonomy while others cave to pressure? How do teachers decide what practices are non-negotiable and what they will submit to within their classrooms?

There is little empirical evidence supporting the claim that mandated curriculum, scripted lesson plans, and the policies of politicians foster growth in student achievement (Marshall, 2009; Nichols, et al 2005, Ravitch, 2010). In fact, there is little evidence supporting reforms that are policy driven. One reason these reforms are difficult for teachers to follow is that they are often scripted and, therefore, difficult for a teacher to follow with reliability and validity (Cuban, 1993; Marshall, 2009; Tye, 2000). Teaching a national or even state lesson plan proves to be a struggle as the plan has to be generic enough to encompass all students without taking into account both the teachers and students who are engaging with the lesson. MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, and Palma (2004) furthered this stance when they argued, "relationships between students and teachers are lost when talk is scripted and lessons are generic" (p. 143). For many teachers this scripted idea is problematic in that we know that interest-driven learning promotes motivation and achievement (Dewey 1963; Edelson & Joseph, 2001; Freire, 1970/2000; Renninger, 2000). If teachers ignore the individuals' learning needs, lessons are likely not to be effective. In light of the standards push, how can a teacher continue to merge his/her personal teaching theories and beliefs, if their theories differ from general scripts, with mandated practices and instructional models that will benefit students? How does a teacher decide what practices to hold on to and what to give up?

The aforementioned questions, as well as many others are questions that many educators and theorists urge individuals to explore as understandings of the world are explored. Questions such as: Who is in power over teacher decision-making processes? Why does he or she have this power? Who benefits from these power relationships? Who may be silenced because of this

power? In the introduction to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2000), Donaldo Macedo described and defined the word "pedagogy" as "having Greek roots, meaning 'to lead a child'" (p. 35). Freire advocated a childlike, humble, and interest-driven instruction. Maxine Greene and Ira Shor, along with Freire, are critical pedagogues and theorists who advocated helping others create meaning in their personal lives and in the world around them. Leading or walking alongside a student to understand and access the information and powers that surround them is essential. Yet, I wonder if this pedagogical relationship is possible in the current mandated and centralized educational settings of schools.

Henry Giroux (2000) described a critical pedagogical classroom as one that encourages individuals to "understand how power works on them, through them, and for them" (p. 139). Drawing from critical theory and pedagogy to construct ideas of a pedagogy of respect, I began this inquiry about how a teacher made curricular, instructional, and assessment decisions in regards to varying power relations and student relationships. I used these theories to investigate and question with the participant how she responded and made decisions in light of the powerful expectations. I explored how a single teacher navigated the rocky terrain of the school setting to safely work in that very context. Finding personal voice and maintaining autonomy in the age of imposed lessons and scripted curricula can be difficult. However, finding out how one teacher was able to sustain many of her beliefs and utilize teaching theories to make decisions that built success is paramount in helping other teachers preserve their autonomous teacher identities.

In this chapter, I discuss the context for the research study drawing from my experiences as both a researcher and middle school literacy teacher. I also describe the rationale and purpose for this particular study. As the chapter comes to a close, I outline the theoretical framework that shaped the groundwork of this study.

Contextualizing the Project

The purpose of this study was to draw upon case study methods and narrative analysis to develop an understanding of how a teacher of adolescents merged what researchers have shown to be supportive teaching practices and what administrators have issued as directives while adhering to high expectations for all students. To develop that understanding, I observed pedagogy in action, watched transactions between students and teachers, and generated discussions about the ways students, policies, curricula, and administrative directives influenced the decisions this teacher made.

I grounded this study on the idea of building a respectful pedagogy drawing from critical theorists, Freire, Greene, and Shor, to begin to understand the myriad of influences and power struggles that a teacher tried to balance each day. I believe that the core of critical pedagogy presented by these theorists is respecting all students and relationships to build a supportive and productive pedagogy. Critical theories added an important dimension to the discussion of classroom practices and decisions as these theories provided a lens for me to examine and critique those practices and decisions. In addition, critical theories provide an analysis of alternate and varying ideas of social spaces, such as classrooms and schools. Constructing a pedagogy of respect, I was an outsider who evaluated teacher practices, fleshed out purposes, assessed un/intended effects, and considered alternate practices. Therefore, critical theories helped me explore the decisions and practices of a teacher and how we consider these in a specific context.

Rationale and Significance

Over the last several years, I grew increasingly frustrated with myself and other teachers who did not resist the negative indoctrination that veteran and preservice teachers undergo as

part of their roles as teacher. This sense of growing frustration is unfortunately linked to the exposure of so much negativity that, instead of searching for student strengths, teachers often only see what is wrong or deficient with the student (Delpit, 1995). Teachers allowed this negative indoctrination to marginalize their expectations of children. This, in turn, influenced their pedagogy. The negative indoctrination Delpit (1995) spoke of dominates many school cultures, as some teachers find fault with the home lives of students and exclude the students from the teachers' pedagogical goals. But what of the teachers that are able to stand firm in their instructional decisions that can facilitate learning of all children regardless of class, race, abilities, and/or gender? Studying the decisions and practices of a teacher can help researchers and educators more deeply understand how to make productive decisions and consider their own educational practices.

Problem Statement

In the spring of 2010 at the school where I was teaching, I was required to take part in a meeting full of teachers, counselors, instructional coaches, and administrators where we made retention or placement decisions for students who were not meeting promotion guidelines. From my position as Title I Teacher, the meeting was tense. David, a colleague of mine, calmly stated, "It doesn't matter what any of us say or do, you [administration] will do what you want to when we leave the room." He appeared to be frustrated as his ears and neck were beginning to turn varying shades of red. The administrator stopped all side conversations and asked him to clarify what he meant. David furthered his argument by concluding that he and his teammates had tried multiple interventions with the student being discussed, but that nothing they did —or 180 days matters. We are all wasting our time because you won't listen to us. His parents wouldn't attend the meetings, and we don't have the appropriate paperwork and an adequate number of minutes

[to suggest retaining the student]. What a load of crap." His team leader turned to me and said, "Emily, you are so lucky to be getting out of here. Just think, you won't have to be in this awful place next year." My heart broke for the hundredth time that school year. My friends and I were struggling to negotiate the requirements of policies, administrators, and other such forces.

Maintaining teacher practices in a system that often values conformity is a difficult endeavor. Many pre and in-service teachers quickly learn which parts of their teaching beliefs or teaching styles are undesirable in the school setting and behaviors that must be surrendered in order to be fully accepted into the school norms (Ingram, Louis, &Schroeder, 2004). While conforming might lead to job security and/or social acceptance, teachers are often asked to leave behind portions of their personal teaching beliefs, practices, and philosophies to assume the role of a compliant teacher who follows all mandates peacefully so as not to be considered an outsider or troublemaker. Furthermore, teachers are often asked to conform to local and state policies. Those that do not conform to these norms are often chastised. Moreover, I argue that these expected "norms" influence pedagogy. For example, if administration perceives a teacher as capable, they appear to offer curricular and instructional latitude in the classroom where teachers can have more freedoms. On the other hand, if administrators label a teacher as unable, then they do not honor him or her with an autonomous relationship. I believe this failure to engage with teachers in a professional, respectful relationship influences classroom decisions and practices and allows cycles of oppression to continue.

Denying knowledge development and teaching beliefs based on assumptions or policies does more than deny classroom knowledge and concepts. Knowledge is formed from socially constructed ideas and "actually impacts identity and creates a sense of fulfillment and inspiration" (Fecho & Meachem, 2007, p. 170). Educators who are deprived of the satisfaction

and stimulation that comes from engaging in making meaning are often frustrated with pedagogical decisions as they lack control. These educators might come to see teaching as nothing more than an obligation not worth their time. Oftentimes, these teachers who are forced into decisions and/or practices they do not believe in leave the classroom and sometimes leave the profession altogether. In a 2009 study, the National Center for Education Statistics found that nearly a third of U. S. teachers leave the classroom within the first three years of teaching. The number rises to nearly half within the first five years of teaching with many teachers stating lack of administrative support as the primary reason for leaving.

In this dissertation project, I explored how a teacher made decisions about her practices in the rocky and unstable terrain of powerful influences that were encountered frequently in her educational context. This single case study set in the southeastern United States used interviews informed by observations to investigate and deepen our understanding of how a teacher was affected by and navigated decisions that were imposed within her professional practices.

Research Question

Specifically, I sought to address the following question: What practices does this teacher engage in within the political and instructional structures of the school so that her decisions meet the expectations of administration and she is still able to enact her pedagogical beliefs?

Implications of this project add insights into conceptions of how pre- and in-service teachers can make decisions that might work alongside or in opposition to the mandates, if they so choose. Additionally, teacher educators can use this study as an example of a teacher who pulled from a wide range of strategies to accomplish her goal of student learning. Helping teachers build curricular and instructional autonomy and allowing them to use professional judgment to interact with students is crucial for maintaining teachers‘ sense of self worth. As an

additional benefit, this autonomy is important in preventing burn-out within the first few years of a teacher‘s career. If we are to trust teachers to empower students to think and function in our changing world, then we must treat teachers as professionals capable of making their own decisions. Teachers must be trusted to teach high standards, set high expectations, honor students, and think for themselves.

Theoretical Framework

Constructing a pedagogy of respect drawing from critical theorists formed the foundation guiding my inquiry. Investigating how a teacher described her practices while navigating around political and instructional structures required an exploration into how she negotiated her decisions within the school constraints. Questioning how the participant transacted with policies and how these policies played out in her classroom furthers our understanding of what is negotiable and what is non-negotiable within the classroom and school setting. Moreover, exploring how the participant questioned or did not question mandates and negotiated with authority figures provided insights into this particular teacher‘s identities and autonomy. Alongside these questions and negotiations, I further explored how she made relational, instructional, and curricular decisions in light of what has been demanded of her from others. Balancing the power between teacher and other is tricky, and critical theory and critical pedagogy gave structure to this project as a way to examine and move beyond the status quo of many classrooms.

Teaching has evolved and changed in the twenty years since Freire (1992) argued that teaching was complex, yet rewarding. However, I feel that teaching, even with the complexity of the standardization, is still rewarding for many teachers. It is crucial for researchers, teachers, and politicians to examine the complications and rewards of teaching in order to better

understand how students can be better served by the educational process. Researchers must look specifically at what is actually happening in classrooms where teachers and students are productively learning and exploring so that it can be offered to others as a viable decision for them to consider. Teachers and teacher educators who fail to take teaching practices seriously or only espouse one particular learning style can be problematic in that they are unable to meet the needs of each student learner and, I believe, often lack satisfaction with their work. Freire (1992), whose pedagogy shaped and is shaped by critical theory, extended this argument more drastically than I by writing that these teachers who fail to engage seriously with their practices ~~–d~~isqualify themselves as teachers" (p. 69).

Critical theory attempts to help individuals question and confront power relationships and the beliefs and practices that dominate mainstream cultures. Drawing from this theory, particularly focusing on respect for each learner, helped me explore the practices and decisions of a single teacher as we worked together to question practices, policies, and responses. Teachers are in politically charged, power-laden environments each day as they engage with students, parents, and administrators with varying degrees of influence as they respond to mandates and policies of politicians. As teachers transact with myriad dimensions of power, they must make decisions that influence their teaching practices.

These examinations of power and domination are one of the starting points for both critical theory and critical pedagogy. Importantly, critical pedagogy applies critical theory as a response to and a transformation of educational oppression, power relations, and inequities (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Keesing-Styles, 2003).

Ira Shor (1992) defined critical pedagogy as . . .

> Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse (p. 129).

Thus, it was my goal to ―go beneath the surface" into the classroom to investigate and question a teacher's practices and decisions. Researchers and educators who strive to create respectful transactions with and among individuals realize the relationship of learning and teaching. Freire (1992) maintained that inside the teaching/learning relationship that ―content must be delivered up to the cognitive curiosity of teacher and pupils. The former teach, and in doing so, learn. The latter learn, and in doing so teach" (p. 96).

This complex, recursive process of learning, thinking, collaborating, reflecting, and acting to shape the world around us is powerful for students and teachers. The idea of ―reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" is referred to by Freire (2000, p. 36) as *praxis* and is perhaps his most simple, yet most profound statement. Critical pedagogues are continuously providing opportunities for each learner to grow (Vagle, 2008), and since the lines of the student and teacher are blurred, students and teachers simultaneously lead each other to grow and take action to change the world. This study captured a teacher's decision-making processes and practices in regards to the mandates, policies, and powerful influences she encounters each day. Within this process, I observed and questioned several important factors involved with critical theory and pedagogy to build the idea of respect as the foundation for any pedagogy.

Constructing a Pedagogy of Respect

Pedagogies offer a complex interlocking of learning and teaching within cultures, speech patterns, structures, and every day practices (Luke, 2006). Constructing a pedagogy of respect that draws from critical theory requires educators to pay careful attention to many factors. The key components of a pedagogy built on respect for the students are grounded in the lives of teachers offering hope, justice, and sensitivity, while maintaining and enhancing academic rigor. Weaving these complex threads together to produce a narrative that expresses the stories and lives of individuals is an art form. I believe that teaching is an inspired and innovative passion: ―It is poetry in the archaic sense of poiesis that is, ‗calling something into existence.' This sense of poetry allows us to better understand the aesthetic dimensions of teaching" (Garrison, 1997, xv). This passion for pedagogy, of being educationally involved with learners, is to have learners become empowered to take action and name their world, so that they may change their world through active engagement with their lives (van Manen, 1991). In this section of the chapter, I will outline several tenets of building a pedagogy of respect; these tenets are respectfulness, dialogic teaching strategies, and inquiry stances.

Freire (1992), perhaps the most renowned critical pedagogue, presented respecting learners as a fundamental tool for teachers. This essential component of critical pedagogy is the first requirement for educators engaging with students. As such, respect becomes the very thread that weaves its way throughout this study as a core tenet for all teachers. Furthering this line of respectful pedagogy, Freire argued that for progressive educators to be authentically involved with their teaching practices, they must be vigilant to respect each student's background and knowledge. Building on student knowledge to ―*learn to learn* in learning the reason-for the ‗why' of the content" begins with respecting and honoring all students (Freire, 1992, p. 68,

emphasis in original). Treating others with respect builds a foundation for a learning community in today‘s policy-driven schools.

Educational spaces are highly political in nature, leaving some learners at a disadvantage; typically, working class or working poor students are further oppressed and marginalized in these politically-charged spaces (Kincheloe, 2008; Rose, 1989, Shor, 1992). These marginalized students, at a disadvantage in terms of their social class status or academic skills, often do not receive an education that frees and empowers them nor do they encounter creative and challenging teachers (Heath, 1983; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2005; Rose, 1989). They are much more likely to be engaged in a banking model of education in which teachers simply possess all of the important knowledge and through manipulation and control, deposit these truths into passive students (Freire, 2000). In my experience, this passivity is frequently the result of a particular teaching strategy that silences students‘ voices and squelches their personal ideas. For example, learners might spend each day reading a section of textbook silently and responding to fill-in-the-blank worksheet questions. This is not to say that reading a textbook or answering questions are ―bad‖ practices, but the decision to use only such methods might be problematic for learners.

Dialogue is the second central tenet of constructing a pedagogy of respect derived from critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; Shor, 1992; Stock, 1995); I believe that dialogue cannot be achieved without respectful relationships between individuals. Dialogic engagement is in direct opposition to the banking model of monologic teaching (Freire, 2000). The dialogic approach to learning invites all learners to encounter an exchange of ideas where reflection and action are united to offer students thinking tools that may be used to name and then change their world (Freire, 2000). Greene (1978) extends Freire‘s argument by encouraging educators to enable

every student –to encounter curriculum as a possibility. Curriculum ought to provide a series of occasions for individuals to articulate the themes of their existence and to reflect on those themes" (p. 18-19) while engaging in dialogue with others' ideas and constructs. Although I fully agree with Greene and Freire's statements on dialogue, I believe it is virtually impossible to enact this method all the time. As stated earlier, only utilizing one teaching method leaves out some students and privileges others (Parks, 2011). Teachers must pull from many different strategies and methods to help learners grow. Moreover, I believe that constructing a respectful pedagogy allows teachers to weave in and out of a variety of methods that can be used to honor the students and the students' learning.

These tenets of dialoguing and constructing experiences from which individuals can learn extend back to John Dewey, who believed that students must interact in the classroom and practice constructing knowledge within and with their environment. Thus, I engaged in dialogue with the participant, who worked diligently to be a respectful teacher, to explore how she made decisions about her practice while seeking to meets the expectations administrators. The participant did not claim critical pedagogy as her particular style of teaching; I use these tenets to explore her practices, decisions, and decision-making processes. I found that she did enact many of these fundamental tools in her engagement with students.

A pedagogy of respect is the foundation for the practices that Freire and others espoused as progressive teaching. John Dewey is generally regarded as the father of progressive education movement as well as constructivist theory in the United States. Dewey fought against rote memorization of learning and instead argued that educators needed to engage students in meaningful experiences that allow them to apply concepts and content to their learning. Dewey (1915) wrote, –Education is not an affair of telling and being told, but an active and constructive

process" (p. XX). For Dewey education must be grounded in personal experiences and varying processes. Many of the characteristics of a pedagogy of respect are consistent with a constructivist approach, which the participant in this study did claim as a theory used in making decisions about her practices. Dewey and Freire both rejected teaching practices that positioned students as passive; instead they argued for respectful engagement with students.

In addition to dialogic explorations, the third construct of a pedagogy of respect is problem-posing education (Freire 2000; Shor, 1992) or what Dewey (1915) called inquiry stances. "Teaching and learning are conceived as reciprocally realized" and constructed out of "the experiences, the images, the language, the traditions, the values, and the motives" of the class members (Stock, 1995, p. 14). Problem-posing dialogue affords students and teachers the right to share stories and discuss literature that allows everyone to see different viewpoints, cultures, and life experiences that each class member brings. Teachers and students generate questions and propose burning issues to explore their views and the views of other cultures. Inviting students to problematize and investigate concepts that are tricky or complex frees them from an oppressive or commanding teacher. Moreover, this respect fosters a growth and a love of learning that seems to be virtually impossible to create in a banking model of education.

Like Freire (1992) who advocated problem-posing and dialogic educational practices, Dewey (1915) promoted social, active, learning environments with the construction of knowledge through engagement. Both championed that educators need to understand the experiences and background knowledge of their students to further the learning process. The foundation for all of these practices lays respect. Thus, I define progressive pedagogy using both Freire and Dewey as learning that takes place within specific and meaningful contexts that builds

on the students‘ prior knowledge where teachers respectfully work to understand that knowledge to reflect on their practices to meet the needs of students raising responsible individuals.

This philosophical approach, progressive pedagogy, attempts to help all people of all ages question and confront power relationships and the beliefs and practices that dominate mainstream cultures. We can adopt a respectful lens to examine practices and decisions that will assist others in achieving their goals. An effective pedagogue cultivates the capacity in students to consider others and create values for themselves, not just memorize the mandates set in place by other cultures (Garrison, 1997). Through the constant state of reflection and action, our inquiries are learning opportunities that never finish. Teachers who enact such pedagogy must therefore attempt to figure out what works for each student from each culture each day. The intention of this study is to draw from these tenets to construct a pedagogy of respect to further understand the rocky terrain that teachers must traverse on a daily basis. Constructing a pedagogy of respect that honors students and teachers as they are learning and meeting personal and administrative expectations is essential so that we can gain a greater understanding of how to build such a practice in today‘s schools.

Focusing on the Study

In this study, I explored the pedagogical practices and decisions a teacher made within the political and instructional structures of her school as she sought to maintain her core pedagogical beliefs. Progressive educators argued that the path to social transformation is through analysis and how it operates in people‘s lives (Inglis, 1997). By becoming aware of the practices within schools and the processes of making personal decisions within these structures, teachers can, on the one hand, avoid them and, on the other hand, hopefully influence social changes (Welton, 1995). Thus, teachers can be enabled with the necessary tools to affect the

social, cultural, economic, and political life of their world inside personal schools and classrooms.

This study adds to understandings of how a teacher can make decisions that best help students achieve within the school setting. Many educators are calling for the freedom to make decisions and to be relieved from oppressive policies. However, if the vision is for a more just and democratic social order, the ability to name and understand the forces acting on educators is not enough. Knowing how to enact change and resist oppression is just as important as understanding the problem. Generating narratives with the participant allowed me to learn how a teacher constructs curricular and instructional autonomy and maintain her stamina for teaching and career satisfaction. Drawing from a critical perspective where respect is imperative afforded the participant and me a way of conceptualizing and reflecting on the forces at work in our lives. McNeil (2009) argued, "we still have serious needs of studies that not only get inside classrooms, but also document from the *inside out* the ways increasingly differentiated power relations are changing systems of schooling and the ways those systems are shaping what is taught and learned" (p. 388, emphasis added). This study addressed this gap in the literature regarding specific strategies, practices, and tools that teachers need to enact a purposeful and productive pedagogy including decisions from inside a teacher's classroom.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

I do not think that anyone would deny that teachers make many decisions throughout a single day that affect the lives of many others in their care; however, many teachers are forced to follow mandates and, in such cases, many decisions are made for them regarding instruction, management, and curriculum. These pronouncements made by people other than teachers often leave teachers with little wiggle room. In my experience, mandates are insufficient. Teachers must also attend to their own professional practices, pedagogies, and the individual needs of the students who are sitting in front of them. Each of these factors can play a role in and can influence the decisions that teachers make on a moment-by-moment basis.

In the last few years, I have heard many teachers comment on their lack of power to make decisions. In talking with my colleagues at a local middle school, I often heard remarks such as "I cave; I will do what they (administration) want," "I can't wait for testing to be over so that I can get back to real teaching and learning," or "Three more days of this test-prep crap; they (administration) will be happy that I did it all before the CRCT." Comments such as these and countless others caused me to wonder how some teachers navigate the rocky terrain of mandated curriculum maps, scripted instructional methods, required assessments, policies, and teaching beliefs, and still maintain their autonomy and strong instructional practices without teaching to a test.

The Literature of Teacher Decision-Making

In this review of literature related to the study, I discuss the varying influences on teachers that affect teaching decisions in a public middle school. Classrooms are complex systems where many factors influence student learning including teacher practices, teacher autonomy, and teacher responses to directives. Recent research (Reiser et al., 2001) argued that a teacher‘s role in the classroom is essential in facilitating construction of student understanding. Within this context, I begin this literature review with a description of teachers‘ decisions and practices within the school setting. Teachers‘ decisions are constantly shifting in response to the power and domination circling around the classrooms and schools, which may force the teachers to negotiate their responses and therefore, their practices. The second segment focuses on the myriad ways literacy may be viewed thru sociocultural perspectives including the relevant views on the labeling of students, which also affects teacher decisions in either positive or negative aspects. Following this, an overview of teaching in the era of standards and how these policy and mandates affect teacher decision-making and practices is provided. I describe the trends in standardization and then explore the research on teachers‘ balance of mandates and autonomy. As the chapter comes to a close, I link these concepts together to begin to show the complexity of teacher transactions in schools.

Teacher Decisions and Practices

In the current climate of standards, teacher decisions are often shut down or controlled (McNeil, 2009); furthermore, in these times of uncertainty, teacher practices cannot be seen as something that is enacted by simply following policies or scripts. It is not enough to acknowledge that teachers play a role in carrying out decisions. We need to more fully understand what decisions are made in order to help support teachers in the complex navigation

of classrooms and schools. The context of every teacher in every classroom must be considered and the context for each classroom is different than the context where policies and mandates are created. Educators‘ professional practices are on rocky ground as more and more decisions are pulled from their hands and their autonomy is weakened. We see this everyday-- as mentioned in the opening vignette of this chapter where a teacher chose to surrender rather than continue to fight.

Wenger (1998) argued, ―Developing a practice requires the formation of a community whose members can engage with one another" and acknowledge decisions made by professionals. Dewey (1927) established a foundation for educators to justify focusing on the classroom practices and school environment. He argued that education was a sociocultural process; specifically, that both students and teachers share a commitment, responsibility, and membership to the learning community. Furthermore, he advocated that connection and collaboration were essential to growing toward a goal. Creating classroom spaces where students feel welcomed and honored regardless of their background takes a professional finesse with careful decisions and attention to practices. Raising these thoughts caused me to wonder what practices were actually taking place in classrooms.

Teacher practices vary greatly in the research literature. For example, a range of studies established that the amount of student learning can be directly linked to the practices and decisions of the teacher (Brophy & Good, 1986; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Wayne & Youngs, 2003; Xue & Meisels, 2004). There seems to be a consensus that teachers differ in their practices and decisions; however, there seems to be a lack of agreement about which practices and decisions matter most. Some researchers have focused on the background of the teacher, such as educational experiences, professional credentials, personal intelligence or test

scores (Darling-Hammond, Berry, & Thoreson, 2001; Wayne & Youngs, 2003). Others argue that it is the ―teaching, not teachers" that is an important indicator for decisions teachers make (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999, p. 10). I argue that teacher practices rely on both their personal background and their educational experiences, both as student and teacher, which influence teacher decision-making processes.

Teachers use their knowledge to make decisions of which practices to use in the classroom. Teachers can select from lecture or direct instruction (Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Magiera & Zigmond, 2005; Rosenshine, 2009), content collaboration or cross-curricula instruction (Chambers, Burns, & Calloway, 2009; Dragon, Floryan, Woolf, & Murray, 2010; Draper 2008), real world interactions (Freire, 1970/1990; Guthrie & Davis, 2003), interest-driven instruction (Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Willis, 2008), inquiry-based methods (Fang & Wei, 2010; August, Branum-Martin, & Franics, 2009), small-group instruction (Rasinkski & Padak, 2004), relational or social pedagogy (Dewey, 1915; Vagle, 2008), dialogical instruction (Fecho, 2011; Freire, 1970/1990), among numerous other methods. As appealing as one of these approaches might sound to an educator, wholesale buy-in to one particular method might leave out some students from being educationally involved (Parks, 2011). As practices are scrutinized by many different educational stakeholders, teachers often decide to verbally advocate for one or two educational practices over others; when in all actuality teachers might employ many strategies across varying theories. The devil is in these details; we need a detailed look into the practices and decisions that teachers actually enact in the classroom as they strive to meet administrative expectations and help students grow beyond the standards.

Thus, developing teacher practices means developing a practice of *praxis*, which according to Freire (1970/1990) is the tension between action and reflection to facilitate a

practice of continual learning. Among the individual agendas of teachers, principals, superintendents, and politicians, there are many clashes as to what the ideal teacher should do in a given situation. As new criteria are handed down, teachers must continually shift their practices. This shift ―defines our capacity to speak and act autonomously," but this is a challenge for teachers ―given that governments do not see it to be in their best interests to have a vocal and autonomous teaching service" (Sachs, 1998).

When I altered my teacher decisions to be compliant with the requirements made by a supervisor or curriculum map, I often felt like a robotic monkey. I despised reading from scripted lessons or following lock step methods with the fourteen other language arts teachers in my former school. It was not that I was an aggravating team player; I enjoyed working with my teammates, but we taught different children with different needs. I felt violated that my autonomy had been stripped away and that I could not do what I considered best for the children sitting in front of me. I wondered how some teachers are able to navigate this slippery slope, maintain good graces and have their practice sanctioned by administration, yet still enact their personal pedagogical beliefs. Nevertheless, the developing nature of teachers' practices is what can distinguish educators from other workers, but if teacher practices are micromanaged, classroom decisions can be affected on a daily basis.

Many teachers may not have the appropriate expertise to promote both a caring environment and a content-rich environment. Beijaard's (1995) exploratory study of eighty secondary teachers compared experienced teachers with novice teachers' perceptions of professionalism. He found that most of the teachers saw themselves as either experts within their content area or experts in building relationships. Influential factors contributing to the development of the professional practices included personal background, teaching context, and

teaching experiences. Throughout the careers of the study participants, teachers were more likely to shift from content area specialists to pedagogical specialists; meaning that as each progressed through their teaching experiences, they were more comfortable with their decisions of what methods were needed to have students best construct knowledge on the given content. Beijaard‘s study did not look at how these decisions were made based on the influential factors such as policy mandates and administrative directives. He looked at what contributed to teacher practices, but not how these practices influenced daily decisions.

In other studies similar to Beijaard‘s, researchers have explored teacher experiences where teachers shared their personal stories of the learning process and application of knowledge involved in developing their practices (Brooke, 1994; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Craig, 1998; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002; Sloan, 2006) . Additional studies included a focus on teacher training practices (Antonek, McCormick, & Donato, 1997; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Goodson & Cole, 1994; Samuel & Stephens, 2000) where novice teachers reflected on their training experiences as they refine their pedagogical skills. In a third set of studies, investigators explored the nature of teaching, and its processes in teacher development (Beijaard, 1995; Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2001; Graham & Young, 1998).

Most of these studies agree that teacher practices and development are ongoing processes related specifically to the person and context of each individual. Additionally, these studies take a personal, theoretical, or contextual stance, but they do not combine these aspects to explore how teachers‘ contexts influence their practices and decisions. Intertwining teacher practices with teacher decision-making processes, with the powerful expectations of administrators, with the knowledge of students and student interactions, and with the subject matter complicates ways to understand teacher decisions. A cognitive perspective (i.e., written and verbal data such as

interviews or portfolios) on teachers is important; however, researchers must work to include observations of teacher actions and decisions alongside the written or verbal data to try to begin the complex task of understanding the social construction of why and how educator decisions are formed and influence practices in the classroom.

In today‘s schools, teachers are met with conflicting expectations of being responsive to diverse learners, preparing students to perform on high-stakes tests, and maintaining teacher agency within individual classrooms. Coldron & Smith (1999) argued that agency was an integral part of teaching; however, in light of legislation like NCLB, teacher agency seems to be an undesirable characteristic (Luke & Grieshaber, 2004; Luke & Woods, 2009). Agency and praxis require learners to be actively involved in the construction of understandings; these can include a teacher‘s professional decisions. Given these ideas, educators‘ decisions are complex because they are produced in a situated set of relations of practice (Wenger, 1998) within the micro and macro politics of schools and school reform (Findlay, 2006; Smagorinsky, 2004). Studying how teachers try to incorporate their decisions and practices as they respond to the professional demands and personal convictions within the school setting is important. This complexity can be nurtured and developed in conditions where teacher ideas are valued, where communication is open and honest, and autonomy is supported with mutuality. Adding to this complex discussion of teacher practices is a question of how much control a teacher has over his or her work.

Teacher Autonomy. Teachers are one among many groups of professionals that value autonomy on the job (Abbott, 1993; Bryan, 2004; Hall 1968; Hodson 1996; Ingersoll, 1996; Leicht & Fennell, 1997; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Research on teacher autonomy has shown a variety of positive outcomes for teachers who feel they possess autonomy over decisions inside

their classrooms. Teachers feel more efficacious in their work with students when they have independence to make choices and decisions in the best interest of the students they interact with daily (e.g. Lee, Dedrick, & Smith, 1991). For example, other professionals such as doctors have the freedom to prescribe the best treatment for their patients just as professional teachers need to have the freedom to make decisions that empower and develop students.

Research has shown that teachers‘ commitment and job satisfaction increased when they felt like their decisions were honored (e.g. Newman, Rutter, & Smith, 1989). However, when teachers felt deprived of their autonomy, not only did teachers feel uncomfortable, but it was also detrimental to efficiency and effectiveness of schools (Aoki, 2002; Bacharach, Bauer, & Shedd, 1988; Conley & Cooper, 1991; McGrath, 2000; Smith, 2000). Within many studies dealing with teacher decision-making, researchers have predominantly conceptualized autonomy as the control that teachers have over activities in their individual classrooms (Huberman, 1993; Ingersoll, 1996; Lee, Dedrick, & Smith 1991; Lortie 2002; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Rosenholtz 1989). Also, a host of studies explored aspects of autonomy included teachers‘ role in developing and changing school policies (for example, Ingersoll, 2001; Socket, 1993; Tichenor & Tichenor, 2005; Wade & Moje, 2000). Both avenues of teachers‘ autonomy – decisions regarding classroom activities and influence on school policies – unavoidably involve teachers‘ decision-making and judgment. Having talked about teacher decisions, practices, and autonomy, it is now important to discuss how these ideas are influences by a teacher‘s perspectives on literacy.

Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy Affect Decisions

Issues of what counts as literacy are a major source of tension for American educators. Worries about whether children in the United States read well enough emerge every time results

of international comparisons are published. Many of the provisions of the No Child Left Behind legislation are directed toward more rigorous assessments and more effective literacy instruction. These concerns have led to interest in the quality of literature and what counts as literacy in the classroom as a way to ensure that all students receive the same content. Is literacy simply being able to interpret print based text such as a novel or short story? Or does literacy encompass accessing a myriad of technologies, music, texts, and other genres along with print based texts? Or somewhere in between? The conceptions of literacy that guide the work of prominent researchers and educators fall somewhere on the continuum between everything counts as literacy and only the ability to read books.

I worked with many teachers who felt that as long as students decoded correctly they were fluent readers who were able to make meaning with the text. Perhaps these teachers have taken this view of reading based on the National Reading Panel's recommendations related to fluency and decoding or an acceptance of what Street (1994, 1995) negatively called the autonomous view of reading where skills are isolated. In April 2000, the National Reading Panel released research-based findings on the best ways to teach children to read. The NRP concluded that there are five key components to an effective reading instruction program: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Comprehension in the report refers to "recall, question answering and generation, and summarization of texts" (p. 4-6), which grows closer to making meaning than simply decoding words.

Literacy historically has been viewed as the act of learning to read and write with the cognitive processing skills following the basic skills (Finders, 1997; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004). A sociocultural perspective expands this view while acknowledging the role of print and symbol systems as a necessary component of literacy, but also recognizes the learning

and use of symbols as mediated and constituted by social systems and practices" (Moje, et al., 2000, p. 209). Street's (1994, 1995) foundational work within two modes of literacy as autonomous and ideological has laid a framework for literacy as a socially situated practice embedded in specific contexts with specific purposes (Bean, Bean, & Bean, 1999; Finders, 1997; Moje et al., 2008). The autonomous stance claims reading and writing are a set of cognitive, neutral processes: a product of collecting the scope of skills necessary to perform at a high-level. Through much of Street's research he has challenged the notion of neutral cognitive processes with an ideological view of reading, which foregrounds his commitment to linking culture, language, and literacy classrooms.

The ideological model does not require educators and theorists to give up the idea of reading and writing as a cognitive process; moreover, the ideological model includes the cognitive processes of the autonomous model while incorporating social and cultural factors embedded in the power structures (Alvermann, 2009; Gee 2008). Luke & Freebody (1999) concur with this view; literacy education is more than developing a set of skills in students; it is about "the institutional shaping of social practices and cultural resources, about inducting successive generations into particular cultural, normative ways of handling texts," and "to the social institutions where these tools and artifacts are used" (p. 2). Teaching and learning literacy are situated practices that are social in nature where the readers must interact with power relations in specific contexts. Alvermann (2009) used power to describe "something that circulates and speaks through silences as well as utterances" (p. 16). Power relationships are ubiquitous in the way that individuals use gestures, sounds, clothing, beliefs, words, and print, among others to identify themselves as belonging to a particular group.

I tend to align with Street's (1994, 1995) ideological model of reading in which literacy is a blend of cognitive processes with social and cultural factors where readers make meaning through the transaction with texts; through this process, readers are encouraged and learning is nourished. Reading is more than answering factual questions or calling words. Reading and teaching literacy cannot be only scientific, but must include factors such as moral, political and cultural decisions and transactions (Luke & Freebody, 1999). In the long run, literacy is about the literate society that can and is constructed.

In addition to the debate as to what counts as reading, literacy can be viewed as something people do in private ways--like the iconic image of curling up with a good book. However, for me and others, curling up with a good book, while solitary in that moment, is embedded in social purposes. I curl up in a hammock swinging between two trees on a cool day to read a book so that I can either escape reality for a short while or engage in conversations with my friends at a later point in time. Literacy facilitates interaction, communication, collaboration, and political action; it is the impetus for social interactions of all kinds (Gee, 2008).

From this view, participants involved in any literate act socially construct meaning from their literacy experiences (Luke & Freebody, 1999; Moje et al., 2008; Myers, 1992; Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). Because literacy is socially situated, the literacies can be rejected or accepted based on societal expectations (Finders, 1997, Moje 2000). Furthermore, since language is socially situated, discussions of literacy practices are not just about the ability to read and write; Gee (2000) explained that literacy is more than just reading and writing; it encompasses "social languages" (p. 413). Social language is a "discourse peculiar to a specific stratum of society (professional, age group, etc.) within a given social system at a given time" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 57). Thus, social languages allow individuals to perform, distinguish, and negotiate within a

particular perspective where the teacher falls on the continuum of what counts as literacy plays into the decisions the teacher makes in the classroom.

For instance, literacy as represented by NCLB is viewed as an instructed skill, accomplished by a student reading to answer a set of questions that are unconnected to political or cultural commitments (e.g., Reyna, 2004). This is a view of literacy that might lead someone to say, "If you test a child on basic math and reading skills, and you're teaching to the test, you're teaching math and reading" (Bush, 2001). It is this view of reading that promotes giving teachers explicit guidance about instruction focused on specific skills within the reading process (Moats, 2004), and teachers are relegated to teach brief passages with multiple choice answers to practice or mimic the style of the test. Given this limited view of literacy, teachers make instructional decisions as to what counts in school based literacies. What counts as literacy within this narrow view of literacy is reading novels, studying for tests, and writing notes or essays.

Alternately, a group of scholars, including David Barton, James Gee, and Brian Street, have coined the term New Literacies (see for example Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee 2008; Street, 1987, 1995, 2001) in an attempt to emphasize their commitment to a broader notion of literacy that rejects the focus on individual skills. These researchers tend to approach literacy as culturally defined with possible growth and change of the individual or group. Within broarder views of literacies, teachers choose a different array of literacy encounters for their students. Teachers' decisions to include a wide range of literacy activities such as: tagging (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007), video games (Gee, 2007), radio, TV, movies, fanfiction, and other pop culture icons (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Jenkins, 2006), figuring out a bus schedule or visiting online

chat rooms (Hamilton & Barton, 2000; Wagner 2003) are influenced by the perspective of literacy that is held by each individual teacher.

The aforementioned stances on literacy are somewhat exaggerated and stereotyped; many educators fall somewhere in between these two varied views of literacy. But it is these more inflexible versions that often dominate policy and, therefore, teacher decisions about classroom activities and practices. In conjunction with the range of literacy views, the perceived ability levels of the students influence teacher decisions. Oftentimes, teachers who teach an AP or advanced class decide to engage in a more holistic or ideological model of literacy encompassing a wide range of what counts as literacy; however, many teachers who teach supposed lower level or at-risk students make decisions to teach isolated reading skills (Brantlinger, 2007; Rose, 1989).

` Recent reports such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Nation‘s Report Card: U.S. History 2001 found that the majority of middle and high school students are able to read at a basic level, but far fewer are able to use higher order thinking skills to read more challenging material. Additionally, Lapp, Grigg, and Tay-Lim (2002) argued that the few students who could read at more proficient or advanced levels were more than likely students of European-American descent living in suburban areas. In other words, minority students and those from poorer geographic areas are cut off from more engaging literacy instruction, and for me, this drives home the point that teachers make decisions of what or how to teach based on who they are teaching.

This line of reasoning seemed to foster a recommendation in the National Reading Panel‘s report (2000) that the more overt teachers are in their skills instruction; the more successful low-achieving students are in their reading and learning. Calling for explicit

instruction of isolated skills for lower level students seemed to reify the nature of many lower level classrooms disengaging the student from helpful, challenging teachers who view literacy with a broad definition. Teachers who employ this narrow definition of literacy isolate entire groups of students who rely on non-printed texts to learn (Wade & Moje, 2000).

As researchers, we must study pedagogy and pedagogical decisions in local and specific contexts to further our understandings of practices. It is also crucial to understand any links between reading and socially constructed labels as students are labeled and, I believe, taught according to that label. Making decisions as to what counts as literacy and who is counting is an important power struggle for many teachers; but not only do we need to look at what lower-level students are being taught, but how teachers treat these students. As critical pedagogy requires a respectful relationship between learners, what practices do respectful teachers engage in to promote student growth is important for understanding how teachers accomplish the practice of respecting all. Does labeling or tracking play a role in the decisions or that teachers make or practices that they engage in with students? Through reviewing the literature of teacher practices and literacy decisions, questions were raised on how labeling students relates to teacher decisions and practices. Therefore, I feel it is necessary to briefly explore the nature of labeling and how it affects teacher decisions and practices.

Labeling of Students Affects Teacher Decisions.

Studying labeling and its effects on schools, students, and teachers opened a touchy area for me. As a high school student in the mid 1990s, I am a product of tracking. In the sixth grade, Mrs. Fields placed me in advanced middle school classes. From this placement, I transitioned into honors and advanced placement courses in high school. However, as a 14-year-old freshman, I did not want the mean and awful honors biology teacher and convinced my advisor

to let me register for standard biology. I vividly remember this first day in standard biology; two of the more salient memories from that day were that the students were not listening, and they were not required to listen to the teacher. I was taken aback at the noise level when class had just begun. Coach Sanders gave each of us a handout, and from my perspective no one was reading it. After fifteen or so uneasy minutes where I felt like I did not belong, I explained to Coach that my schedule must have been printed wrong; I was supposed to be in Honors Biology. He signed me a pass to the guidance office, and I bolted from the room.

No doubt these experiences of mine shaped my views of learning and teacher expectations. As a high school student, I felt that because I was in the honors classes, I was getting a better education that would prepare me for college and life after college, and I felt I was superior to my peers who were not in these same classes. I know now that more than likely I did receive a different education than some of my peers though I am not sure if it was better. However, I think that Rose (1989) would argue that it was different in that I probably had higher quality, more creative teachers being in these advanced courses. This does not necessarily mean teachers were tracked with students, but more than likely teachers assumed a particular definition of learning and made decisions dependent on who they were teaching (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Oaks, 1986). While in these courses and being academically good at school, I was severely lacking and should probably still be labeled deficient in anything requiring artistic ability, social interactions, and common sense. So while these advanced courses may have prepared me academically for college, I was not well prepared for life outside of the classroom.

In American schools, the sorting of students into tracked classes based on students‘ interests and abilities has been and still is widely practiced (Brewer, Rees, & Argys, 1995;

Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Kelly & Price, 2011; National Center for Educational Statistics). The labels for the classes and the students in the classes vary greatly from school to school but are nonetheless intended for students at different levels of performance and are thus taught accordingly.

Brief overview of student labeling. Students identified as having problems with school based literacies oftentimes either meet criteria for special education services or they are unofficially labeled with negative adjectives such as lazy, slow, or unmotivated. How to effectively teach and reach this latter group has been a goal of many researchers throughout decades of research. Classifying students based on a learning deficit implies knowledge of the traits of the students‘ difficulties (Franzak 2008; Heward, 2005) meaning that categorizing learners into groups allows for services to be provided based on specific needs. Thus having homogenous groups, teachers are able to make decisions based on what the group needs.

As reported in various studies, educators have labeled these lower track students as slow (Clifford, 1968; McGill-Franzen, 1987), reluctant (Beckman, 1984; Christian-Smith, 1988; Love & Hamston, 2003; Lamburg 1977; Wilhelm, 1997), remedial (Alfassi, 1998; Byrk & Thum, 1989; Wilhelm, 1997), marginalized (Franzak, 2006; Moje, Young, Readance, & Moore, 2000; Schofield & Rogers, 2004), at-risk (Fisher, 2004; Pinnell, 1985), struggling (Ash 2002; Hall, 2007; Ivey 1999), low (Anderson, Mason, & Shirey, 1984; Berends, 1995;), and poor (Anderson, 1970; Bettleheim, 1961; Broadus & Bloodgood 1999, Davey 1988; Hall, 2009).

The complex task of labeling struggling learners can change shape under the scrutiny of teachers, students, and researchers. The term ―struggling reader" has been debated and contested through the years (Alvermann, 2001; Franzak 2006). The argument tends to revolve around not only the intended scope of the label, but also the designator of the label itself. For example, a

guidance counselor using the term *slow reader* can have a drastically different connotation than the same label used by a fellow classmate. In the first case, the counselor may be seeking additional support or testing for special education services whereas in the second case it might be derogatory slam meant to hurt.

Throughout life, there are many instances when others assign a label to an individual, and sometimes these labels are accurate, but sometimes they take on lives of their own. Alvermann (2001) argued, "often our identities as readers are decided for us, as when others label us as avid readers, slow readers, mystery readers, and the like" (p. 676). All of these labels convey considerable meaning. Readers who are believed to be struggling have generated many debates among educational stakeholders, as terminology across the decades continues to shift as researchers and teachers strive to address the concerns of the readers. Literacy scholars point to the unfavorable cultural baggage that accompanies the aforementioned labels (Alvermann, 2001; Moje et al, 2000). In sum, the diverse nature of the group makes it complicated for researchers and educators to adequately label, define, and therefore, teach.

Teaching to a label. Hallinan (2004) reported that the practice of tracking or ability grouping began over a century ago with the arrival of immigrants into the United States. The low or basic track served students who were seeking the survival skills of functioning on the job, and non-college curriculum became identifiable based on socio-economic status and race (Finley, 1984). Remedial tracks were often established and coincided with the busing in of minority students to schools that have not typically been considered diverse (Finley, 1984; Oakes, 2005). Hammer (1983) stated that the lowest track in his high school was called basic and "the basics are black" (p. 39). Able and willing students were not found in the remedial track because teachers made the decisions to manage struggling students in a rigid and unmotivating classroom

(Finley, 1984; Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Hammer, 1983; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2005). If teachers were forced to teach in lower tracks, they were often generally displeased (Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Hammer, 1983; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2005); moreover, the language used by many teachers was negative and demeaning toward students who were struggling to keep up with school-based literacies.

The social constructionist position that all knowledge is reliant on the social exchanges between individuals seems useful to teachers emphasizing that changing expectations, institutions, environments, or approaches can change the experience of those participating (Crotty, 2003). Therefore, focusing on how teacher decisions, practices, and literacy expectations for students is paramount to understanding the construction of learning. These decisions include curricula, instructional stategies, and expectations for student learning. Many research studies have looked directly at learning and instruction, examining, for example, how the social roles and expectations in individual classrooms shaped thinking and literacy education (Langer, 2002; Lee 2001; Rex 2001) and the different kinds of student learning that develop based on the emphasis of the teachers (Hillocks, 1999; Sperling & Woodlief, 1997).

Another set of research studies surrounding labeling explored the depth of teacher/student discussions in the classroom and teacher quality as central to developing understandings of literacy practices (Alvermann, 1996; Gambrell & Almassi, 1996; Guthrie, Schafer, Wang, & Afflerbach, 1995). Previous studies also suggested that non-mainstream students fare poorly in classrooms with ―traditional" lecture type approaches, which are often structured around the students‘ weaknesses (Gutierrez, 1994; Heath 1983).

A major reason for this inequity is that instruction is often unequally distributed by ability or track level. In higher English tracks, observers report that teachers generally decided to rely

on the canon of literature whereas lower track teachers often focus on popular or juvenile fiction (Oakes, 1985; Gamoran, 1993; Wold & Elish-Piper, 2005). Furthermore, teachers in the higher tracks have decided that these higher-level students can handle discussion-based classes better than other tracks (Gamoran, et al, 1995; Scherff & Piazza; 2008). Coincidently, Langer (2000, 2001) studied classrooms of varying levels that were deemed successful and found that across all these successful classrooms; the teacher chose discussion-based instruction. So, we know that discussions assist most students in deepening their levels of understanding, but many times we reserve this decision for discussion-based approaches for students with higher school-based, academic abilities. Yet, I argue that teachers need to assess the students' needs and make decisions accordingly. Some students might need lecture or direct instruction while others might need project-based. Teacher practices need to reflect decisions that will best help each student.

In addition to foregoing discussions in low or standard tracts, teachers often have lower expectations for students who have been labeled as struggling. Butler (2000) found that teachers who reserved judgment on a student's abilities until after assigned tasks were complete were more likely to have higher expectations than those who judged early and then planned the tasks. Because the student is labeled, his or her learning might be hindered, as teachers do not think that the student has the ability to complete a given task. This same concept might work in favor of students who are labeled more favorably. This constraint of labeling deeply affects the student's identity, as now she is no longer known as "Jill", but as "Jill who can't read." With the lowering of expectations comes the devaluing of students' strengths and identities, which I believe influences the teachers practices.

Teachers might also revert to a deficit model of teaching. Deficit model teaching is when teachers teach students focusing on what skills they are lacking, devaluing their abilities, and

marginalizing students by not offering curriculum that meets high standards. Delpit (1995) contended that the deficit model leads to a stereotyping of students where they receive a watered-down curriculum. These stereotypes or labels project negative connotations, encouraging some teachers to give up on students while other teachers still search for ways to "fix" the reading "problems" of students. Because labels tend to focus on a difficulty a student is having, some teachers may think only in terms of what the student cannot do rather than what they can do and learn. For example, Jordan, Lindsay, and Stanovich (1997) reported that in their study of teachers, teachers who assumed a deficit presumed an inability for the student to offer anything to the class and dismissed the student as a lost cause (see also Franzak, 2008; Langer 2002). Viewing students as deficit based on a label is a disservice to the student, and oftentimes teachers minimalize curriculum, which limits students' learning to decontextualized and simple material.

Perhaps the most complex difficulty for teachers and students in regards to labeling is that labeling students as *struggling* lumps them all into the same category; thus, educators lose a sense of individualism and often fail to differentiate regarding each student's difficulties in reading. Oftentimes teachers assume that all children with a particular label share the exact same traits (Fink, 2006; Heward, 2001). Adequately defining *struggling* learner is difficult since each student who is struggling may be struggling with different aspects of the learning process. Learning is an intricate process involving context of social relationships as well as the cognitive influence that has long been studied. The complexity of the learning process further complicates the label of *struggling* as we add to the "what counts as literacy" debate. Not only do communities construct what counts as literacy, but they construct who is literate and who is not (Rose, 1989). Because language is a shared affair that is social in nature, researchers must connect language with the circumstances surrounding the use of the language to be able to

explain the meanings of the socially constructed label of *struggling* (Gee, 2008; Heath, 1983). Language and labels are positioned within particular contexts of political, social, cultural, environmental, and historical settings (Dyson, 1990; Finders, 1997).

Policies Affect Teacher Decisions

As I sat in my middle school classroom grading a stack of papers, I had three options for grades: *Exceeds*, *Meets,* or *Does Not Meet* since the school system where I was employed no longer gave number or traditional letter grades. Unfortunately, I marked *DNM* on most of them, but then I often dropped my pen and called my instructional coach with myriad questions. If state policy says that any student who correctly answers 20 out of 50 questions on the reading Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) meets the state expectation for passing the grade level standards, should I not have had more *Meets* than *DNM*s on my students‘ papers? If 2/5 is passing for state policy, should I align my expectations with the standard? As a parent I would be mortified to know that my daughter could pass the CRCT with a 40. But as a teacher I had to make decisions. Do I maintain high expectations? Do I lower my expectations? Do I quit? How would this and similar policies play out in the classroom? What happens if I interpret the policy differently than other teachers?

For the last sixty years, educational stakeholders have sounded many alarms about the ineffectiveness of schools in the United States (Hillocks, 2002). Moreover, policymakers have equated true edification and knowledge with high-test scores. Recently, NCLB legislation is ―sucking the life out of the public schools, turning teachers into test-driven automatons, and driving talent from the profession” (Carey, 2008, p. 1). The way that policymakers and administrators have decided to enact NCLB is a legitimate concern; some teachers, schools,

systems, and states have swung the curricula pendulum too far and forced teachers into a kill and drill or read-a-script teaching strategy that has created what Carey (2008) called a ―pedagogical straitjacket" (p. 1).

Hillocks (2002) argued that state assessments influence what is taught in the classroom; in other words, the assessments--not the standards--drive instruction. Oftentimes, I hear teachers comment that they are not teaching to the test, but they have decided to teach the students how to take the test to ensure that specific features and testing designs are taught before testing season arrives. There seem to be many inconsistencies between the standards and the state assessments. For example, how does one write a multiple-choice question that demonstrates mastery for the Georgia standard: ―ELA8W3 The student uses research and technology to support writing. The student plans and conducts multiple-step information searches by using computer networks and modems." After I worked with state testing officials in 2008, I learned that this standard is assessed by asking students to properly sequence a list of steps. So, what decisions do teachers make: do they use the standard and work with students or do they simply practice ordering in multiple-choice format? Thinking of this question on standards leads me to discuss how policies and assessments affect teachers and teachers' decisions as they prepare for students in their classroom.

Policy driven assessments. A significant source of evidence about one's commitment to a particular view of learning is reflected in decisions about how to assess learning. High levels of learning are multifaceted, complex, and difficult to assess on a straightforward multiple-choice test as shown above in the example from the state department. The complexities of designing an assessment that measures multifarious, higher order thinking skills make it easier for assessments

to draw conclusions and make assumptions about students based on an instrument that we know does reflect the domain effectively.

Federal policies, especially since the 1990s, attempted to create school environments that are meant to improve teaching and learning through better assessments. However, NCLB's version of standards and assessment has had some distorting effects on instructional practices and curricula decisions. Though I am critical of NCLB and standards based approaches, this does not mean that I am against these initiatives; I do not want any child to be passed over or passed on and denied the opportunity to learn. I do, nonetheless, feel that they leave much to be desired. Further, according to the National Research Council Board on Testing and Assessment, ~~"a~~ccountability provides a way to focus assistance to our schools… without developing school capacity, accountability leads to inappropriate practices, such as efforts to increase test scores without improving student learning" (Elmore & Rothman, 1999, p. 6).

One problem with policy-driven assessments is that through policies and a fear of falling behind other countries, policymakers have moved to increasing the level of centralized curriculum decisions in order to standardize content and subjects matters, to eventually raise student achievement (Wraga, 2009). Policymakers seem to think that if they control all aspects of curriculum then American students would be able to compete globally. As standardization of curriculum occurred, I felt the noose tighten around my neck as classroom decisions were taken from my hands and replaced with scripted lessons. Many Georgia teachers have curriculum maps, frameworks, and lessons that should be taught on any given day. Most teachers do not have the authority or autonomy to change or deviate from the curriculum.

Fortunately, there is very little support that argues for a centralized curriculum to improve student achievement (Wraga, 2009). For example, some states, New York, California, and Texas,

have increased common curricula, introduced rigorous standards, and held students accountable for this mandated curricula, but student achievement has not improved in any significant way (Cuban 1995; Ravitch, 2010; Wraga, 1999). In fact, Georgia's standards have been ranked "as one of the best in the country" by the Fordham Foundation (Cox, 2010, public.doe.k12.ga.us/pea_communications.aspx). Georgia's curriculum was ranked 5th in the country due to its "state-of-the-art" standards and accountability measures for each student. Centralizing the curriculum and instituting it without deviation led Superintendent Cox to state, "We will see all of our test scores improve even farther." The goal, then, is not that we will see students learn and be serious thinkers, but they will be able to pass a 10-hour multiple choice tests. Statements like the ones made by Kathy Cox are published and publicized widely, even if there is only a minimal amount of improvement in student achievement. Hursh (2007) found that states where achievement on state assessments has gone up, so has the dropout rate, retention in grades, and students receiving special education services. The numbers are growing for the states, but I am not sure they are the right ones.

As top down approaches increase, I believe teacher decisions decrease. This is ironic in that experts and policymakers outside the classroom are making decisions and forcing teachers to follow a structured plan. Taking the power away from the teacher and students who are transacting with each other has proven to be the least effective way to implement curriculum changes (Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992; Wraga, 2009). Hoping to "teacher proof" curriculum by stripping teachers of the decisions has not work as planned; teachers adapted lessons based on who they were teaching, which means that in spite of student learning, the overall goals of the program were not met. Such programs (for example: Read 180 or Read Naturally) are highly scripted with the goal of improving achievement scores, if the teacher follows the "clear path"

(http://read180.scholastic.com/about). While this clear path may increase isolated reading skills, for me, reading is more about using skill to make meaning and develop analytical thinking.

In places where teachers still have autonomy and decisions, where teachers collaborate with students to develop curriculum specifically to meet the needs of the students, and students are free to think and question, these are the places where achievement is improved (Wraga, 2009). Following Wraga‘s line of reasoning, teachers, who have the autonomy to interpret standards, make decisions, and power to engage students in authentic pedagogy, end up with higher performing students.

Pulling It All Together

In this review of literature, I have shown myriad factors that affect personal and professional decisions and practices in teaching. Within this context, what practices teachers engage in within their classrooms, the decisions that teachers make on literacy and labeling of students, and the complex ties between teacher autonomy and policy are often discussed in a solitary way or with brief mention of one aspect or others. This leaves me wondering how a teacher can work and function in an environment with an onslaught of administrative expectations and requirements from outside the classroom, plus balance instructional and relational concerns from inside the classroom to be effective. Specifically, this study will not isolate influences; this study will seek to understand a great range of the contributing factors that play into teachers‘ decisions and practices as they work within the political and instructional structures of the school. Whereas many studies zero in on one or two influencing forces and many teachers, this study zeroes in on a single teacher‘s practices and decisions with the myriad influential structures and expectations that were in place within school, county, state, and federal guidelines. More broadly, this study contributed to the interest of middle school teaching and

learning practices and understanding decisions of how to creatively operate with these systems, which may lead to a more respectful schooling experience for both teachers and students.

In 2007, Carl Cohn argued that a school environment fraught with conflict and distrust from authority figures only leads to more conflict, distrust, and fear within the classrooms (see also, McNeil, 2009). Educating students is a complex task that requires authority figures to harness the ~~"t~~alent of individuals instead of punishing them for noncompliance and bureaucratic mandates and destroying their initiative" (Cohn, 2007, p. 4). Many times researchers, teachers, and politicians want silver bullets or magic wands that will fix all of the problems within the schools immediately. However, this is not possible. There are no perfect theories as flawed individuals operate within a personal set and understanding of theories. This study combined these numerous aspects of school life to generate a further understanding of how a teacher made decisions regarding her practice in light of reform movements, administrative expectations, and personal pedagogical beliefs.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The purpose of this study was to explore how a teacher engaged in practices and decisions within the structure of the school to meet both administrative and personal expectations. This study informs pre-service and in-service educators about the practices and decisions that teachers can make to improve the school experience for more students. Additionally, this study has implications for teacher educators as it shows the complexities of making decisions about teaching practices in modern schools. In this chapter, I describe the methodology and the underlying assumptions that guided my study. I describe the research design and how the methodology suits the nature of the study. I provide a context of the study and discuss how I selected the site and the participant involved. Finally, I outline my data generation procedures (Baker, 2004), review the data analysis, and discuss limitations of the study.

Methodology

I situated this research project within a pedagogy of respect frame viewing learning as a social practice (Bartlett, 2003; Dewey, 1915, 1927; Freire 2000; Street, 1994, 1995). From a sociocultural and critical perspective, I explored not only the practices themselves, but the decisions and power behind the practices and the meaning they held for the participant.

Case Study Design

A case study is an inquiry into an intensive bounded unit (Maxwell, 1996). One teacher was selected purposefully (Maxwell, 2005), which I considered an individual case in order to

better understand the participant‘s practices and decisions. This study followed Merriam's (1998) characterization of case studies as being heuristic, particular, and descriptive. It was heuristic as it provides explanations of how a teacher engaged in pedagogical decisions and practices. This study was also particularistic as I selected this teacher so that learning and understanding of what might make a classroom work in this specific time period of standardization (Fecho, Mallozzi & Shultz 2007; Marshall, 2009; Stewart 2010) and lack of teacher control. In addition, this case study was descriptive as data generated and constructed are presented in a detailed, narrative manner, providing rich descriptions of a teacher's decision-making and instructional practices. These particulars are important in understanding the role of teachers in middle schools and the influence a teacher‘s decisions has on classroom success for all individuals regardless of the students' background. Merriam (1998) explored how case studies could be arranged based on their orientation or function. According to these two distinctions, this study will be considered a descriptive case study as it provides a detailed account of the pedagogical decisions and practices of a middle school teacher.

I decided to conduct a single case study so that I could devote careful attention to that case and build a deeper understanding of the how and why a teacher makes decisions. The strength of a case study design is that compared to other methods, this method affords the researcher an examination of a ―case within its real-life context" (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Case studies are used to understand the meanings that people make in particular contexts (Dyson & Genishi, 2005); therefore, this study not only created detailed accounts of the decisions of a middle schoool teacher, but the study also explored the meaning behind those decisions.

Data generation. Interviewing is one method used within case study designs where the researcher and the participant have the opportunity to engage in dialogue on the topics and

nuances of the research topic. Interview questions are central to the discussion and cannot be viewed as neutral (Baker, 2004). Both the participant and the researcher bring different backgrounds and baggage to the dialogue where both individuals access this information and draw on their personal references to make meaning. It is enlightening to then consider that interviews are not collective in nature, but generative. Baker (2004) argued that generating data with the participant is the only way ~~o~~f identifying knowledge and logic *in use"* (p. 163). This sets up both parties as competent and engaged in further understanding the phenomenon that is being studied.

Perspectives in Interviewing

Researchers and participants engage in dialogue with each other, not from stable or static viewpoints, but from situated and varied perspectives (Warren, 2001). These perspectives incorporate the contexts and roles of the individual at the point in time of the interview as they are influenced by socially situated roles such as race, class, and gender. A research participant might shift to alternate perspectives throughout the interview just as the researcher might shift based on the new experience. Although each interview will hold its own meaning, these perspectives shape the context and flow of each subsequent interview. Participating in the same interview on a different day with a different perspective might offer varying responses from the participant. An important point to consider when socially constructing knowledge through interviews is that of the situated perspectives taken up by a single interviewee. I decided that just as the contexts of schools and teacher decisions are continually changing that a specific look across a semester could offer an in-depth exploration into how a teacher might shift her decisions and practices as situations shift around her.

In their work with middle class students, Maher and Tetreault (1991) demonstrated how interpretations reflected the positionality of the researcher and the participants. Observing relationships, they reflected on the highly gendered, raced, and classed dynamics within social groups. They argued alongside Haraway (1991) for new understandings that incorporate different constructions of knowledge as partial, political, and situated. Positionality means that essential characteristics of individuals are ~~r~~relational positions rather than essential qualities. Their effects and implications change according to context" (Tetreault, 1993, p.139). These insights provided researchers with a critical lens on how positionality and power influence knowledge production. Under this theory, all knowledge is linked to the contexts in which it is created. Accordingly, this study offered specific perspectives of particular contexts embedded within the cultures, languages, and traditions of an individual.

Situated knowledge is created through particular learning experiences that generate new knowledge. Experience forms perspectives that give shape to how interviews are structured and how understandings are gained from the interviews presented. As meaning is continually constructed through interactions with others, perspectives are dynamic and situated for every occurrence. I structured my interviews following concepts described by Zigo (1998) in her study of young adolescents' reading strategies. She sought to obtain individual perspectives about literacy instruction and interactions in the classroom. As Zigo interviewed students and teachers, everyone involved shifted their perceptions to incorporate new understandings gained from the interviews. Through this analysis, Zigo took a recursive stance affording ~~o~~ngoing refinement/reformulation of methodology and generation of theory" (p. 4). Thus, I would argue that as perspectives changed, subsequent interviews with the participants are altered to

encompass a new and growing body of knowledge. Perspectives are especially significant in qualitative interviewing, where meaning construction is imperative in the process of interpreting data.

Eliciting detailed perspectives required listening carefully to meaning that was being conveyed to be able to create new meaning (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and share the socially situated interactive story of the participants (Brockmeir & Carbaugh, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Qualitative interviewing is based in conversation (Herda, 1999; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) with the emphasis on researchers asking questions and listening (Casey, 1995; Rubin & Rubin, 2005, Spradley 1979). As in many types of interviews, listening closely allows the researcher to fulfill his or her purpose, which according to Spradley (1979) is to draw inferences from the rich stories of situated experiences where researchers construct meaning through the interaction, through careful consideration of what and how information is relayed (see also Riessman, 2008). Utilizing these techniques to construct meaning with the participant adds to the body of literature available on how teachers make decisions on a minute by minute, hour by hour, and/or day by day basis.

Additionally, I chose to use semi-structured interviews, offering me a technique that welcomed a set of guiding questions, but was flexible enough to follow deviations and clarify with follow-up questions (Brenner, 2006). This framework is often beneficial as the interview guide allows for topics to be grouped and questions to be altered (Lindof & Taylor 2002, p. 195). Semi-structured interviews allowed me to tailor questions to the context or situation of the person I was interviewing, thus, allowing more natural conversations in a research context. Because my theoretical framework emphasizes personal constructions of meaning while

exploring specific contexts, I decided against standardized or highly structured interviews where questions are not tailored to individual settings. Conversations allowed me to gain insight into the pedagogical practices and the factors influencing those decisions. To try to more fully understand practices required I not only engaged in conversation and storytelling, but also I needed to observe these decisions and practices as they were carried out in the school setting.

Research Conversations Informed by Observation

Observing performances in social worlds of schools and in interview settings can inform interviews. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) observed students in their school environment and then crafted written fictional profiles so that participants could engage with these scenarios during the interviews. Each boy within the interview setting read the creative profiles of other boys and responded to questions in order for the researchers to understand more specifically their thoughts concerning literacy. Smith and Wilhelm acknowledged that often adolescents have a hard time articulating themes in their personal lives if asked directly. However, through the use of the observations that informed interviews, they were able to infer meaning and construct beliefs based on the individual interviews. This process enabled a comparison across the boys and the culture at large with the hopes of generating practical strands of theory.

Similarly, Dressman (1997) explored the complexities of individuals and their reading preferences. In this study, Dressman used research methods to combine observations with interviews to supercede the performance of the interview by asking participants to perform formal tasks such as sorting books into categories. While performing these formal tasks, the participants shared their thought processes in regards to the sorting. Through conceptual inferences, Dressman was able to offer the media specialists of the local schools, in-depth information on race, class, and gender preferences for texts to include in the library. In the course

of observing prior to the interviews and in the interviews themselves, Dressman was able to examine the participants‘ social identities as they identified themselves in a situated context.

Both Dressman (1997) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002) chose qualitative interviewing techniques that allowed them access to understandings, knowledge and meaning making practices of the participants. In sum, through observations researchers can draw meanings and perspectives about others (Maxwell, 1996; Riessman, 2008). The observer-as-participant stance requires researchers to reveal their roles, but the extent of the participation in the setting is limited (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Although I have previously been highly involved in this school setting, I selected a less involved role in this study as I used classroom observations to engage in conversations with the participant (for example: Owodally, 2011; Winters, Belliveau, & Sherritt-Fleming, 2009). Utilizing observations allowed me to hear directives, to observe immediate reactions, to examine follow through, and to build questions for subsequent interviews.

Narrative Analysis Lenses and Strategies

Research that aspires to be critical in nature and inquiry-driven strives to understand and tackle injustices within a given social structure or society. Drawing from Paulo Freire (2000), I tried to maintain awareness of the social and political structures that influence a teacher as she made decisions within and about her classroom. The stance that ―critical theorists are interested in social change as it occurs in relation to social struggle" drove this study by exploring how and why teachers operate with a complex framework, thus, offering educators an example of how to overcome struggles that are prevalent within todays schools (Clark, 2006). Given this, narrative strategies of meaning-making are an appropriate choice for data collection and analysis for several reasons.

First, aligning with sociocultural perspectives, narrative strategies are ―retrospective meaning making" experiences," the forming of past experiences to form new understandings (Chase, 2005, p. 656). Narrative strategies allow for understanding of participants' actions, reactions, and views and for arranging events into a cohesiveness that allows the participant and others to examine the actions and consequences of whole events over time (Chase 2005). Furthermore, narrative strategies describe events and encourage the voice and emotions of the participant to be prevalent within the stories. As I was interested in the construction of practices and decisions, narratives afforded the participant a voice to represent herself as she told the *how*s and *why*s of her decision-making processes and how they shaped her teaching decisions.

Another reason narrative analysis works well when drawing from critical theory is that in both critical theory and in narrative strategies, researchers use the collected stories as actions. The participant's voice is brought to the forefront where he/she is encouraged to clarify, enlighten, endorse, criticize, and corroborate or confront the way things are (Chase, 2005). Using narrative supported the participant through explorations of the interrelatedness of mandates and her personal teaching philosophies, looking specifically at how she moved in and out of decisions that affect students and their learning in the classroom. Moreover, it will allow others -- teacher educators, in-service teachers, and pre-service teachers – to see an active voice from a classroom. Highlighting a single voice will focus readers on what was happening in this classroom and how this particular teacher navigated through these dynamic events given her context and social situation. Combining the ―what, how, and where makes the narrator's voice particular" within active stories, researchers can move from factual descriptions to ―highlight the versions of self, reality, and experience, the storyteller produces through the telling" (Chase,

2005, p. 657; see also Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Thus, allowing the researcher to look at the facts as they are embedded in specific social, political, and personal positionings.

Finally, using narrative strategies will not only allow the participant to tell her stories of her decision-making processes, instructional practices, and how she winds her way through the trails of schools, but will allow me to also be viewed as a narrator (Chase, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this sense, I also told a story as I generated interpretations, presented the findings, and shared her voice with others. Likewise the aforementioned reasons for aligning narrative analysis with critical theory also applied to me; I studied my actions and reactions to the data that was generated, I developed my own voice as a researcher as I constructed stories, and I operated within and around a specific social and political setting in the hopes of creating a culture of change that challenges the status quo of many teachers and schools today. Having discussed the rationale that underscores this study, I will discuss the particulars of generating these stories and how they were interpreted and shared.

Methods

Research in school educational settings makes qualitative studies distinctive from other disciplines due to the complexity of dealing with multiple age groups and differences across varying contexts. People of different age and status groups view education from unique perspectives, such as principals and teachers‘ conceptions on policy implications may vary (Lingard & Blackmore, 1997; Moyle, 2006). The dynamic nature of conducting research within school settings requires researchers to design studies using appropriate research methods to achieve the goals of the project. I sought to answer the research question: What practices does this teacher engage in within the political and instructional structures of her school so that her decisions meet the expectations of administration and she is still able to enact her pedagogical

beliefs? I explored pedagogical decisions and practices using observations and interviews with a teacher who is regarded by colleagues as a master teacher. I argue that interviews and observations are well suited to inquiries that are built upon a constructionist theoretical framework. These methods tend to fall into the constructionist epistemological category where meaning is made through active engagement and dialogue with participants to draw interpretations, not scientific facts and theories (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Warren 2001). I position interviews and observations as an interchange where the participant reflects and makes meaning of her worlds and experiences. Not only do researchers involve themselves in co-constructing meaning with the participants, but also interpret personal reflections of the participant and themselves. In this section, I describe the context of the study, the participant and how she was selected, data collection methods including interviews and observations with field notes. Additionally, I explain data analysis methods and why these methods were chosen.

Context of the Study

The small city of McKenzie brings a long heritage of pride and slow growth. First settled in 1784 by a small group of Revolutionary War veterans, this community was originally spread over a thousand rural acres. McKenzie now has only 337 acres. With the opening of a major interstate in the 1970s, McKenzie began a steady increase in population and industry due to accessibility to a major Southeastern city.

Recently McKenzie is suffering growing pains as it shifts from being a small town into an upscale metropolitan suburb. In the last ten years, Harmony Middle School, the largest middle school in the city of McKenzie, has seen changes in demographics. Alongside my work at the university, I taught in this school for nine years and understand the shifting dynamics

within the school by maintaining close relationships with teachers and students. Once known as a rural school with a farming background, it is now considered a semi-suburban school with an influx of upper middle class students moving into newly built million dollar homes. According to the US census, the population of the city of McKenzie has grown by 52.8% in nine years (2000-2009).

In 2008 Harmony Middle showed an ethnic diversity of 10% comprised of small populations of Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students. This is a significant shift from 2000 when the school was 98% White. Also during this decade, the median household income increased by over 15,000 dollars (an increase of 27%) with an estimated $50,000 per capita (Census.gov). With this new level of income, the percentage of students who qualified for free and reduced lunch lowered from close to 80% in 2000 to close to 20% at the time of the study. Essentially, the school population shifted from a White, poor, rural community to a mostly White, middle to upper-middle class, suburban community.

According to the participant, these population and demographic changes indicate that the working class or working poor students were not being served as were in the past. Lily lovingly labeled these two varying sets of demographics as the ―Skoal versus cell phone" demographics, which will be explained more in-depth in subsequent chapters. One change in how students and families are served is that nine years ago Harmony sent home paper copies of announcements and notices. At the time of the study, Harmony almost exclusively utilized the school's website to communicate with parents and guardians. The school personnel did extend via the website that paper copies of policies and announcements were available by coming into the office to pick up the copy. So parents must have Internet access to know what is happening with their children at school. This example is hard to argue in a school where most of the students' parents have

Internet access either at home or through work, but the administrators and teachers seem to be ignoring a portion of the population and denying information to some families who might not have access to the Internet.

The scenery surrounding the school is perhaps the biggest indicator of how the neighborhood has transformed. As little as five years ago, the landscape surrounding the school was a sheep pasture and lake. By the time of the study, the school was engulfed by million-dollar homes and an upscale golf course. Harmony recently began offering a wide range of gifted and advanced classes in math and language arts with multiple sections at each grade level. There was also one remedial reading classroom where regular education students were served in small groups of eight to twelve with an intense focus on increasing reading levels. Additionally, standardized test scores have recently increased with more students scoring in the –exceeding" category and only a handful not meeting the standards.

Harmony Middle School was selected for this research study because it is close to my home, providing easy access, and having taught at Harmony, I had somewhat of an understanding of the school's unique dynamics as it has made its shift from its rural roots. I have lived in the community for many years and have established a good rapport with administration at both the school and district levels. The school was currently undertaking professional development in regards to Reading, Writing, and Thinking across the Curriculum. The school district's curriculum director and secondary language arts coordinator, as well as the school's instructional coach and principal, expressed interest in studying how successful teachers made decisions about their practices.

Participant Selection

I selected a teacher named Lily (all names of people and places in this study are pseudonyms). At the time of the study, Lily had been teaching for 14 years all of which have been in a middle school classroom except for one year as a high school teacher. Lily and I taught in the same school for eight years; as her colleague, I informally observed her interactions with students, teachers, parents, and administrators. I had many conversations with her and often wondered how she engaged students, respected students, negotiated county mandates, stayed positive in light of policies, stayed out of trouble with administration, was nominated and elected teacher of the year for Harmony, and generated high test scores. This study explored her practices and decisions in the hopes of shedding light on how Lily stood her ground as we crossed the rocky terrains of administrative expectations not always aligning with personal pedagogical beliefs.

Lily was recruited for this study for several different reasons. First, Lily stated that she believed in a healthy balance of meaningful inquiry, reading, and writing to promote student learning and success. Through these strategies, students were engaged and interest was piqued. She promoted and required educational excellence in her room, and the students seemed to follow her to understand the *hows* and *whys* of their learning to further this excellence.

Second, I selected this teacher based on her successes. She has been nominated multiple times and elected Teacher of the Year for Harmony Middle School. She has won numerous awards, presented at varying levels of conferences, and most of all she was respected by administration, other teachers, parents, and students. I sought to understand her decision processes and deeply explore how she made those decisions and maintain her autonomy.

Thirdly, this participant was chosen because of her philosophy of education. I have read numerous philosophies of education that pre- and in-service teachers have written over the years, and Lily's was the only one that I remember ever mentioning social class as a construct that must be considered when teaching. "All students can learn" seems to be a common phrase in most philosophies of education, but Lily's was explicit in that all students can learn regardless of their socioeconomic level, race, or gender. This belief in *all* students was considerable in a school where teachers continually seemed to write off students from poorer backgrounds; therefore, Lily stood out as a teacher who valued all students and encouraged all students to achieve their potential.

Data Generation

Qualitative interviews have varying ranges and purposes; in this single case study, I generated conversations with the participant after observations in the classroom and varying levels of meetings. This dialogue provided access to unique details of the participant's perspectives on specific topics (Gillham, 2000; Ho, O'Farrell, Hong, & You, 2006). Generating these unique outlooks on languages, cultures, and knowledge was a great opportunity as I was able to clarify and gather details of particular nuances that arose during the interview process.

Data were generated for a little over four months in the fall of 2010. Lily and I engaged in formal conversations for nearly 500 minutes and countless side conversations. The formal interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Through over 2700 minutes of observations of Lily's daily interactions within the school, I generated questions based on what was observed. I used weekly observations to generate a semi-structured interview guide that was used with the participant (See Appendix B for a sampling of interview questions).

Observations. Participant observations allow researchers to document participant's engagement in activities, conversations, and behaviors within the setting of the school. I argue that with only interviews a researcher cannot know how a participant acts in the classroom; therefore, observing Lily before and after interviews allowed me to gather actions and opinions, which guided our dialogue on the intended topic. I observed and interacted with Lily without having significant interactions with others. Throughout the study, I observed Lily's teaching in her classroom, planning her lessons, and interacting with others in team, parent, and faculty meetings. I observed her teaching whole class, her small group instruction, and her one-on-one tutoring sessions. Paying close attention to pedagogical practices and decisions during these times of interaction and times of planning allowed me to identify specific practices that promoted student engagement in learning so that during the interviews we explored how these decisions were made.

Field notes. Field notes were an essential part of the observations as they were a written account of what I saw, ~~h~~eard, and experienced in the field" (Horowitz, 1989, p. 17). I took various types of notes depending on the situation that I encountered. For example, I took "~~o~~n the-fly" notes, as described by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) as notes, phrases, or key words to help remember events during observations. Times that I took *on-the-fly* notes included informal conversations and observations. I kept a journal with me for observations of Lily so that I could capture conversations that we had even if I could not write out an entire field note. Observations in the classroom and in other meetings were also documented in this journal with as much specificity as possible. I took detailed and *on-the-fly* observation notes while in the field; however, I also recorded notes and thoughts on my impressions and understandings after leaving the site (Horowitz, 1989). The notes I took after leaving the field were both descriptive of

situations and conversations, expounding the notes taken during the observation and reflective in that I generated thoughts and questions for the interview settings with Lily (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

Narrative Data Analysis

While generating data with Lily, I simultaneously analyzed data (Merriam, 1998). Data analysis formally began with the preparation of transcripts (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). All digital recordings of interviews were mapped. As I expanded and reread field notes, I took note of developing ideas, categories, and relationships so that I could generate questions to ask during the formal interviews. I took further note of developing ideas, categories, and relationships and identified points that need clarifying (Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1998) as interviews where mapped and studied.

As I constructed Lily‘s stories I drew from several scholars work as I made interpretations to share Lily‘s practices and decisions with others all the while constructing my own research story. This study moved away from traditional theme-based approaches as the goal of this project was to fully understand the practices a single teacher has in regards to maintaining her pedagogical beliefs as she made decisions in her particular classroom. Therefore, when it came to interpreting narratives, I began with the participant‘s voice and stories, thereby ―extending the narrator-listener relationship and the active work of listening‖ into the analytic process (Chase, 2006, p. 663). Furthermore, I drew from Bamberg‘s (1997) three levels of narrative interpretation: I listened for how Lily positioned herself and others with her specific school context (e.g. labeling, victims, emotions), how Lily positioned herself in relation to her audience (e.g. administrators, teachers, students, parents, researcher), and how Lily positioned herself to herself. Essentially, I developed an understanding and interpretation of how Lily

constructed herself and negotiated the gaps between her pedagogical beliefs and structures and requirements from others. This is in line with my social construction and critical framework as I worked with the participant to construct new knowledge as we explored teacher decisions in regards to power and autonomy within her school.

Analytical memos. Memos provided an opportunity to ―reflect on issues raised in the setting and how they relate to the larger theoretical, methodological and substantive issues (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p.161). I used memos to stimulate analytical thinking and to help notice the patterns in the data we generated (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Maxwell 1996). I also used memos to address and explore my positions as a researcher, my feelings about the school, participant, and topics of interest or concern (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Memos allowed me to link my knowledge of theory and previous research with new findings. Although I see many advantages of using narrative strategies within a single case study design, there are researchers who are judgmental of both the techniques used in narrative methodology and the narrow focus of a single participant in a case study. These limitations are presented in the following section and a rationale is provided for why I maintained my commitment to narrative strategies.

Limitations

In-depth case studies can provide extensive insight into a community‘s culture (Berends, 2006; Gillham, 2000). Riessman (2008) argued the difference between statistical and qualitative approaches: Statistical methods strive to generalize findings that will apply to all individuals whereas qualitative methods strive to generalize proposed theories. While it may not be possible to make assumptions about other communities, the in-depth information generated at a single location can be compared across other classrooms and schools to begin to generate theory that is practical. These ―conceptual inferences” drawn from comparing social processes and actions are

a legitimate process of qualitative research goals (Riessman, 2008, p. 13). Drawing inferences from interview and observation data prompted me to move from within the data set to expand into theoretical implications for further study and research.

A common critique of single case studies is that they are often too unique and nuanced to have value to the research community at large. However, even within a single case study there are multiple sources of evidence from which theories can be drawn (Yin, 2009). Using observations, interviews, and analytic memos together can ascertain uniting evidence to make findings more comprehensive. For example, a researcher might be able to observe a teacher in action, dialogue with the teacher, talk with others about the participant, and examine the teacher‘s formal observation records, which are completed each year as required by the state. Having all of these different data sources that point to similar findings can help the researcher draw conclusions with more confidence than a single data source.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1984), extended engagement in the field, persistent observation, and triangulation increase credibility. In qualitative studies, reliability and validity must lie with the researcher‘s adherence to ethical standards in data generation. In an interview setting the interviewer is a ―research instrument‖ and thus must function in a transparent, professional way (Gillham, 2000). Freeman, deMarris, Preissle, Roulston, and St. Pierre (2007) argue that ―there are no ‗pure,‘ ‗raw‘ data, uncontaminated by human thought and action, and the significance of data depends on how material fits into the architecture of corroborating data‖ (p. 27).

The importance of validity and the wide range of ways validity is constructed in qualitative research creates tensions among researchers from varying fields. In quantitative studies, terms such as relevance, measurability, and accuracy have been used to describe validity

(Lahm, 2007). In qualitative research, where the interviewer is the instrument, researchers must commit to communicate the trustworthiness of their findings. In fact, Freeman et al. (2007) and Yin (2009) remind qualitative researchers that the question –Why am I supposed to believe this? – must be central to any research project. This requires much of a researcher. The researcher must openly admit how he or she is present in the research question, data collection and analysis, interpretation, and in the final description of the findings. In qualitative research and interviewing ~~–v~~alidity cannot be defined in advance by a certain procedure but must be attended to at all times as the study shifts and turns" (Freeman, et al. p. 29). Providing a detailed description of the interview and observation techniques used is significantly more important in constructing a framework and evidence of trust in reporting data. Given these tensions, justifying and supporting an argument for using qualitative interviewing is a useful tool for reaching the goal of creating spaces for participants to explore and reflect upon their experiences.

Subjectivities

Peshkin (1988) claimed that a researcher's subjectivities impact the entire research process and that the researcher should ~~–s~~ystematically identify their subjectivity throughout the course of the research" (p. 17). He extended these thoughts by stating that the subjectivities may shift depending on the project or setting; yet, they are always present and must be examined to clearly present the researcher and the data. Transparency is a crucial element of qualitative research. I have had many life experiences that have shaped my view of teachers' choices and these experience must be named in order to study the phenomenon from a fresh perspective.

I am a White, middle-class female who lived near and taught at Harmony Middle School. In my teaching role, I was responsible for educating middle schoolers according to local and state standards, as well as tutoring, coaching, and sponsoring clubs in which the students are

or have been involved. In addition to understanding, I wanted to elicit change, or at least the idea of change, in other teachers‘ minds and practices to capitalize and reshape thinking around how teachers can enact a purposeful and productive pedagogy. Fecho, Graham, and Hudson-Ross (2005) presented this exposure to new ideas in hopes of a response or action as a ―wobble" (p. 175) where practitioner and student, alike, are open to others‘ considerations.

To borrow from Peshkin (1988), I have a ―Justice –Seeking I" (p. 19). I tend to fight for the underdog in any situation, even if the situation does not directly influnce or involve me. I hate to see injustices or unfair situations and will travel great lengths to right these injustices. In my experience when I felt constrained by policies or other factors, I often would take up the problem and try to have it changed. In fact this aggressiveness toward things I considered unfair would result in a meeting with administrators. I am intrigued with the phenomenon of teacher‘s perceptions of expectations influencing how they treat students and the decisions they make for classroom practices. Teachers expend effort and utilize their culture to meet the expectations of peers, parents, and teachers, which begins a cyclical process wherein teachers might shift their pedagogical practices. When educators make decisions based on a directive or new policy and not what is best for the students they teach, they sometimes pave the way for unfair and unnecessary control from administrators. How can teachers make decisions and navigate the bureaucracy of schools to maintain autonomy and student success?

Summary

The major purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of what practices a teacher engaged in within the political and instructional framework of the school so her decisions might meet the expectations of administration and herself. As I described in this chapter, I generated data with a teacher who appeared to be able to successfully navigate her school in the

hopes of gaining knowledge on decision-making processes and instructional practices that can inform and enhance schools. Data included observation field notes, interview transcripts, and analytic memos. Using observations of practice to inform interviews allowed me to understand how a teacher enacted decisions within the larger context. This research has the potential to provide educators and researchers with a deeper understanding of how policies and mandates interact with teacher decisions of curriculum and methods and how a teacher can maintain autonomy while navigating the rocky terrain of the standards era (Marshall, 2009).

CHAPTER 4

INTERTWINING HISTORIES: A REFLECTION ON SCHOOL CHANGES AND CONNECTED IDENTITIES

On a cool, October day in 2010, Lily and I sat in the front of her classroom having a conversation over a cup of tea. As I was in my researcher role, this conversation was official, meaning that I had prepared questions based on field notes written during earlier observations, and I was digitally recording the conversation with the intent of analyzing and learning from her stories. However, in my role as former middle school reading teacher, Lily asked me questions about how to help a student struggling with content area reading. We discussed a particular student who had been in my Title I reading class the year before and came up with different support strategies to help this student hopefully be more successful with content.

Two roles should be enough over a cup of tea, but as our positions and conversations were always in a state of flux, we then added another layer of complexity. The principal of Harmony Middle School swung open the classroom door; Lily and I swiveled in our seats to face the visitor. The principal appeared to be in a hurry and, without acknowledging either of us, blurted out, —Where is the other [teaching] team?" Lily explained that they usually met in one of the cross-team teachers' rooms for their meetings. Lily had barely finished the sentence when the door began to slowly close. The door of Lily's classroom is on a hinge much like a storm door on a house. The principal had been propping the door open with her body, but as she moved, the door began to creep back into its closed position. Lily and I watched the door until we heard that final click that meant it was all the way closed.

As we turned back to our conversation and cooling tea, Lily glanced at the digital recorder and asked, "Can this be off the record?" As I reached for the recorder, I realized how complicated research is in a place where the researcher has a history. Not only a professional history, but a friendship with the participant that only added to the complexities we engaged in during this conversation and throughout the study. Powering off the recorder, Lily shared a story about the principal during which I repeatedly said, "I'm sorry." We discussed some different options of ways to handle this particular situation. While she reiterated some of her frustrations, she motioned for me to turn the recorder back on with a "let's get back to business" look. Pushing play on the recorder, we picked up right where we had left off before the interruption that sparked a sidebar.

These complex interactions with Lily created many internal questions that I knew I needed to grapple with as I began to analyze the field texts from this study. These interactions were complicated as my positions and Lily's positions shifted throughout the interchanges of dialogue: we are friends, colleagues, teachers, parents, wives, sisters, and patients (we both had surgery just prior to the study). How do I represent Lily and her teaching stories ethically and professionally while protecting her and our many relationships?

Intertwining Histories

What happens when members of a school community become outsiders once they move into their university researcher roles? How is the researcher positioned in relation to her own school community, social group, research setting, and the academy? While qualitative educational researchers often theorize and reflect about their own subjectivities and privileges in relation to their research participants, the insider-outsider researcher must deal with personal experiences and identities in relation to participants, as well as the experiences and identities of

participants and must try to understand how these complex histories intertwine to tell their own stories. I am, in many ways an insider due to my having taught at this school for nearly a decade. Additionally I am an outsider, a member of the very community of academia that oftentimes ―others" teachers in their research. I am an insider-outsider researcher in the field of literacy education, a former middle school teacher from the school where the participant still teaches. I have taught alongside Lily, the participant in my study, under the same principals, through the same changes and same policies. I taught many of the same students. Yet, I am no longer a teaching member of that school community. I share the same vocabulary and understand many of the school's idiosyncrasies, such as the specifics and confusion of a new grading system. Lily and I served together on leadership teams, school committees, teaching teams, and club sponsorships. Our daughters have gone to school together, swum together, and attended each other's birthday parties. Our lives are intertwined and our relationships are complex, in addition to the multifarious context and culture of change within the school. This chapter outlines how these myriad complexities came into play in the process of conducting research within a southeastern middle school that has undergone much change since No Child Left Behind.

Turning Inside-Out or Outside-In? The Insider/Outsider Quandary

At the beginning of this research project, I was aware of the politics and privilege of my roles and relations to the research participant and the setting where she taught. I was eager to experience the process of constructing meaning and telling Lily's story because running alongside Lily's story was my story as a teacher. By observing and talking with Lily about her beliefs and philosophies of teaching and learning, I would also engage in an internal dialogue about my philosophies of teaching and learning. This personal reflexivity required me to be aware of my contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process.

Reflexivity allowed me to acknowledge the impossibility of remaining outside and neutral in this research project (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999; Vagle, 2008), which is vital in any qualitative study, but especially in a study where the researcher is highly connected with the school and participant being studied.

Throughout the length of the study, Lily and I engaged in conversations about how she created a pedagogical space for herself and her students in a school climate that appeared to prefer conformity. I had vague ideas about her teaching practices and the strengths she brought to the school community. For instance, I was familiar with her philosophy of education as I had read her application for Harmony's Teacher of the Year. About her philosophy, Lily wrote,

> I incorporate new ideas and concepts with contagious enthusiasm for learning. I believe a healthy balance of meaningful inquiry, reading, and writing is critical in teaching. Through all of these strategies, I am able to pique student interest, help students become aware of and responsible for their own learning, and uncover student misconceptions that need to be addressed early.

Lily drew from inquiry-based learning and teaching strategies and tried to enact this belief in her classroom through engaging experiences, yet she also pulled from many different strategies to meet the needs of students. I knew that she had a natural curiosity in life as we have explored ponds and creeks for different organisms with our own preschoolers. I thought I knew how she incorporated inquiry-driven instruction and natural curiosity into her teaching.

Later, through her reflections and mine, I came to realize how pompous my early notions were and how wrong I was to think I knew how she navigated the tumultuous terrain of a changing school. I realized that I had to question all of my assumptions about Lily, her classroom practices, decision-making processes, and her pedagogical beliefs. Over the course of a semester,

we learned and worked alongside each other, pushing each other‘s pedagogical beliefs to different levels. I was certainly ready to learn from Lily, but in the process of learning about the school context and climate, it became clear that I was going to have to protect Lily in that very same school where I was collecting data. I did not want to get Lily into trouble or cause her stress because she was sharing the good, the bad, and the ugly business that goes on within the school. As her friend and a researcher, I could protect her identity with a larger audience; however, everyone at the school knew I was observing and interviewing Lily.

These complexities forced me to reflect on the many changes that have taken place in the school, in Lily‘s roles and how she engaged with those changes, and how our relationships intertwined throughout the study. In this chapter, I will first provide background information on the participant, the school culture, and climate of change. Then I will show the complexities of the intertwining histories of two teachers and their thoughts and reactions to the dynamic nature of the school. A thorough description of Lily and the relationship we bring to the study is important to understanding both the school culture and the data in this single case study of how she made decisions about her practices in the rocky and unstable terrain of teaching.

A Snapshot of Lily

Lily has taught seventh graders since 1997 with the exception of one year where she thought she would explore the possibilities of teaching high school. Lily was hoping to find more engaged learners and more departmental support, yet she discovered that she did not enjoy teaching these older students and felt like she received less support. Therefore, she returned to seventh grade after only one year. Over the years, Lily has taught science, language arts, and reading on two, three, and four member teaching teams. At the time of the study, Lily was

teaching science and language arts on a six member teacher team. During the year of the study, Harmony had ten regular education 7th grade classes augmented by Title I and gifted pullout classes.

Lily's particular teaching journey stemmed from her personal philosophies of learning and her natural curiosity. This natural curiosity in the classroom blossomed while she earned her undergraduate degree in ecology. She was excited about nature and wanted to pass that love onto other people. After graduation, she began working at a local nature center where she taught reptile explorations for different groups. Lily designed an after school program that met one day a week for students interested in the environment. During that experience, Lily enjoyed working with reptiles and could never get enough of them; however, she really enjoyed the kids. Lily explained her shift from reptiles to preteens with, "I had no idea that I would enjoy the kids to that extent. I had so much fun with them. I loved hanging out with them. I loved watching them discover stuff. And after a while I really started enjoying the kids more than the reptiles. Being with them for an hour a week wasn't enough."

At this point in Lily's career path, she had a decision to make: Lily chose to return to school for a master's degree in science education. She is currently certified in science for seventh through twelfth grades, middle school language arts, and middle school reading. Lily was very happy with her career choice and did not see herself leaving unless she "gets sick of it. I'm not sick of it. I love it. If I didn't like it, I wouldn't do it. It is never boring. I can't do something that I don't care about. I care about this job and the kids. And it is fun."

In addition to her natural curiosity and love of having fun, Lily's philosophy of learning and education plays a major role in how she conducts business in the classroom. If she is not enjoying herself, she claims that the kids are not either. Her enthusiasm is motivating and

contagious. For example, Lily wrote, "The real beginning of a lesson or unit is an inquiry event that is fun, surprising, or exciting to them. Drawing from inquiry processes allows students to understand the how and the why, not settling for just the facts. Students are able to extend their own learning by posing their own questions and designing their own investigations." Exploring personal interests and inquiring into the world around her students, Lily diligently works to differentiate instruction and assessment "to reach every learner and teach one concept in many ways." This key differentiation allows her to have high expectations for all learners. Lily is committed to education excellence, explaining,

> I accept no passivity from students, and failure is not an option. I teach students to be aware of standards (they know what they need to know) and what we are doing as a class to meet and exceed standards. My students self-analyze their own data, set goals for success, and evaluate where they need to improve. I am committed to providing student timely and specific feedback [further] demonstrating my value for their learning.

Working alongside her students, Lily holds each student's learning as an important tool for their success in working towards their personal goals.

Passion and enthusiasm for learning led to Lily's admission that she tries to be a constructivist educator. However, she has struggled recently in light of the standards movement and with the interpretation of No Child Left Behind legislation. Inquiry into the real world and life application learning experiences had slipped due to the complicated framework and parameters established for her by outside forces. She worked hard to provide real world experiences for her students; however, at the time of the study her "teaching style felt cramped" as she had to comply with many mandates and expectations from various levels of administration. She freely admitted that she would rather shut her door and enact her own

pedagogical beliefs in light of all the mandates and requirements but found this difficult because the people who require certain actions are the very people who sign her paycheck.

This resistance is more passive than I originally thought as I observed Lily within the school community. She did not share all of the fantastic learning experiences she created for her students. She maintained that when she does share or people happen to stumble into her room, that she feels chastised for "showing up" the other teachers. She is a classic close-the-door teacher doing her best for the students in her room, and the rest of the school can do whatever they choose. For example, most years Lily's class engages in a game called, "Oh, Deer," which is not on the curriculum map. Lily gives an overview of factors that affect the ability of wildlife to survive overtime, leads a discussion about the lack of resources, and specifically questions why habitats and resources are challenged. The lesson culminates in a loud activity where students simulate deer and resources in a forest with many of the "deer" dying due to lack of resources with the "deer" remains return to the game as resources. All of these learning and questioning activities happened behind closed doors.

The barrier between Lily and the rest of the school was established as she closed the door and preceded with her population study. Sadly, administrators and other teachers often entered the classroom and complain about the noise level forcing Lily and her students to alter the learning experience. This possible shift in pedagogy stemmed from the fact that Lily did not want to be labeled as "having a bad attitude or being a troublemaker." Her students have high test scores, and she hoped to influence students to be great learners in all subjects but does not want to be seen as negative or difficult by administrators. Therefore, she shut her door and taught her heart out through many different and difficult changes. Shutting the door and taking care of

her students isolated her from many on staff; moreover, the same act protected her from adverse re/actions from outside influences.

In this section I have presented Lily and her histories with school and learning. This understanding of Lily and my earlier explanation of my insider-outsider quandary is necessary for setting the foundation for unpacking the history of the school. School context is important to any educational research study, and most schools undergo much change; however, Harmony has seen more than its fair share. The next section addresses the myriad changes that the school has gone through in Lily‘s teaching career and how she and I responded to these complex situations.

A Changing Backdrop

A school‘s culture is an all-encompassing element that varies from school to school, which makes it complicated to define. Trying to understand what happens in a school culture is essential to understanding the day in and day out intricacies of school life. Culture influences all facets of school life, including what clothes the teachers wear (Peterson & Deal, 1998), how teachers design their classroom (Hargreaves, 1997b), what teachers discuss at meetings, (Kottler, 1997), and what teachers emphasize within the curricula (Hargreaves, 1997b). For example at Harmony, some principals allowed teachers to wear blue jeans and other denim clothing, and faculty meetings were logistical and schedule oriented. Other years, denim was banned, logistics were handled through email, and faculty meetings focused on improving student achievement.

Harmony Middle School is a school of change, making the culture tenuous and rocky and forcing teachers to watch where they step instead of focusing on their pedagogy and classroom practices. I cannot begin to count the hours that teachers were required to meet on professional dress. One year teachers at Harmony were not allowed to wear flip-flops. Countless hours were spent defining the difference between a flip-flop and a sandal. Rules regarding flip-flops were

established. For example, any shoe that had a strap between the toes was a flip-flop, which evolved to a strap between the toes and floats in water, it was a flip-flop. Through much dissension and struggle, the definition shifted again: If a strap of the shoe goes between the toes, the shoe floats in water, and you would wear it at the beach, it was a flip-flop. Teachers spent large amounts of time adjusting to and fighting the flip-flop battle. I use this example from many examples of change and dissension, as it took time away from instructional activities and planning for students. Ironically, the next school year brought a change in administration so all of it was thrown out, flip-flops were reinstated as viable footwear, and the sleeveless shirt battle began.

Innumerable changes take place in schools, some as time-consuming and silly as teachers‘ clothing regulations and others that have a more instructional focus. For instance, Lily spoke of a time when a video had to be produced by the end of the day. This video was a promotion for a school program and was to be shown that night at a parent meeting. The school‘s instructional coach handed Lily a flash drive with the video clips and asked her to have the video ready within a few short hours. Lily admitted that she ~~–s~~crapped her lesson [for the day] and showed a movie.” The movie shown was a great movie but did little to further the understandings of seventh grade learning objectives.

Since Lily first began teaching, Harmony Middle School has experienced administrative changes, policy changes, curricular changes, demographic changes, and personnel changes. In a constant state of change, the school has appeared to hold together, but in the next section I outline the changes and the difficulties that have ensued as a result.

Principals Come and Principals Go

School leadership at Harmony Middle School bears resemblance to King Henry the XIII‘s wives‘ history: six women who held their position only for a short time. In thirteen short years, Lily has had eight different head principals. In a study of over 16,000 public school principals, Fuller and Young (2009), researchers from the University of Texas at Austin, found that the average tenure of a middle school principal was nearly 4.5 years. While this average time is not especially laudable, Harmony‘s administrative turnover is closer to 1.5 years. Why and how does this affect those at the school?

These eight different principals have left this middle school for varying reasons as shown in Table 1. While change can be positive and negative, it has been difficult for teachers to build stability and trust. In an interview in which Lily reflected on the past, she said, ―The lack of continuity maybe gave me more continuity in my classroom because I know that on so many levels there is so much going on in the outside world, and I can‘t let it affect me.”

Table 1: Principal Turnover

	Length of term	**Reason for leaving**
1	3 years	Asked to resign
2	1 year	Promoted to county office
3	1 year	Asked to resign
4	3 years	Promoted to county office
5	2 years	Asked to resign
6	2 years	Promoted to county office
7	3 months	Promoted to county office
8	1.5 years	Current principal

Each new principal spent time learning the school culture all the while introducing new requirements and ideas. I cannot personally speak of the principal who hired Lily to her first teaching job as I was not teaching at the school. Lily shared that he was her first principal and

personally he seemed like a nice man, but everyone else ~~t~~thought he was horrible" and apparently ~~t~~there were problems with money. When they cleaned out his desk they found hundreds of checks from parents." When the next principal began his short tenure, he ~~s~~cooped us out of the ditch. He made us look good." He had high expectations and made the teachers perform, which helped student achievement. Lily said, ~~I~~I really got to see what a real leader was like, and he was way different from the next principal who was laidback and let the teachers have their way." After a year of a free for all, he was asked to leave and a fourth principal came in with new requirements and strategies.

The fourth principal required a program called Learning Focused Schools to be implemented and that differentiation occur in every class throughout the day. Both Lily and I operated well under the direction of this principal, as did most teachers. During our Southern Accreditation of Schools review that year, the team reviewing us likened our school to ~~C~~Camelot" and a ~~u~~utopian" place to work. This principal revamped the school structure and discipline policies while allowing teachers freedom to accomplish their pedagogical and student achievement goals. Upon her promotion to the county office, the fifth principal worked to institute a program called Capturing Kids Hearts where the main focus was building relationships and having students take ownership. Lily did not attend any of the trainings for this new program. She said, ~~I~~I always found something else to do when the workshops were offered, and I already got along fine with my students." In contrast, I did attend this summer training on how to engage with students; however, I only incorporated small portions of the program into my classroom. The idea of connecting with students is something I am an advocate of, but a program detailing exactly how I was to establish this connection was frustrating.

Principal number six was the only principal who had been a principal before her short tenure at Harmony Middle School. She required teachers to do whatever it took and to burn the midnight oil. Lily described this principal's two years as ~~"r~~efreshing." I tend to agree with Lily, as this principal swooped in and made positive changes. Her high expectations for herself rubbed off on the teachers, and the bar was raised. When this principal was promoted to the county office, teachers cried. Lily said, ~~"E~~very time we get someone great in here, they get sucked right on out."

The next principal had been laid off from a local county office and was seeking employment, and he stayed until another county hired him as an assistant superintendent. Unfortunately, he was Harmony's leader during the summer and the first few weeks of school, which led to lack of decisions and direction that were integral at the beginning of a new term. He resigned on a Friday, and one of the assistant principals was promoted into his spot by the following Monday. The final principal in this long line of change appeared to micromanage events as shown in the opening vignette of this chapter. Moreover, Lily said, teachers ~~"a~~re not allowed to question or clarify procedures. We [the teachers] are expected to follow everything she says, which leaves us floundering."

Harmony is not all that different from many schools across the country. Being able to accept change and being flexible are characteristics of many great teachers; unfortunately, too many changes bring about dissension and confusion, especially if the change has an unfocused and chaotic feeling. As Lily said, ~~"I~~t doesn't matter what we do, it will change in a couple of years anyway. So I just roll with it and do my own thing. Nothing stays long enough to sink in." Including principals.

These administrative changes came with tears of sadness or cheers of joy, but questions remained about how they affected student learning within the building. A positive thing about so many changes was that the teachers never really have to fully adopt a program presented by the principal. They could appear to adhere to expectations because before anyone knew they had not conformed, the principal would probably move to a different position. For example, with the fourth principal, teachers were supposed to implement Learning Focused Schools. Most teachers began implementing the various components such as writing a student friendly question of the day on the board, taping up a word wall, and using a few of the strategies (i.e. ticket out the door and think-pair-share). Nevertheless, this was as far as the program went before a change was made. Teachers shifted from Learning Focused Schools to Capturing Kids‘ Hearts. In this new program, teachers were now required to stand at their door and shake the hand of every child, write learning contracts, spend several minutes of every class sharing good things, and give standard hand signals to control students (i.e. make a T with hands to signal quiet). Learning and content took second place to connecting with each student. If teachers could capture hearts, then they would have the brain. All of these practices could be good, solid teaching practices, but as Lily said, ―Nothing stays long enough to sink in.”

In and of themselves, these requirements were not bad ideas; the problem lay with the sudden shift without explanation. Speedy implementations, expected wholesale buy-in, and a lack of continuity led to uncertainties and struggles that deterred focus away from student learning. Reflecting on these changes, Lily explained, ―No matter who rolls in through the front office or the county office, I can‘t control it. Or even through the state. All I can do is do the best I can with the kids that I have that year.” Lily and I agreed: every time there was turnover, we would ―get a little bit worried” because we ―don‘t know what the new person is going to expect.”

These uncertainties contributed to Lily's adoption of a more complacent attitude. She said, "Nope, [change] makes no difference to me. I'm just going to do my own thing."

These are but a few examples of the changing context of the school. Administrative changes brought varying programs that were required to be put into practice whether aligning with personal pedagogical beliefs or not. Alongside these growing pains of administrative and program changes, the state department of education overhauled the objectives from core curricula to standards based learning while increasing the accountability of high-stakes testing. These changes are discussed in the next section.

Core Curriculum versus Standards

After No Child Left Behind was adopted, states were left scrambling for compliance and continued to race to the top throughout the time of the study. The southeastern state where this study takes places rolled out new curricula with the following objective:

> The performance standards provide clear expectations for instruction, assessment, and student work. They define the level of work that demonstrates achievement of the standards, enabling a teacher to know *how good is good enough*. The performance standards isolate and identify the skills needed to use the knowledge and skills to problem-solve reason, communicate, and make connections with other information. They also tell the teacher how to assess the extent to which the student knows the material or can manipulate and apply the information (https://www.georgiastandards.org/Standards/Pages/BrowseStandards/BrowseGPS.aspx *emphasis added*).

The performance standards for each grade level are a detailed plan of content that should be taught. These lists simply tell the teacher what each student is expected to know or master in that

particular school year. Additionally, it adds to these concepts by providing three additional items: frameworks and timelines, sample student work, and teacher commentary on that work. The phrase that jumps out from the above quote is ―how good is good enough.‖ NCLB requires that all students pass a high stakes test in both reading and math to be promoted. It appears that we have reduced the expectation of teachers to helping the students be ―good enough‖ to pass this test and then the teacher‘s job is done. Lily and I were both frustrated with the low standard presented by the state. Lily felt that her goal as given to her by the county office was to ensure that every student received a passing grade on every standard, even if that meant lowering the content and expectations in any way that she felt was necessary to accomplish this goal.

According to the state department the change from core curriculum to the enhanced performance curriculum ―will drive both instruction and assessment in Georgia‘s schools, providing guidelines for teachers, students, and test makers. Teachers will now teach to a curriculum, not to a test or a textbook. Statewide assessments will be aligned with the Georgia Performance Standards, taking the guesswork out of teaching and providing guidelines for our schools, students, and test makers and the standards are based on best practices that have proven to be effective in high-performing states and nations‖ (http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/pea_communications.aspx?ViewMode=1&obj=785). I suppose teachers and researchers should be excited that teachers no longer have to guess at what they need to do. These changes brought about standardization in Harmony Middle School and McKenzie County. Notebooks with curriculum maps and required performance tasks were bar-coded and issued to the teachers so that each teacher and therefore the students, regardless of ability, would be doing the same thing each day. As this was happening, principals changed at

Harmony Middle School and how students were graded changed from traditional letter grades to a standards based grading program.

A culture of too many changes leads to a school of uncertainty. I once heard a colleague of mine compare Harmony and its approach to educating children to building a plane. She said, "We are taxiing down the runway and serving drinks, before we have the new wings bolted in place." This metaphor implied that we were endangering the integrity of the school and students by continually modifying expectations, policies, systems, programs, mandates, and administration. Many of the changes were progressive and appropriate to a school just like new wings on an airplane, but there was not enough consistency across time to allow those good changes to transform learning into meaningful achievement. In light of the many changes, one thing that remained the same was Lily's classroom. With the exception of one year, Lily had been in the same room since she started her teaching career. In a school where principals came and went with frequency; there was a high turn-over in teachers as well. Of the 68 faculty members who were teaching at the time of the study, only five were teaching at Harmony when Lily began teaching. For instance, the year I was hired there were 22 new hires in the building. A constant flow of new teachers has made Lily and the few others who have been in the building for any length of time a viable resource of county knowledge and information. Moreover, Lily created a classroom environment for herself and her students that was welcoming and stable in a school that has seen constant changes over the years.

Lily's Classroom Setting

Lily's classroom was located on the seventh grade hall. Her team of students and teachers were the first set of classrooms. This means that the majority of her students spent most of their time at school confined to the first four rooms on the hall. Lily's decisions about how to interact

with students began at her door. A small white board hung beside her classroom door. Most days Lily wrote a strange or unusual fact on the white board. Some days these facts were scientific: ―Did you know that you are taller in the morning than at night?" Other days these quotes bragged about student accomplishments: ―Paulie Wo wins the eye staring contest. 8 minutes without blinking." Many students read and commented on the fact of the day as they entered the classroom.

A love of animals was evident in Lily's classroom; in homes along the back wall -- Lily would never call them cages-- a spotted gecko and a hamster live day in and day out. Near the front of the room were three turtles and an aquarium full of colorful fish. Rabbits, spiders, snakes, and other animals from Lily's personal collection visit occasionally. Earlier in the school year, Lily hosted Japanese exchange students who graciously labeled her animals in English and Japanese.

In addition to the animal labels, Lily decided to cover her classroom walls with posters and words of encouragement. Her posters reflected her decision to have a positive, engaging, and loving learning environment. Colorful posters such as ―Be nice or leave," ―Learn something new today," and ―Be yourself-- An original is always worth more than a copy" covered the walls. The bulletin boards displayed student work, lunch menus, and sports schedules. An entire classroom wall was covered with a 3-D paper tree that served as the word wall. ―Look What We Are Growing" was written on the trunk of the tree and every leaf was a word that the students were responsible for knowing.

One way that Lily helped her students learn this vocabulary was through the technology in her room. Lily felt fortunate to have two student computers, a Promethean SmartBoard, a projector, an Elmo document camera, a television, and a laptop. Unfortunately, the school

system‘s technology budget had been almost entirely eliminated so there would be no replacing anything that no longer worked nor would there be many purchases for new, upgraded tools. While Lily would enjoy more technology in her room, she was careful to take care of what she had to ensure it lasting as long as possible.

In addition to the technology, there were 28 student desks, a teacher desk, three science lab stations, four bookshelves, and a filing cabinet. Most of the student desks were arranged in groups of four to make tables for the students. This allowed the students to spread out their work or work in partners or groups without difficulty. A few desks were scattered around the room for students to sit away from their peers when needed so that they were able to accomplish a task alone. The bookshelves were stocked full of books that students could check out or read in their free time. Overall, Lily‘s classroom was a happy and engaging place to learn. The welcoming environment was evident in the relaxed tenor of the classroom and in the calm, witty personality of Lily.

Stable Classroom Environment in a Changing School

Lily‘s classroom was the first glimpse we see of the importance of children and relationships she has in the classroom; therefore, it was necessary to unpack the setting of her individual classroom. Bookshelves, student desks, and even to an extent animals are commonplace in many classrooms at Harmony and across America. However, an evident feature of Lily‘s class was her decision to have a child-centered and friendly classroom environment. Her room was set up in such a way that students were able to engage with each other, discover new and exciting things, and learn the material that was presented. Lily loved to observe her students when they finally grasped a new concept. She was not out to stump or confuse students.

She wanted all of her students to succeed so she provided a base structure that enabled them to know exactly what to expect each day.

Each class began the exact same way every day: students copied the question of the day from the board and completed the warm-up. The question of the day was a question that turned the daily objective(s) into a question allowing the students a preview of the upcoming lesson. Warm-up activities were short responses to a prompt or question Lily wrote on the board. The students quickly responded and Lily walked around the room to read each response and check in briefly with each student. Having a set pattern allowed the students to know what to expect each day as well as offering a comfortable, non-chaotic start to the day. Lily explained, "The more procedural the little things can be, the easier the more complicated activities and lessons will go." In addition, an established expectation afforded the students a familiarity with the expectations and procedures, which in Lily's view meant "they screw up a lot less." Having an easily accessible classroom with set expectations allowed Lily and her students the freedom to explore many content-related questions and inquires into the world around them.

Lily's classroom environment emphasized a mastery and application of content by engaging students in effective learning strategies, tasks that challenge, and social learning. Students were clustered together to dialogue about their work and lives. The classroom environment's arrangement and decisions involving décor might seem insignificant in the grand scheme of educational decision-making. Most public schools post innumerable signs about bullying policies, locker search policies, and admission to school policies, rules that must be followed, even commands in the cafeteria about where to stand and how much food to put on the tray, what side of the hall to walk on, and the like. Entering a classroom as welcoming as Lily's

seemed to shift the tenor of the learners. The students often skipped into class, told funny jokes, and visually appeared to relax as Lily welcomed each student by name.

This shift in environment was an important understanding for Lily as throughout the day she felt that many students did not feel welcome in other classrooms. She desired to be a stable, caring teacher who worked alongside students to excel even in a school environment that, at times, felt constraining.

Discussion of the Intertwining Histories

As stated earlier, Lily‘s and I are connected with each other and the school. Our intertwined stories began a decade ago when I began teaching at the school where Lily was teaching. During this study, I learned that I responded differently than Lily to many of the changes and requirements of the school. I liked sharing the progressive or innovative experiences that students encountered in my Title I classroom. I wanted to spark a change and push others to believe in the infinite possibilities of each student. So while I did close my door and forego many mandates from administration, I shared what we were doing every chance I got. This sharing and speaking out labeled me as a troublemaker, but as long as my test scores stayed strong, I was safe. As time passed and new policies, mandates, and requirements were forced upon me, I felt more and more constrained. Many changes in the school culture happened in a relatively short amount of time. I felt my time at Harmony Middle School was coming to a close, and I resigned from my teaching position in May 2010. I no longer wanted to participate in the many shocking and difficult complexities of a school undergoing many, many changes.

This complex connection between Lily and I probably led me to more questions than I have answered; however, in this chapter, I have been able to begin to examine my insider/outsider dialogue of change with myself, with Lily, and with the school. Based on

Freire‘s (1970) relational and inquiry-based educational philosophy in which education starts with issues central to each individual‘s world, I explored the common theme of change through dialogue. Freire noted that one means of enabling people to think critically about their surroundings and to begin to discuss the everyday political, social, and personal forces that influence their lives, was to bring it to the forefront of conversation. He used pictures that represented individual realities of the people with whom he was interacting, in much the same way that I used observation of Lily‘s world to shed light on our dialogue with each other in construction of her story through the many changes of the school culture and context.

Through my insider/outsider relationship with Lily and other school personnel, I was privy to information that many researchers might not have had access to; however; this same privilege probably clouded my judgment and interpretation of events. But in my hopes to share Lily‘s story, and in a peculiar way my own, I must take into account Freire‘s advice. Freire (1970) argued that if I wait until my subjectivities are a nonentity than I will have to wait for Lily‘s story to tell itself. We cannot ―dismiss the role of subjectivity in the struggle to change structures. On the contrary, one cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity. Neither can exist without the other, nor can they be dichotomized” (Freire, 1970, p. 50). I cannot separate the two, but they must remain in a steady dialogical relationship.

In examining this complex history, I felt powerful because I could discuss the school, the strengths, the changes, and the problems, having been an insider. I was even in a position to negotiate my power to gain access to meetings and reflections that would not normally be allowed an outsider. My professional role, my credentials, and my common knowledge afforded me an inclusion and commonality with Lily and the other teachers and administrators. My intent was to only observe Lily in these meetings; however, in one clear instance at a student support

team meeting of one of my former students, I was a participant observer. Lily and an assistant principal brought me in and deferred to me for instructional strategies to help a struggling student. I comfortably fell into this role of reading teacher by suggesting and offering ideas to support this learner. The intertwining threads that connect were growing stronger.

Throughout the study, Lily shared much of herself, her decision-making process, her pedagogical beliefs, her assumptions, her practices, and her views on the aforementioned changes. Oftentimes, she would say, "I know you know this, but I will say it for the recorder." Or she would preface a story with, "I have something to tell you that would be great for your research." This familiarity with each other allowed me a candid look at her practice and reflection. Moreover, these connections and interactions were presented in such a way that it was like reading an open book insomuch as I had to slow down and reflect on how an outsider would see or what an outsider would need to be able to understand Lily's story. I was self-conscious and awkward at times with Lily, and she with me, because I did not want to exploit her contributions to the study and because I was no longer a teaching community of the school.

Our connections and our processes of learning and growing together are still intertwined even as the data collection ended. Our stories continue moment-by-moment and through changes in our surroundings our stories are reconstructed and revived with each new change, context, and situation (Stone, 1992). When I resigned from Harmony Middle School to finish my doctorate, I struggled to identify with any particular group. In my experience in the local community, I only knew middle school teachers and defined much of myself by my relationship to Harmony Middle School and the dedicated teachers who work there every day. I left knowing that many would see my future endeavor of studying Lily as objectifying her and her practices, and that this might lead other teachers in the school to be uncomfortable. So with this in mind, I am still seeking not

to objectify Lily or her story through sharing our complex history and her decision-making processes.

In Sum

The complexity of defining a school culture and unpacking a relationship between researcher and participant has been a complicated process. The many waves of reform and multiple shifts within this particular school context can be seen as damaging to teacher practices and student achievement, but these struggles forced Lily to define her personal and professional knowledge and philosophies. Through the rocky steps, Lily felt as if her classroom and learning continually grew stronger. She reflected on the lack of continuity as a factor that forced her to have ―more continuity in my classroom because I know that on so many levels there is so much going on in the outside world and I can't let it affect me." Lily's philosophy of teaching and learning while hitting bumps along the road became stronger as she knew what needed to be accomplished with her students gaining understanding and learning to question the world around them. She further argued that she could not allow the changes within the school to effect the growth and learning of each student: ―I know my kids, I know how they learn, I know what they need to learn, so we learn… We have a good time, we do cool activities, and we pass the big test in the end."

Chapter 5 unpacks Lily's practices and decisions that took place within the political and instructional structures of the school. Through analyzing Lily's stories, I add to already established research by providing an in-depth look into a teacher's classroom practices and decision-making processes. Lily did not comply thoughtlessly with new policies and standardization requirements. Instead, she struggled to hold onto practices that have credibility in the world outside her classroom and school context. These relationships, practices, decisions, and

actions are explored and analyzed in the forthcoming chapter as I examined tools that one teacher used to navigate the tumultuous terrain of today‘s schools while trying to meet the expectations of administrators and still enact her pedagogical beliefs.

CHAPTER 5

CLASSROOM NARRATIVES AND UNDERSTANDINGS

Exploring decisions and practices in teachers‘ lives entails, in part, learning from teachers what it means to negotiate the multiple factors that influence these decisions. McNeil (2009) argued that what is missing from universal theorizing and other critical studies is an analysis of how influential factors and forces play out in individual rooms and affect individual teachers. Accessing Lily‘s expectations, decisions, and practices involved creating a space for the telling and interrogating of stories of practice, a space that permitted openness in the way her decisions were rendered, framed, and responded to, and a space that embraced the un/certainties involved in teaching. In addition, this dialogue space required particular attention to the context: how teachers understand their work as deeply embedded within the political and instructional structures of local classrooms, schools, and districts.

Lily‘s stories of practices, decisions and decision-making processes are structured in the following way. Each position that Lily places or finds herself in is presented as one facet considered individually. These facets tell some of the many stories, successes, interactions, perspectives, and beliefs of this particular classroom teacher‘s practices. First, I explore Lily‘s stories of her interactions with her students. Starting with Lily‘s decisions and beliefs regarding students further helps teacher educators understand her philosophy and theories that are presented in chapter four. These relationship decisions and practices establish much of the framework for her instructional decisions and how she operates within the larger political setting of her team and grade level. Therefore, the second set of stories involves instructional decisions

and actions made by Lily inside the classroom. Many of these decisions have been removed from the teachers‘ hands; however, teachers can use their practices to navigate around these mandates to best serve their students. Looking closely at Lily‘s decisions concerning her instructional practices help us as researchers further our understanding of how teachers can operate within the political and administrative expectations. Moving outside of Lily‘s classroom, I present Lily‘s stories of school-level negotiations and decisions she makes on mandated policies. These policies are delivered from school level administration and are interpretations of the administrators‘ understandings of county and state implementations. Within each set of stories, I share, analyze, and interpret Lily‘s decisions and reflective practices.

Following the individual narratives of Lily‘s practices and decisions, I examine them as an intertwining story of how a veteran teacher makes decisions about her practices within the school setting. Lily, as an employee of McKenzie School System, worked for over a decade under conditions of continuing change and conflict. The decisions she made in light of these challenges are crucial to her instructional practices and transactions with students as they are political, personal, social, and historical. Decisions--automatic, reactive, and strategic--support Lily‘s personal beliefs about implementing a productive and supportive pedagogy for her students as she tries to maintain administrative expectations.

Stories of Lily and Her Students

Lily came to teaching through the relationships she built while working as a biologist at a local park. Student relationships were important to Lily, thus being appropriate events to begin unpacking Lily‘s decisions regarding her classroom practices. In this section, I present three vignettes that lay the foundation for the successes Lily and her students share in the classroom. Vignette one details Lily‘s reactions to a student who interrupts class. The next story shows us

two salient points of Lily‘s interactions with students: first, a creative way to engage students with standards and second, the importance of requiring respect of all individuals. The final narrative in this series focuses on Lily‘s use of authority in the classroom. These vignettes give us insight into the many decisions that Lily made as she related to each student and built relationships that enhanced her instructional decisions.

Vignette 1: Owl Barf

The first vignette occurred a few days after the students dissected owl pellets. A little background on owl pellets: Owls are unable to chew their food and therefore, swallow large chunks of smaller animals whole. After the material that can be digested is digested, the owl regurgitates the indigestible items such as bones, feathers, and fur. In recent years, many teachers, including Lily, decided to dissect this regurgitation within a larger instructional unit on the dependence of organisms on one another. The students were intrigued by the different bones found in the ~~–o~~wl barf” and it stuck with them throughout the unit as a student in the following story made a reference to it several days after dissection.

Second period life science is almost ready to start. Lily is standing at the door greeting the students as they enter the classroom. Most of the students are in their seats, copying the question of the day, “What are the parts and functions of the skeletal and muscular system?” from the board into their agendas, a required practice of the school. As the students finish copying and begin their daily warm-up (“Why does the muscular system need the nervous system?”), Julie is one of the last to arrive. Upon entering, she points at a mass of fur on the floor and squeals, “Ooh. Oh, yuck! Look, the invisible owl barfed!” Students around the room strain their necks to see what the invisible owl has left behind. Lily laughs at the actual hairball on the floor and says, “He must have had a great night last night.”

A few days after the owl barf comment, a tiny stuffed owl appears perched on the LCD projector. Lily is unaware of who brought it in or when the owl was placed, but she runs with it. She asks the owl to clean up after himself after he plays at night. The students giggle and name the owl. Later that same day, we discuss her reaction. Lily says having silly things and being goofy "is just part of my personality… Kids don't want you to take things too seriously; it stresses them out. Having silly things [like owl barf] gives them the freedom to make mistakes and try again."

My understandings. I often saw Lily joking and laughing with her students, in an affectionate and caring way. This decision to be friendly and enjoy students was a vital component in Lily's teaching philosophy; it was part of her larger philosophy, which came into play often in the classroom. We see a realization of this stance in this vignette, Lily found herself in a situation where a student entered late and disrupted the class with, "Oh. Oh, yuck! Look, the invisible owl barfed." Lily made the decision to contrast a more traditional classroom management approach with an approach I call "laugh and move on." Not only did Lily decide not to reprimand Julie for the owl barf comment, but she also decided to roll with it, to play into it by acknowledging that the owl must have "had a great night last night."

This reactive decision to play along with the invisible owl was predicated on several larger decisions that Lily has made regarding her classroom. First, Lily knew from experience that if she reprimanded the student there was a possibility that Julie might refuse to work for the remainder of the class or, worse, cause an even bigger disturbance that might detract from student learning. Secondly, taking time to punish Julie for disrupting the class was time that Lily was not willing to give up. The students had a lot of material to explore and work through that day, and Lily decided it was much quicker to play into it and move on to the topics at hand than

dwell on the silly comment. Students strained their necks to see the hairball, giggled, and returned their attention to Lily who had been begun to give directions for that day's class. This decision happened in a split second and did not interrupt the flow of learning for the students. Julie found her seat and quickly got caught up; moreover, the students moved forward with the material. Lily and I would like to think that no harm coupled with a little silliness played a role in student success.

Over the next day or so, students continued the line of silliness by perching a small stuffed owl on the LCD projector. Once Lily noticed it, with the help of a few students, she walked right over to the little owl and demanded that he clean up after himself after a night of partying. This brief lecture to the owl took place in the middle of class as the students were working in small groups on a class project. Students laughed and copied Lily's instructions to the owl by also admonishing him for leaving their classroom messy. In this instance she chose to lecture the owl on tidiness, affording herself and the students a brief reprieve from the rigorous content of seventh grade science. Lily said, "If I am not having fun, then they aren't either," implying that silly behavior possibly aided and abetted student learning.

Another decision that we see in this narrative, is that Lily required her students to copy the question of the day from the whiteboard into their agenda. In years past this was a requirement from the principal who installed Learning Focused Schools into the school culture. There was an administrative expectation that each day, each student would copy the "essential question," homework, and any announcements from the board. With an agenda full of questions, parents would have a content question from each content area to discuss with their child, and they would be aware of homework and upcoming events. During the time of the study, this practice was no longer a required expectation, but Lily decided to continue it as a way to start

class. The simple act of copying the question from the board gave the students a heads up on the topic(s) that were being explored each day. Furthermore, this practice allowed Lily to quickly check in with each student as she walked around the room looking in each student‘s agenda.

Lily decided that her classroom would be a fun, respectful place, where students are honored. While copying the question of the day and completing a short warm-up is unexciting and not an engaging task, it was an easy way for all students to be working from the moment they entered the classroom. Lily had decided that there would be little to no down time because in Lily‘s experience she has learned that it is in the unstructured times that students tend to flounder.

Additionally, the decision to roll with the owl barf lightened the mood of the students and did not interrupt the flow of learning. For Freire (1970/1990), all knowledge is relational and knowledge is produced in interaction. He argued, ―Knowledge is not a piece of data, something immobilized…I cannot think authentically unless others think… Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention” (p. 76). Playing into the silliness of middle school students allowed them laughs and mental breaks in a school environment that often emphasizes buckling down with rigor to accomplish goals (as seen in Jürges and Schneider, 2009).

Over time, Lily negotiated with herself and decided that maintaining a fun environment allowed the students to ―not take things too seriously” and engage with content in meaningful ways. Thus, she helped her students create new knowledge, building on their experiences [in this case the experience of dissecting owl barf] to provide them the ―opportunity to use their own reality as a basis for learning” (Freire, 1970/1990, p.85). This is not to say that Lily‘s students were not working hard on the content. In fact, Lily believed that being goofy was more than okay because the students wanted to be in her room and could be more easily engaged in rigorous

content. Bakhtin (1984) argued laughter is both beneficial and freeing, which –makes it possible to extend the narrow sense of life" (p. 177). Seventh graders are not adults nor are they children. This weird hybrid of child/pre-teenager/pre-adult is a tricky and complex being to teach.

These seventh-graders no longer received recess as they did in elementary school and were not offered the 15-minute breaks that are common in many high schools. They were engaged in, by Georgia law, 300+ minutes of instructional time each day – middle school students have the longest instructional day of K-12 students. This lengthy time could become dreary and boring, forcing many students to disengage with content, classmates, and/or teachers. Lily decided, despite the standardization of many curriculum areas, she would embrace the silliness of students to make her classroom an exciting place to be, activating their brains and willingness to learn by building relationships instead of shutting students down by yelling or demanding controlled behavior.

The decision to have fun and negotiate silliness might not seem like an important one worthy of research. However, it is remarkable in that she trusted the students to be silly while still attending to the administrative expectation of meeting the standards and Lily's belief of learning about the world around them. As seen in Jurges and Schneider (2009), increased pressure to perform might raise the rigor of the classroom while often removing the fun; moreover, if the fun is removed from the classroom, we see negative effects on student attitudes and learning. During an interview, Lily said, –They [the students] are tested, tested, tested so much… they are used to being active in here. I feel their pain… we do the fun stuff [learning activities]…and it makes the not fun stuff more bearable." Feeling the pain of the students and enjoying being active herself, Lily continued to try to make her classroom a fun, exciting place to be as she believed that enjoyable teaching and learning moments afford her and her students a

level of happiness and contentment within the larger school setting that is more rigid and unforgiving. Lily compared the ―not fun stuff" to washing clothes in that ―You may not want to do the laundry, but you got to" to go on vacation. Lily decided to operate within the school's framework of testing, testing, testing, by sympathizing with the students about the struggles of the many prescriptive requirements and promising the students that more engaging activities were coming as soon as they finished the ―laundry."

The ―laundry" was prevalent in her curriculum map, administrative expectations, and her scope and sequence materials. Lily maintained that she complied with the necessary items and attempted to teach actively and creatively in between ―laundry" days. The next vignette not only describes Lily's decisions about relationships within the classroom between the students and teacher and student-to-student interactions but also outlines a creative way to address standards.

Vignette 2: Third Person Thursday

"Welcome to Third Person Thursday" is scribbled across the board as the students enter language arts class. Third Person Thursday is a fun event that occurs once or twice a semester. On third person Thursday, no one is allowed to say I am *or* you are; *only third person is allowed. Students greet each other with "Lindsey says hello" or "Lindsey loves Third-Person-Thursdays."*

Jeff drops down into his seat and says, "I am so tired today."

Lindsey verbally jumps on him with an admonition that "I" is not in third-person. Jeff counters with "Jeff says, shut-up, Lindsey." *Lily is wandering around the room, checking warm-ups, and answering questions, and happens to overhear this conversation. She calls out to Jeff*

and Lindsey, ~~–~~Be nice. 'Shut up' is not nice." *Without calling attention to the situation, Lily walks behind Jeff, pats him gently on the back, and encourages him to get started with his warm-up.*

Later in the same class period, I ask Lily to share her views on her command to "Be nice. Shut up *is not nice." Before I even finish asking the question, Lily interrupts*, *"I just don't like [when teachers or students say]* shut up. Shut up *is horrible. I just don't like people to be disrespectful to each other, and kids are so mean.* Shut up *is mean and they don't think about it. It is mean, and I don't like them to say it in my room or anywhere. I don't know if you have seen the signs that say 'Be nice or leave'... I think it is a great rule to live by. I don't necessarily kick anybody out but the whole point is to be nice."*

Lily often requires the students to rephrase things they say to one another. Many times the students are stuck and not sure how to rephrase their comment. Lily takes the time to work alongside the students and brainstorm alternate ways to address each other. For example, Lily shares that middle school students "are famous for taking each other's stuff without asking. And I am like: Can you just ask them politely, ‗Can I borrow your pen, please?' *It [being mean] is not okay in my room."*

My understandings. Lily has a strong presence and continually conveys to the students in her classroom that while they are engaged with Third Person Thursday and other activities, that respect for each other is just as important. The first decision Lily made in this example was to declare that particular Thursday as Third Person Thursday. I suspect that there is much temptation for many teachers facing mandates and curriculum maps to knuckle down under the pressure and follow the county-mandated scripts. We know from Mattison, Ross, and Vinson (2006) and Hover and Pierce (2006) that this knuckling down often happens in classrooms, with

teachers turning from productive and supportive pedagogy to follow strict curriculum maps and administrative expectations in preparation for standardized tests.

Third Person Thursday is one of many examples I could pull from the data set that shows how Lily worked to address the standards and maintain her teaching philosophy of purposeful pedagogy built on student-teacher relationships. Georgia ELA Middle School Performance Standards has several standards that address point of view including:

- The learner will "select a point of view . . . based on purpose . . . audience . . . to analyze oral communication.
- The learner will "recognize and trace development of . . . point of view . . . in text" (public.doe.k12.ga.us).

Students do not innately know the differences in first, second, and third points of view. Teachers must share the differences and show how each works when used during writing and encountered in reading. One way that Lily decided to work within the framework she was given is Third Person Thursday. Lily decided that in randomly declaring a Thursday as Third Person Thursday that she could reinforce the concept and meet the performance standard at the same time. I argue that having to use third person in everyday oral communication is a type of creative practice that moves away from traditional question and answer sessions. Hardman (2011) urged teachers to "break out of the recitation script through higher-order questioning and feedback strategies which promote a range of discourse strategies" (p. 36). Students who are actively applying and experiencing the content are far more likely to make meaning and grow in their understanding of a topic. The students must communicate and learn from each other to authenticate their learning experience.

The students seemed to enjoy engaging in this activity as seen in Lindsey‘s quote from the above vignette, “Lindsey loves Third-Person Thursday.” This is one of many examples of students declaring their excitement about an in-class activity. Third-Person Thursday did not interrupt the flow of learning, nor did it force Lily off the required content standards for that day. Lily and the students carried on with other activities and lessons as they normally would, except that all of it was done in third-person.

Focusing on relationships we see in this incident, Lily was able to be educationally involved with her students as she walked around the classroom engaging in short conversations with students. In order to create a pedagogy based on the relationships between students and teachers, Lily spent considerable time away from her desk and out with the students. However, Lily felt that it was in these unstructured times when she could connect with and learn about students‘ personal lives. By no means does this decision to be active during transition times mean that Lily did not occasionally try to get caught up on email, make copies, or sprint to the restroom. I argue that making the decision to be active in her classroom helped demystify her as authoritarian. Through her activity, she was able to intercede for Jeff, who was frustrated with Lindsey. Her approach of simply saying, “Be nice. ‗Shut up‘ is not nice” and moving closer to Jeff was an attempt to offset his frustration by engaging him in a conversation and caring for him as person. She was able to defuse the situation through her involvement and respect for both Jeff and Lindsey.

Lily was adamant in her classroom that all people were worthy of respect and should be treated as capable individuals worthy of contributing to the class. For Lily, *shut up* did not encourage respect and participation; in fact, she felt it often caused students to become silent and to feel as though their voice was not valued. Lily‘s diligence in providing students an open space

where they and their contributions were valued was consonant with Lily‘s teaching philosophy. She made the decision to believe that all students are capable of learning and worthy of respect and besides having fun in the classroom, Lily believed that respect was vital for student achievement and inquiry-based instruction. Furthermore, Lily‘s decision to be vigilant of student-to-student interactions allowed her to approach students respectfully and I believe this afforded Lily and her students a relaxed manner in which to engage in content.

According to Freire (1990/1970), education can only occur within respectful relationships: ―dialogue cannot occur…between those who deny men the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied to them” (p. 76-77). Lily strived to have an engaging, considerate classroom that was very similar to Freire‘s views on relational teaching and learning. His philosophies rely on respectful relationships between the students and the students and teacher. Before students and teachers can engage in dialogical, inquiry learning, a healthy and safe right to voice thoughts and questions must be established. Language like *shut up* and other hurtful words ―have no place in the classroom” and work in opposition to dialogue. Students in Lily‘s classroom were not silenced or discouraged from thinking and playing with new concepts to create their own understandings and meanings. Moreover, they were encouraged to ask burning questions and share their experiences as a way of connecting to the curriculum.

However, these activities and enforcement of mutual respect did not place Lily and her students on a level playing field. Teachers still have authority and responsibilities in the classroom that differ from that of their students. Authority without authoritativeness or oppression is a difficult achievement. Lily did not necessarily develop or practice a critical pedagogy a la Freire, yet she did create a respectful one that met the expectations of Freire‘s notions of respect between students and teachers. Freire (1998) argued that ―to teach is not to

transfer knowledge but to create possibilities for construction of knowledge" (p. 30). Teachers can use their authority to create safe places with high expectations for all learners.

Freire (1970/1990) also declared, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction" in that teachers work alongside and learn from students, which further deflates the teacher as an authoritative force lecturing in the front of the classroom (p. 72). Lily made the decision to use her authority to negotiate spaces with her students that maximized the learning that took place in her classroom. The decision to build a supportive relationship between the students and herself was one aimed at fostering learning through love and confidence. In choosing to emphasize love and respect in order to further learning, Freire wrote, "Dialogue cannot exist . . . in the absence of a profound love for the world and for [students]. . . . Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to other [people]. If I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love [students]— I cannot enter into dialogue" (p. 77-78). These learning processes are built upon the notion that students respond to encouragement and respect rather than shaming or repressing their personalities. For Lily, this meant that students needed to be engaged in classroom activities and to treat each other as persons of value.

The above vignette explored Lily's decisions to have respectful, playful, loving relationships *between* students as they were engaged in the process of learning. The forthcoming vignette continues along this same theme: Lily trying to practice a respectful, honoring pedagogy; however, it focuses on her relationships *with* students. During this particular story, Lily's students were in their third day of testing (unit test, lab test, and pretest), and many of the students were frustrated with this lack of engagement. Lily decided to use her authority as the teacher to work *with* a student who was struggling to accomplish a difficult task.

Vignette 3: Using Authority Positively

Shawn is sitting quietly at his desk, staring off into space. He is not looking at the test, nor is he holding his pencil. Lily notices this and walks over to him. She leans in close, and they have a nearly silent conversation. She pats him on the back and walks toward me pausing long enough to say, "He doesn't want to take this test." I scrunch my eyes inquisitively; Lily shrugs her shoulders and says, "He doesn't want to." *Lily moves to help other students before returning to Shawn.*

On her next pause by my desk, I ask Lily what she and Shawn discussed in their hushed talk over the test. Lily explains, "He [Shawn] gets off task really easily and really needs to wiggle. He is very bright but often doesn't do well on tests because he is hurrying through them to get finished. He didn't want to take his test so I walked over and I did not say YOU NEED TO TAKE THIS TEST. [There was] no directive. [Instead] I said, 'Hey, let's look at number 1.' I pointed to it and read it to him pointing out the different parts of the picture [that went along with the question]. I read him the answer choices and said, 'All right, I am going to be right back to check on you.' I thought that was better than standing over him and taking an authoritative stance with him. That would just shut him down and he wouldn't want to take his test even more. But I figured if I could just get him started on it. The way I talked to him, the expectation was there. He was going to do it for me or for himself or for whatever reason. Not doing it was not an option."

My understandings. Again, Lily was up and about in her classroom even during a test, which is one of many decisions she could make during this quiet time of testing. Her decision to be mobile gave her opportunities to assist students who were having difficulties or to encourage students to stay focused on the given task. The above vignette showed Lily's commitment to

helping students, as she did not berate Shawn nor did she stand over him forcing him to work. Rather, she took the stance that maybe he was confused and she needed to explain the test items or process more thoroughly. As seen in this narrative, Lily made the reactive decision to approach Shawn and have a hushed conversation. Rather than, calling his name and demanding he work, focusing other students' attention on him and perhaps embarrassing him or causing him to act out further, Lily chose to approach him quietly so that even though I was observing this interaction from across the room, I had no idea what they discussed in whispers. This decision to not humiliate or publicly disgrace Shawn aligned with Kohn's (2005) argument, "The best predictor of whether children will be able to accept themselves as fundamentally valuable and capable is the extent to which they have been accepted unconditionally by others." Lily knew that Shawn longed to be up and moving in the classroom; thus, the decision to approach him quietly honored him and helped him begin the test.

Another decision that Lily made was to explain the first test item, saying "Hey, let's look at number one." Then she further helped him by "point[ing] to it and read[ing] it to him, pointing out the different parts of the picture [that went along with the question]." Approaching him with the attitude that maybe she had written a confusing question or made a mistake in writing the directions afforded her a relationship of trust in which the student was able to see her as a real person who made mistakes. Just as he was struggling with the test, she reached him on a personal level and encouraged him by setting an expectation that was both high and attainable.

She made the decision not to require that the entire test be finished by the time she returned. She explained number one and said, "I will be right back to check on you." Not check on the test or see how many you have answered, but "check on you." This action placed the

relationship with the student front and center, valuing him and acknowledging his struggles with the test, not emphasizing the test but instead that he was capable and able. This practice of focusing on the student rather than the task at hand was an important decision in Lily's constructivist classroom; she considered Shawn, and other students, a subject in his learning instead of an object.

While Lily did choose to focus on Shawn, there was also an implied "I'll give you some time, but I hope to see progress when I return. I'm reaching out to meet you half way—you reach too." Lily was responsible for student learning and there was an administrative expectation that she show progress of that learning to officials outside of the classroom; therefore, she decided to send Shawn a message but chose to do so in a respectful way that aligned with pedagogical beliefs. Freire (1970/1990) argued, "Leadership must…practice *co-intentional* education…Teachers and students are both Subjects," not objects in their realities (p. 69). Placing students first is not rocket science, but my worry is that it seems to be more rare in many classrooms as testing pressures have objectified students and learning. As Lily continually checked on Shawn throughout the testing time, he was able to finish the test before the end of class.

Lily diligently worked to differentiate instruction, activities, and assessment whenever possible; however, there were times, i.e. this unit test, when she decided to meet the administrative expectation of administering this county-level post-test. Every seventh grade student was expected to take this test so that it could be used as a benchmark for principals and other officials to study at the monthly principal's meeting held at the county office. Additionally, Lily used post-test data to compare with pre-test data to help her ensure that students were indeed learning the standards. While a multiple-choice test was not Lily's first choice for an

assessment, she decided to incorporate it into her practice as she felt students did need to be exposed to this style of testing. However, she decided to continue her own practices of varying assessments (e.g., written responses, practical applications, projects, and the like) where students were able to show their growing knowledge in multiple ways.

The decisions in this vignette to act on behalf of the student and be less authoritative developed over time. Lily admitted she was more authoritative in her relationships with students in her first few years of teaching. She would stand over them and demand the given task be completed, not leaving until they showed her that they were indeed working. As she learned more about teaching and relationships with students, she found that the best way to engage students in the given task was through caring about them and building a relationship built on mutual trust and respect. She learned how essential this approach was with each student, not standing and yelling "YOU NEED TO TAKE THIS TEST" but getting on the student's level and engaging in conversation. Calling out students or embarrassing them can often lead to further shutting down (Mayer, 2007; Weist, Evans & Lever, 2003; among others). Lily believed that if she stood over Shawn, he would have rejected her and the test would never have been finished.

Lily decided to use her authority to work alongside the student to accomplish the task at hand. Quantz, Rogers, and Dantley (1991) contended that for leaders to participate in transformative leadership with others they must use their authority to build new leaders. They further argued, "Authoritarianism creates alienation; authority creates community" (p. 102). Over time and learning from experiences where students fought back or rejected her authority, Lily discovered this different use of her authority, one that afforded her and her students respect so that learning could occur. This decision to work alongside each student to move them

forward with their goals again allowed her and the students a safe place to navigate the rocky terrain of testing and policy that is common in today's schools.

This is not to say that this philosophy worked every time and with every child, but Lily found that often helping the students and then ~~–w~~walking away is a good strategy to let the students work." Her decision to work with her students to meet goals instead of ~~–s~~tanding at the front [of the classroom] and screaming" stemmed from the child-centered, welcoming classroom that she strove to enact with her students. The relationship between the student and the teacher is important as the teacher does have authority in the classroom. Lily decided that she would not abuse her authority and intimidate or scare students. Working together to create and learn does not place the teacher as an equal with students; instead, Lily decided to negotiate this relationship with 114 students by engaging in dialogue. ~~–T~~hrough dialogue, the teacher-of the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers" (Freire, 1970/1990, p. 80). The teacher plays an essential role in fostering an environment in which students are able to take control of their own learning in the classroom.

Pulling it all Together

The loving, caring attitude that Lily practiced in her classroom was evident in her struggle to connect and light inquiry fires with each student. Lily's practice of engaging in respectful relationships with her students was a decision she negotiated long ago. This decision to be positive about students and their abilities first and foremost was in line with pedagogical beliefs. These vignettes illustrate several ways that Lily was able to navigate around administrative and political expectations and still build constructive relationships with students:

1. She strove to connect with students on a personal level, not berating them when they were silly, possibly subverting a buckle down and be rigorous ethos offered by the school.
2. She decided to use creative avenues to enforce previous standards and continue with content required. In the same short vignette, we saw Lily‘s decision to honor students‘ voices by not silencing them and not letting the students silence each other.
3. Lily‘s practices included working quietly alongside each student when they needed encouragement and assistance, further creating students-teachers as they work toward both individual and county/state goals.

Stories of Lily and her students were full of histories, as each student Lily interacted with left a part of themselves with her, informing her practices and decisions of engaging with current students and with students in the future. The decision to learn with and from each other, even with the teacher in authority, afforded many students and Lily educational opportunities, in particular her pedagogical autonomy that I believe many students crave in our current educational framework of mandates and strict curricular maps. These crucial decisions to engage with students were one way that Lily navigated the gaps between her personal teaching beliefs and the expectations of others. Lily sought to gain the trust of her students and through the students, their parents. These two groups can be problematic for some teachers who struggle to follow strict guidelines or difficult expectations handed down from outside the classroom. In Lily‘s case, most often any missteps on the rocky ground were leveled out as Lily sought to work alongside each student and his/her parents to accomplish goals. This established trust between stakeholders allowed Lily the pedagogical autonomy to enact her instructional decisions in the best interest of the child and the child‘s learning. In the next section, I share and analyze three

examples of Lily‘s instructional practices selected from many that could serve to show how she engaged in decisions and decision-making process in today‘s era of standardization of lessons.

Stories of Lily’s Instructional Decisions

Much of the recent debate regarding the improvement of student achievement treats education as a procedural or mechanical issue (Bartolome, 2009, Giroux, 1992). Moreover, Hargreaves (2008) wrote that the instructional strategies adopted by many schools are ―so gimmicky" that they can be immediately installed and ―do not challenge or encourage teachers to question" what decisions might or should be returned to teachers who can then establish a productive pedagogy (p. 16). In light of so many political and institutional structures, Lily made decisions that fit within the given structures of the school; moreover, she found ways to continue her personal teaching practices including student-centered, engaging plans where she shared authority with her students.

In this section, I unpack three instructional practices, decisions, and the decision-making processes Lily undertook as she worked to fill the gaps between her teaching beliefs and outside expectations. Several core beliefs that carry over from the previous section, the vignettes about Lily‘s relationships with students, are that in Lily‘s classroom there will be respect and there will be activities that are child-centered, affording the students opportunities to explore and seek understandings through responding to and engaging in their lessons.

Each of the vignettes presented focuses on one aspect of Lily‘s instructional practices and decisions. The first story is about decisions Lily made about the practice of writing informational books with her students. Next we see Lily‘s impromptu decision to take the time to follow students‘ interests and questions as a part of the instructional day. The third instructional vignette features Lily‘s curriculum and assessment practices and how she utilized these choices to make

decisions about how to accelerate and/or remediate concepts. Taken as a whole, these vignettes give insights into the many decisions Lily made each day as a part of her larger pedagogical practices and commitments to work alongside students to meet their goals.

Vignette 1: Writing Books and Helping Others

"For the next few days, we will have four visitors from another class so make them feel welcome. We want them to have a positive experience in our class. They will be working on a book similar to what you are working on," Lily announces. "Make sure that you are researching with resources [to write your book]. You must be specific with your facts."

Students begin working. There are two crates full of resources in the front of the room. Some students are working on the computers, some are reading in the resource books, and some are working on their illustrations. As this is happening, Lily whispers to a group of girls, "We have some from visitors from Mrs. B's class [self-contained special education class]. Do you know Mrs. B's Class?" The girls nod their heads. "I want you to help [our visitors]. As you find information or pictures in our resources, please share with your partner."

Just as Lily is finishing these instructions, four students and a para-pro from Mrs. B's class enter the room. Lily introduces each student to one of her students and gives them modified requirements for the informational book project. The pairs of students begin chatting and discussing the project. The rest of the class appears to have barely noticed the visitors and continue to work on their books.

Students occasionally walk over to Lily to ask questions about their books or to ask for clarification on something from the resource books. In between these questions, Lily is organizing stacks of papers and cleaning her classroom. She says, "I have to have a clean room

before parent conferences start later today." This week is parent conference week and Lily's team of teachers has 62 conferences this week.

Lily and I debrief this experience. The next interview with Lily included a question about the inclusion of Mrs. B's students into the regular classroom. In this particular self-contained classroom the students were labeled as "mild intellectual disabled," where a special education teacher served a whole class of students who spent the majority of their academic day in one classroom covering a wide range of subject areas. However, students from this classroom were served in inclusion connections classes such as art, health, physical education, and the like. Lily shared her thoughts and explained why Mrs. B's students were invited to participate in the book publishing project.

Lily said, "They [Mrs. B's students] will come for about a week and a half. They are doing a modified version of the book. They work with my students and do quite a bit of their own research . . . My students work well with them. The ones that are working directly with the other students in kind of a partnership, I took them aside and said that we wanted our guests to have a good classroom experience just like they were having. They might not have all the abilities that you do, but they have lots of abilities. They [Lily's students] understood. [Lily asked them] to share with them what we are doing and how to find stuff. My students guided them along in their research."

I asked, "How do you think it went?"

"One of the girls [from Mrs. B's class] really surprised me about how much she writes." Lily shared. "I don't know if I had preconceived notions about writing ability. She wrote a lot,

and she said over and over how much she loved to write. Overall, it went really well. The kids did well with the project. My kids did well working with Mrs. B‘s kids and helping helped them learn.”

My Understandings. Harmony Middle School served students with disabilities in a variety of ways. These particular visitors in Lily‘s class had been labeled as mildly intellectual disabled and spent the majority of their day in a self-contained classroom with a specialized teacher. Lily was unaware if they were invited to other classrooms to engage in particular units with general education students, yet for the past several years, she worked collaboratively with Mrs. B. to include these students for the informational book writing unit. This was a planned decision on Lily‘s behalf to include Mrs. B‘s students in a regular education classroom. Most days, Mrs. B‘s students only interacted with other students during sixth grade connections classes. This meant that regardless of the chronological age of Mrs. B‘s children, they spent 90 minutes of their day with eleven and twelve year olds in exploratory classes.

Lily invited the seventh grade students from Mrs. B.’s class into her room to participate in a slightly modified version of the informational book project. This invitation took effort and planning on her part. She created modified rubrics, questions, and guidelines, which included fewer pages and paragraphs per page then the general education students. Instructionally, the students transacted with grade-level standards that differed from the content of their self-contained class. Lily valued the students and their thoughts in this open invitation to think, interpret, and share. Shor (1986) argued that the ~~“h~~umanities curriculum should be admired when it generates thought in students and inspires them to be interactive learners” (p. 12), which further aligns with Dewey‘s social-construction of meaning inside classrooms. This interactive process was seen in Lily‘s classroom as the students did not appear to worry about the

differences in requirements. They simply worked on their books, knowing, I believe, that Lily was working to ensure that most students were adequately challenged most of the time.

Another decision Lily made was to prepare the class for the impending visitors. She simply stated, "For the next few days, we will have four visitors from another class so make them feel welcome. We want them to have a positive experience in our class. They will be working on a book similar to what you are working on." From my observations, this was the extent of Lily's prepping of her students. She decided to inform them without making a big deal or over explaining. She offered a few sentences and moved right into directions into what the general education students needed to accomplish that day.

Building on the decision to prep the class, Lily pulled aside four students and gave them more information and asked them to work alongside the visiting students to help them create their own informational book. In her short set of instructions, Lily asked, "Do you know Mrs. B's class?" Thus, acknowledging the students' differences and as we learn further from the interview, she asked her students to honor the abilities of the visiting students. This further showed Lily's belief in all students' ability to learn. Additionally, the statement, the visitors might not have the same abilities as them nonetheless they had abilities, aligned with Lily's belief in multiple intelligences. Deciding to honor the abilities of each student and deciding to teach this honoring of abilities to her students, I believe went a long way in the welcoming of the visitors.

Idol (2007) studied different schools to determine the degree of inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classes. The findings included descriptions of how each school utilized the concept of inclusion and the roles, attitudes, and skills of general and special education teachers. She found that overall "educators were positive about educating students

with disabilities in general education settings;" however, ~~t~~hey were conservative about how to best do this" (p.77). Moreover, many preferred special education teachers to work with the students with disabilities in the regular classroom and/or in resource rooms. Lily worked with Mrs. B to include students in the regular education setting where these students where Lily was the lead teacher during the informational book unit. Lily honored Mrs. B's students with a thoughtful and respectful pedagogy as she worked alongside them and her students to build a great understanding of each other and to make meaning through writing their own informational books.

As this was a writing example, the next vignette offers a similar questioning approach in Lily's science classroom. In both of these examples, we see how Lily maintained her teaching philosophy of respect and following student interest in light of the many changes and policy initiatives and administrative expectations.

Vignette 2: Science Questioning

Lily's students are finishing their daily warm-ups, some students are chatting, two boys are holding the hamster, and Lily is finishing her rounds of reading each student's response to the warm-ups. As Lily walks to one of the classroom computers to push play for the showing of a quick clip from BrainPop, a collection of online animated videos, Mikey calls out, "Isn't the tongue the strongest muscle in the body?"

Lily responds, "The tongue is a very strong muscle, but it would depend on how you define strength. How do you define strength?" There is a lot of discussion about how strength could be defined and what muscles would be the strongest based on the given definition. Many students offer definitions and examples, and Lily accepts them all. The class continues offering and giving examples until the topic is exhausted, and Lily presses play on the BrainPop video.

While the video is playing, Lily briefly explains to me that the spur-of-the-moment deviations are often places where "the most learning occurs." Later that same day in a different class, the discussion between warm-ups and the movie clip wanders into the realm of voluntary and involuntary muscles. Paulie asks, "Why are some muscle actions called involuntary, like breathing, when I can hold my breath and stop breathing?" Lily responds with a simple, "Why do you think?" Students fire answers and examples from all over the room. Paulie Wo (mentioned earlier in chapter four regarding the Fact of the Day written on the classroom whiteboard) launches into a story about blinking eyes. As he wraps up the story, Lily offers an impromptu science experiment, "How long can you override involuntary muscles before they kick back in? How can we test this?"

Students offer that they can have a staring contest and time how long people can keep their eyes open without blinking. Students quickly find a partner and the contest begins. Lily calls out times periodically as students announce that they blinked. Each student writes down the length of time they are able to keep their eyes open. As a class they tally and categorize their times to make a class graph of how long involuntary muscle actions could be held off before the involuntary response takes over. Eight minutes later Paulie Wo blinks; sparking an entire new round of inquiry and dialogue including how and why he can do this. One student hops onto the computer and Googles information to share with the class what a website about the human eye has to say about moisture in the eyes and blinking. Lily pulls the conversation back to the focus of the BrainPop video, but as she says, allowing the students to explore their interest in the muscular system's functions is often where "the most learning occurs."

My understandings. Lily employed many strategies in her classroom. For Lily, science was a natural fit for inquiry, and she lamented that ~~–~~Many science teachers seem to use more

content delivery than discovery in their classrooms." While Lily called her teaching inquiry-based, what I actually saw was that she not only decided to draw from inquiry methods but also she drew from a wide-range of pedagogical practices to help students accomplish their goals. In this vignette we see the decisions Lily made to follow the student-initiated inquiries. Colburn (2000) defined inquiry-based instruction as "the creation of a classroom where students are engaged in essentially open-ended, student-centered, hands-on activities" (p. 42). Using this definition of inquiry-based instruction and adding it to Freire's ideas of (1982) new knowledge being produced from interaction between students' experimental knowledge and teachers' systematic knowledge, we can explore dialogue in Lily's classroom. Students' knowledge about life and their own experiences was the starting point for dialogue in Lily's classroom where she used in expertise in content to facilitate discussion.

The first decision we saw Lily make was the planned decision to use warm-ups as a way to get the students "started on something brainy, and it [warm-up questions] gets the mind ready and they know what to expect." Warm-ups were quick questions or prompts that students had to answer most days. This decision afforded Lily many benefits, the first being that Lily was able to talk to each student everyday as she walked around with a colorful highlighter to read each student's response and place a checkmark on the paper. Lily decided, "I want to talk to each kid individually because I want them to know that every single one of them matters to me. It is so easy in middle school to go days without speaking directly to some students." This practice of talking to each student about their warm-up also allowed Lily to gauge his/her mood on that day and help where she could.

Before Lily placed a checkmark on the student's paper, she quickly read and assessed the student response. This quick assessment was vital to Lily's decision to use daily warm-ups. Lily

was able to quickly check for understanding of previous concepts and clear up any misconceptions. As Lily related in this example, "I can check prior knowledge right then…so I can see if they got yesterday'[s content] or not. On Monday, [the question was the] difference between biotic and abiotic. Maybe on the whole team only 1 or 2 people got it wrong, but I could see that and I could correct it right then before we went into [the next topic] because they needed a clear knowledge of those things before moving on." Deciding to check daily for confusions helped ensure that the students were making meaning with the material and remembering content from day to day and week to week.

Within this practice, Lily chose to take advantage of time to do a number of things. A third way Lily decided to use warm-up questions was for a quick and informal pre-assessment of upcoming material. If the majority of the students knew the content of the warm-up question, Lily could shift plans to incorporate deeper or more complex understandings than what was required in the Georgia Performance Standards. If only a couple of students did not "get it," she pulled them aside for a "Rhodes Meeting" (Rhodes is Lily's pseudo surname) to unpack, clarify, and work toward an understanding of the content. This idea of small group remediation and acceleration is presented and discussed in the next vignette, Lily's Curriculum and Assessment Decisions.

Another decision that we saw Lily make in this second vignette was the decision to engage students with muscular system vocabulary and its functions in an involved way. Many of Lily's instructional decisions do follow the county's expectations as seen on the curriculum map. That week, according to the curriculum map, teachers all over the county were teaching about the muscular system. However, Lily chose to supplement heavily with BrainPop or YouTube videos, music, clips from popular TV shows (i.e., *Dirty Jobs*), making and creating hands-on

projects with the students. This decision to supplement and dig deeper than required took time. She and the students did not have all the time in the world to learn seventh grade life science. In fact, there was a finite, fixed amount of time allotted for the material to be covered (55 minutes a day for 180 days, minus furlough days, snow days, and other interruptions that take away from class time, such as fire drills and assemblies). Consequently, Lily decided to continue to work within her larger philosophy and commitment to engaging students in their learning. This decision cost some coverage of material, but for Lily that was okay. She related, "We'll [still] get done what needs to get done."

Two additional decisions presented in the above story were reactive or on-the-fly decisions to follow student questions and curiosities. Natural questions and student stories were often heard in Lily's class. In both of the examples presented in the above vignette, students freely questioned and sought understanding of topics based on their experiences. In first period when Mikey questioned the tongue being the strongest muscle, Lily validated his answer with "The tongue is a very strong muscle." This could have been the end of the conversation; however, Lily decided to dig a little deeper with his inquiry by asking him to define strength. The term strength can have multiple meanings, which would then change the body part that would be consider the strongest, thus leading into a fairly lengthy discussion about different definitions of strength and the muscle that would best fit the given definition.

The second decision to follow a student's lead came later that same day with a staring contest. Lily was about to begin the BrainPop video when Paulie asked, "Why are some muscle actions called involuntary, like breathing, when I can hold my breath and stop breathing?" Paulie could have gotten in trouble for calling out, but Lily decided to question his thoughts on the topic and explore this teachable moment with him and the other students. Students shared their

experiences and stories and together the entire class participated in a staring contest to see how long different individuals could override their involuntary muscles. This took time from the specific content of the day, yet it was related to the standard and gave the students a hands-on understanding of the muscular system.

In these examples and countless others, Lily viewed instruction as a tool that had the power to transform student understandings. Understandings that valued personal knowledge and understandings that grow, shift, and change through social interactions were evident in Lily's philosophy of teaching and in her attempt to enact this belief in the classroom. The curriculum map did not include this impromptu discussion of defining strength or having a staring contest; however, Lily chose to take the time to uncover meaning and make connections to further students' knowledge of the muscular system. Additionally, with the non-specific Georgia Performance Standard: "Explain the purpose of the major organ systems in the human body (i.e. . . . . movement, control)," Lily could defend taking time to explore student interest in both of these examples if a justification had been required.

These deviations from the established expectations could be seen as flimsy or not worthy of the time allotted for content each day. In no way does having an engaging classroom allow Lily to sit back and relax. Lily viewed her processes and practices in this way,

> It would come from my own fascination and curiosity. If you [the teacher] lead them [the students] through the questioning process, maybe they can learn to be a questioner and to seek and find the answers to their own questions when they are gone from me… It does no one any good for me to just answer the question… they need to think about it, read about it and work through a process to come up with an answer. I had a teacher like, and I

> loved it [example from college]. *I don't know* is a good answer. There is not just one right answer because you can define things in so many different ways.

Fascination and natural curiosity were an integral part of Lily's classroom practices. Following the lead of the students' questions, guiding them in finding their own answers, and seeing multiple perspectives on pressing issues helped prepare the students for seventh grade, later grades, and life outside of school. A crucial decision that Lily has made and one that I observed her practice often in the classroom is that not knowing something is okay. However, Lily encouraged her students to try and figure out an answer through questioning and reading of multiple sources. Hopefully, as the students saw Lily explore and question the world, they would open up and explore and question their own worlds.

Lily felt it was her responsibility to explain her understandings of the subject at hand, which is a key component in dialogue. While Lily often answered questions with questions, there came a time when she did share her knowledge and explain concepts in a more banking or traditional style. This practice pulled away from her decision to be inquiry-driven, but Lily argued that there were times when a student needed to simply know a definition; for example, students needed to know that the muscular system encompasses all the muscles in your body. She could have let them explore and discover, but it was quicker for her to give the information to the students before digging deeper into the muscular system. Had Lily decided to have the students inquire into simple concepts, she more than likely would have not had to time to explore concepts in depth. Basic information, such as terms or surface understandings of content might be ~~"~~good enough" for Georgia teachers as Cox (2010) stated; moreover, Lily explained her belief that ~~"~~a student could probably pass the test [CRCT] if they have the textbook knowledge of a topic, but in here we need more." With this decision to need more, Lily promoted questions and

tried to offer experiences so that the students could do more than respond to a multiple-choice question. While multiple choice questions are important and the gateway to many things in life, for example, SAT for college, driver‘s license test, CRCT for promotion, among others, Lily decided that learning was about touching, feeling, asking, and exploring and tried to practice this belief within the structure of the school.

In the process of inquiring into the world around them, the students worked through material and concepts to get from point A to point B. Lily decided to focus on the process of moving the students from where they were to where they want or need to be. Freirian maxims, such as ―teaching within students‘ realities‖ and reading ―the word and the world,‖ were realized in Lily‘s classroom as she invited their natural curiosity to fill the learning space and further the content to a higher level of understanding. An on-the-fly decision to have a staring contest aligned with her pedagogical beliefs to have students excited about learning and questioning. For Lily, this practice of following students‘ leads and the decision to time how long students could override their involuntary muscles encouraged the students to continue to question and explore intellectual thoughts. The students were curious about a concept, were able to contribute to the content of the classroom, and were able to develop a consciousness through the instructional decision to honor a student‘s questions. The goal of helping students learn to discover the world around them continues to show Lily‘s commitment to her larger pedagogical beliefs from chapter four, that all students are capable and curious. Additionally, Lily‘s decided to view her job as their teacher as a respectful relationship where she chose to work alongside each student to foster their love of learning with motivating and interesting practices. In the next vignette, this commitment to student learning is furthered through her decisions and practices regarding curriculum and assessment choices.

Vignette 3: Curriculum and Assessment Choices

"Flip over your quizzes. Circle what it says to circle. Turn it back over. Go," Lily says as class is beginning. Students quickly flip over their quizzes and circle the parts of the body that belong to the nervous system. As quizzes are finished, Lily collects them and begins sorting the papers into different piles while students watch a short School House Rocks clip on the nervous system. Today's agenda is written on the board: 1. Warm-up and quiz. 2. Nervous System Stations (Anatomy Arcade, Ready or Not, Rhodes). After the movie clip, Lily divides the students into different groups. She sends two boys to the back computer and two girls to the front computer to play games in the Anatomy Arcade station. Six students are sent to the front table to work with Lily at the Rhodes station, and the remaining students break into pairs to conduct a Ready or Not experiment.

"We will rotate in a few minutes, so everyone pay attention. [When you are at the computer station] you will see a tab called Nervous System Games. Choose one and play it with your partner. When you are with me, we are doing something special, and when you are doing Ready or Not follow the experiment directions on page 626. Read the directions and get started."

As students start to work, Lily whispers to me, "This group [Lily gestures to the Rhodes station] is struggling with nervous system information, we are going to go over it again and then I am going to work on skeletal system so they will be experts when we start that [concept] tomorrow. Hopefully they will be able to teach it to the rest of the class."

My understandings. Lily decided to arrange the nervous system quizzes into three groups: students who missed zero, students who missed one or two, and students who missed more than two. The practice of giving daily short quizzes during the body systems unit began

two years ago. As students took the quiz at the beginning of each class, Lily quickly assessed the students‘ understandings of the concepts and responded accordingly. The students were organized into groups that were different day to day, depending on the results of the quizzes.

What stands out in the above story is Lily decided to use the computer to extend the knowledge of the nervous system of students who scored a 100 on the quiz. The games that Lily selected on the ―Nervous System Games" tab were advanced games that not only required a high level of understanding of the nervous system, but also required the students to apply knowledge to make anatomy decisions to keep animated characters alive. These games entailed a lot of heavy, intense reading and decision-making that engaged and enriched students who were already comfortable with the material. Lily made the decision that the standard was simply a starting point; therefore, it was her practice for students who scored high on pre-tests or daily assessments to engage in a variety of tasks or projects to extend their knowledge. If students knew the information required in the Georgia Performance Standards, she believed it was her responsibility to take them to a more in-depth and complex understanding.

The second group, ―ready or not," was responsible for designing their own experiment. These students missed one to two questions on the opening quiz, and Lily decided that they needed reinforcement of a few simple concepts to fully grasp the material for the day. This station required the students to work in pairs to read through directions, conduct an experiment using meter sticks and timers, and interpret the results. This activity allowed the students to further explore how the nervous system works and responds to stimuli that helped them understand the different responses and parts of the nervous system.

In this narrative, the middle group was engaged in a dialogical process as they were working in pairs or triads to discover how the nervous system responded and reacted to stimuli.

Students were given basic guidelines to follow in the experiment, then they had to work together to read, converse, reflect, figure out a process, try out ideas, and repeat again and again to more fully understand the given topic. The process of working together and conversing to figure out a problem had to have helped the students be more fully aware of the nervous system understandings. Lily admittedly believed in the construction of knowledge and one way she decided to negotiate this space was through the practice of dialogue. Dialogue, according to Freire and Macedo (1995), ―characterizes an epistemological relationship. Thus,…dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic." We should engage in dialogue because dialogue is a social way of knowing: ―In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing" (p. 379). Moreover, Lily's decision of allowing the students to explore functions of the nervous system afforded her the opportunity to work with students who were struggling with these concepts.

The final group, Rhodes, ―needed to meet with me [Lily]." Upon taking the short assessment, these six students showed that they were really struggling on the different parts and functions of the nervous system. Lily's determination of this level was a decision that was always evolving. With her practice of short assessments or informal observations, Lily was able to perceive who needed additional help in understanding the material. These particular students from the above story missed between three and six items on an 18-question test (or scored between an 83 and 67). Many people would consider an 83 a sufficiently decent score and not consider the student in need of remediation. However, Lily decided an 83 ―wasn't good enough." This group met with Lily as they reviewed the material that was in the standard. Lily drew from many different practices to help these students: they reviewed orally, made flash cards of key

concepts that were missed, and quizzed each other before they retook the quiz. These students scored either a 100 or a 94 on the retake.

However, Lily decided not to stop with remediation with this group; instead she chose to front-load the next body system, the skeletal system. This decision gave these students a preview into content for the next day, enabling them to lead discussion and teach the rest of the students the major concepts of this system. This practice placed the students into a more privileged, responsible role possibly affording them some academic benefits with their peers. Several of the students in the Rhodes Scholar group on this particular day were students with school-sanctioned labels. Labels, such as struggling reader served by Title I teachers or learning disabled served by Special Education Teachers, had been a part of these students‘ academic career. Lily chose to remediate the misunderstandings of the current topic and frontload the next topic. This idea of acceleration has been studied, found to help students are struggling, yet sadly, it is not widely implemented (Allington & Wlamsley, 1995; Cooper, McWilliams, Boschken, & Pistochini, www.eduplace.com). Many of the students who were labeled have already experienced academic failures. Therefore, Lily saw the need to accelerate their progress in order to help them achieve more.

Another decision Lily made was to not engage this group in inquiry-based instruction practices on that particular day as she worked with the political expectations that the students would be able to pass the state tests and county expectations. Lily‘s decision to diverge into a wide-range of diverse teaching practices strengthens her pedagogical belief that all students were capable. The Rhodes group made flash cards, which is a more traditional practice, yet in this group flash cards had a different feeling. The Rhodes scholars chatted while making flash cards, asked Lily to clarify concepts so the information on the card would be easily understood, asked

Lily to use the cards to question them, among other practices. Lily chose to take the time to use the student-created flash cards to quiz the student. Upon finishing she would say statements similar to ―Great job. You missed three. Practice with them [the cards] a little more and you will have it." This decision for some students to engage in flash cards was important as it was not every student in the room, but a select group of students who would benefit from this practice.

Lily worked to build a learning community founded on trust and respect. A functioning learning community built on respectful connections afforded Lily the use of whatever practices she decided were necessary to promote student learning. The act of working with this small group is respectful in that Lily hoped to ensure that each student received what s/he needed in order to learn. Lily provided the note cards for the students to use and invited the students into the learning group with her. She did not sentence them to a remote location or berate them for struggling with the quiz. She decided to approach these students with a respectful tone where the students knew she would work tirelessly to help them learn and develop a deeper understanding of the content. Moreover, the students knew that Lily respected them and wanted them to succeed. Offering students this respectful relationship, I believe made flash cards a viable practice that the students did not mind undertaking.

A classroom where the expectation is that the educator‘s purpose is to assist students in making meaning and growing understandings of concepts is a place where students blossom. As Greene (1978) argued it is the teachers‘ responsibilities to enable every student to learn content and approach curricula with confidence while engaging in dialogue with others‘ ideas and constructs. Lily made the decision to diligently work to provide access and understanding to all students. This was a powerful lens for Lily to utilize in the classroom. Creating stations and

rotations took extra work and time; however, Lily wanted to overcome any barriers present to assist student learning.

Lily engaged in productive and meaningful pedagogy by having an interactive and engaging classroom as often as possible. One principle of such a supportive pedagogy was dialogue that was enacted though ongoing, interactive classroom spaces where Lily and her students worked together to reflect, critique, and act within and on their worlds. Freire (2000) reminds us that teachers have the responsibility to ~~r~~respect the dignity, autonomy, and identity of the student" acknowledging that such educational practices demand ~~p~~ermanent…vigilance in regard to the students" (p. 62). Carefully assessing and moving students in and out of different groups was one way Lily maintained this vigilant care and respect for each student.

Furthermore, Lily preferred that students work and discover concepts rather than her simply transmitting information to her classes (Freire, 1970/2000). However, there were times when Lily, as with the Rhodes group, did enact a more traditional style, giving students information as they worked together to create ways to understand it. This more traditional style came after attempts to help them discover the content. We saw that she pulled this small group aside after the material had been explored and a subsequent brief assessment showed that the students were struggling with basic nervous system facts. But she did not stop with helping them understand the previous content; she accelerated the next topic so that these students who were struggling with the current content would be more comfortable with the next topic affording them the opportunity to teach material to the rest of the class.

Rather than throw out practices that did not quite fit with her inquiry or construction of knowledge beliefs, Lily pulled from other teaching methods to selectively and respectfully help particular students for particular purposes. Freire (1992, 2000) continually returned to the idea

that teaching was complex, hard work as teachers needed to pay attention to different backgrounds, cultures, abilities, political expectations, administrative requirements, and the like. This narrative shows that teachers can and probably should draw from a wide range of practices to balance instruction to help all learners. Furthermore, we see that this narrative highlights the myriad ways Lily used a comprehensive set of learning methods to reach her goals and administrative expectations. These varying practices accessed and implemented by Lily afforded each student regardless of their background or ability to grow to a deeper level of understanding content.

Pulling it All Together

Lily‘s instructional, curricular, and assessment decisions stemmed from two beliefs that she held as important for all students to be successful. The first understanding and decision that Lily brought into the classroom was that all students deserve access to all curricular materials. Additionally, she felt that it is the teacher‘s responsibility to assess students‘ current understandings and background knowledge and add to these as much as possible with the standard being the minimum. Discarding deficit views and seeing the potential in each student was a conscious decision that all students can and will learn material by any means necessary, and led to Lily‘s second instructional belief that she must work to meet the students where they were and use numerous teaching strategies and methods that helped further the students‘ learning. For Lily, the best way to spend her classroom time is engaged with students in interactive opportunities to grow and learn and to question and understand the world around them. Lily was not turning cartwheels or standing on her head; she was enacting her beliefs the best way she knew how in the current climate of strict policies and mandates. The next group of

vignettes explores Lily‘s actions and reactions to policy decisions rendered during the time of the study.

Stories of Lily’s Interactions with Mandates

Before diving into the vignettes and understandings, a little background on the school system‘s policies and mandates is necessary. In the year prior to this study, Harmony Middle School installed standards-based report cards and grading system. This new system of grading for learning was seen by the local county education office as a positive move for teachers, parents, and students in the county. However, they could not have imagined the backlash and conflict from many groups of stakeholders after changing the traditional grading system of percentages and letter grades to a grading scale that simply told guardians if their child *exceeds* the standard, *meets* the standard, or *does not meet the standard.* In the ensuing months numerous newspaper articles and editorials were printed in the local paper critiquing the new system. Countless meetings have been called to train teachers on systematically implementing this system.

The summer preceding the study, the seventh grade teachers, including Lily, were required to attend a Standards Summit where, according to Lily, they were to plan their common assessments, be trained on the new grading system, and ask questions to fully understand the shift in thinking. Prior to presenting Lily‘s stories on her understandings, fears, and frustrations with the new policy, I will briefly share the policy as it is necessary for understanding the selected narratives that follow.

Standards-Based Report Cards (SBRC)

Many school systems around the country are making the shift from the traditional grading system to a standards-based system (Hanushek & Raymond, 2004). In light of this shift and at

the time of the study, McKenzie School System decided that only summative grades would count for reporting out to parents. Each teacher had to assign three summative grades per standard or an NA (not applicable) was reported for that nine weeks. The summative grades were required to be a mixture of performance tasks and common assessments that were given in the form of multiple-choice tests. For instance, for a student to *exceed* expectations s/he must score an ―E" on all performance tasks and score a 90-100 percent on the end of unit common assessment multiple-choice test.

Additionally teachers had been given a rubric that they were required to use when assigning grades (see Appendix H). According to the rubric, the end of unit common assessment trumped all other grades. For example, a student who scored an ―E" on two performance tasks and an 88 on the end of unit test would score a *meets* on the report card for failing to make above a 90 on the multiple-choice, end of unit test. An additional example is a student who scored two *meets* and one *exceeds* on the performance tasks, but a 71 on the end of unit test would score a *meets minimally* (M-) on the report card. Lily viewed this new system as unfair to the students, noting that if a student scored all E's on ―the performance tasks, the kid clearly knows his stuff, and now I have to give him the lower mark. He knows what he needs to know and then some. Shouldn't he get an ‗E'?"

This was problematic for Lily because the Georgia Performance Standards are performance based. She felt that if students did well on performing and applying knowledge, then they had shown mastery. In Lily's view, grades should reflect the knowledge the student has formed, not the student's ability to pass a multiple-choice test. These beliefs are further problematized in the upcoming sections as Lily grappled with the implementation of these policies and negotiated how it would work for her in her classroom.

Vignette 1: "I Got a Meets"

A couple of weeks before the December break, Lily is returning each student's pretest on parts and functions of the nervous system. Susie looks at her grade, seems surprised, and proudly calls out, "Hey, Mrs. R, we [Susie and her friend that sits next to her] both missed 2.5 on this quiz. I got a meets!"

Lily answers, "Really… it's just a pretest and it is only for my record keeping. It doesn't factor into your grade." Lily smirks at me and, as the students are pulling out their "foldable thing with the dude on it" graphic organizer of body systems, Lily leans in and whispers to me, "That's the girl that cheated that I told you about in the interview. She is so proud of herself [she rarely scores a meets], but we are going to have to have a conversation about cheating. I need to know what she knows so I can help her."

As Lily moves away to help a student find his graphic organizer, Sam leaned over to me and said, "Boy, I love Mrs. R. She makes everything fun. Well, everything except tests. And if Ghandi was teaching [us], tests would still not be fun."

My understandings. Lily decided to create short pre- and post- assessments for this unit as a result of her belief and practice of helping ensure that each student had an understanding of the basic factual material before moving into the project that she designed to accompany this unit. Lily returned the quizzes as quickly as possible to the students so they would know what they made; she said, ―I decided that everyone would get a 100 before they could even start the project. That's a 100 or an *exceeds*. An 80 or a *meets* wasn't good enough." In the above vignette, we see a young girl who was proud of herself for scoring a *meets*. In light of Lily's personal decision that each student needed to score *exceeds* on the small assessments before moving into the project, Lily knew that Susie would have to retake the quiz anyway and,

therefore, chose not to publicly make a big deal out of Susie cheating. Later that day, as a result of this decision, Lily moved Susie's assigned seat away from her friend, and the next day they discussed how she needed to know what Susie knew so that she could best help her achieve her goals.

Lily had been through many changes at Harmony as a result of varying school policies; however, this change to SBRC was the only one that she "felt railroaded into." She explained her frustration with standards-based grading, "It has made me mediocre. Once you [a student] met. You're done. You're capped now." Complaining about having students who met the standard seemed ironic. She furthered her line of reasoning with, "The whole goal is for the students to have a *meets*, not for the students to learn information." Lily had high expectations for herself and her students and within the SBRC framework she felt stifled to mediocrity. Lily really struggled with the implementation of the new grading system. At first she was unsure of how it would play out in her room and with the students' learning. Lily examined the rubrics and created lists of questions for administration that she never asked because she admitted that she does not "have a choice about it." She said, "I was not allowed to speak what I thought about it. And if I did there was going to be a severe consequence for me. I'm afraid to speak up about it. But it is awful. I am going to do it [SBRC grading system], and I am going to do it enthusiastically." Imagine Lily swinging her arm across her chest *gung ho* style.

The last line in the above quote was a recount of what the administration told the staff in regards to standards-based grading. This short reflection and mimicking action reflected the minimal amount of dialogue and the mandated enthusiasm all teachers were required to feel when discussing SBRC. Lily attended a seminar to learn about standards-based grading. She had been excited about the possibility of moving to performance assessments and grading standards.

Unfortunately, the summer session and sessions since were little more than information giving and transmitting of new expectations and mandates. These meetings lacked the collaborative, dialogical exploration and development of a standards-based grading system that Lily felt was essential for its success. When administrators who have power wield it with the expectation of their teachers accepting a policy enthusiastically, the voices of the teachers are often silenced (McGill-Franzen, 2005; Owens, 2008). It further shows how education is political and not a neutral place. Lily felt afraid to even ask clarifying questions because she was afraid of being labeled as a troublemaker or as a negative employee.

Views of the new grading system similar to Lily's were felt throughout the school and community. Lily shared that she had friends who wanted to withdraw their children from the school system because of the way this policy was enacted and communicated to the parents. In fact, Lily continued, "There are teachers in this building that want to take their children out. I am considering placing Abby [Lily's preschool student] in [an adjacent county's] magnet schools." This was a weighty decision for Lily, as she would love to have her daughter within walking distance of her classroom, but she was not sure if she could "subject her to this mess."

That policies were so controlling that teachers employed at Harmony wanted to withdraw their own children was a major statement about the way SBRC was implemented in the county. An education that silences some and serves the interest of others is dangerous. This new grading system served the interest of McKenzie Schools as they could be considered a forerunner of practices based on the newest wave of educational theories. County level administrators were excited about the implementation and, while it was acknowledged it was not perfect, they clung to the hope that it would improve and that teachers and other stakeholders would accept it. This

act of holding on tightly and implementing without allowing questions spurred many additional meetings that teachers were required to attend.

As these policies controlled much of what happened in and out of the classroom, Lily still strove to engage her students in active, child-centered learning. What stands out in light of this control is Lily's students' belief in her ability to guide and direct them. Sam said, "I love Mrs. R. She makes everything fun. Well, everything except tests. And if Gandhi was teaching [us], tests would still not be fun." Sam's quote acknowledged many of Lily's core understandings and beliefs of what learning entailed. She believed that learning should be engaging as she said, "If I'm bored. The students are bored" showing Lily's decision and desire to have a classroom where all students are actively working and learning with each other to reach their goals.

Unfortunately, Gandhi might also have difficulty navigating the terrain of policies and mandates delivered in schools. As this narrative explored Lily's decisions regarding policies of grading students based on the SBRC rubrics; the next vignette took place roughly two weeks before report card grades were assigned and recounts one of the many changes that took place after implementing SBRC.

Vignette 2: Ten Percent Directive Story

Seventh grade teachers gather around three long boardroom tables in the Professional Learning Room of Harmony Middle School, sitting comfortably in leather chairs and snacking on PTO provided food and drinks. They receive a printed meeting agenda and are asked to read the quote that is displayed on the ActivBoard.

> *Those countries that produce the most important new products… depend on a deep vein of creativity that is constantly renewing itself, and on a myriad of people who can*

imagine how people can use things that have never been available before, create ingenious marketing and sales campaigns, write books, build furniture, and imagine… Two questions are written under the quote: 1. *"What are we doing in education today to foster creativity, imagination, ingenuity, and self motivation?" and 2. "What behaviors would you expect to see in students who possess these qualities?" The teachers' thoughts on this quote are to be discussed first; however, the principal usurps this discussion for a lengthy talk of standards based report cards (SBRC), common assessments expectations, and requirements from the county office.*

Lily sits back in her chair with a legal pad in her lap where she takes notes and doodles. The principal states that tests "should have a minimum of ten percent higher order thinking questions so that kids have the opportunity to score an exceeds on the assessment. No one in here thinks that kids can't learn. That being said, ten percent of your common assessments need to be above the standard. Is it truly fair to assess them at the higher level? You know our regular kids don't have the potential. Those run of the mill/middle kids, non-honors, non-AP kids. Can we expect these kids who do not have the potential to perform the higher order thinking that is required to exceed the standard?"

Lily scrawls "yes" down the side her legal pad, only for me to see. Prior to this Lily appeared to have checked out from the monologue being delivered. However, she is listening as she writes her "yes" showing me her belief that all students should be expected to perform higher order thinking questions.

Continuing this line of lecture, the principal says, "So, let's just say that a kid gets a DNM [does not meet the standard or fails in the traditional grading system] or an M- [minimally

meets the standard or a 70-75 in the traditional grading system. We need to curve their grade by ten percent. We'll assume that they missed the higher order thinking questions."

Lily shakes her head and whispers to me, "That's ridiculous. Higher level questions aren't necessarily exceeds. This is a bigger issue. This is not a discussion for here. I don't want to waste anymore of our planning time."

Teachers shift in their seats, throwing sidelong glances at each other. It appears that the teachers are uncomfortable with where this directive of curving grades of "lower students" is headed. The principal continues, "It is a lot of work to go back [through the tests] and specifically see which questions were missed. This creates a lot of extra work… just add back ten percent. It is a lot of work to make up retests." Teachers begin firing logistical questions including, "What if a kid scores a 90, which is exceeds, but missed the higher order thinking questions?" The principal responds, "In this point of the game, it's a non-issue. The kid gets what the kid gets" meaning that if a 90 is scored the students receives an 'exceeds' mark regardless of which questions are answered correctly.

What if the opposite happens and a kid misses the factual stuff and gets all the 'exceeds' questions right? That student would have to miss a whole lot of questions, the principal continued, "There is no way they can get 'exceeds'. Remember you are only looking at DNM and M- to that ten percent back."

Curving grades only for students who score low on an assessment sparks a flurry of side conversations around the room. Lily argues, "That's not fair!"

"It is really too much to think about right now." As if on cue or in response to Lily's comment, the principal yells out over all of the conversation, "I'm sorry guys, I feel like we failed you all. And by 'we' I mean all administrators. Shh…hey. I'm talking. All students should

attempt the 'exceeds' questions, but their grade shouldn't be penalized if they don't answer the high level questions correctly. We are all in the trenches. However, if you have a personal problem or issue, you should come to us. Our doors are open."

Lily leans over to me and whispers, "This is a load of crap, we have wasted so much time debating these things and no one is listening." As we are chatting, one of the seventh grade social studies teachers points at the quote on the ActivBoard and asked, "Aren't we supposed to be fostering self motivation and creativity?"

Lily and I debrief the meeting. In the days after the tense meeting, Lily and I reflected on the content of the grade level meeting. "It really bothered me about the higher order questioning thing because I don't think that only the higher level kids should get to do the higher order thinking," Lily began our discussion. "I often include more than ten percent of the higher levels of questions" and many times students that missed lower level recall questions were able to apply information to correctly answer the harder questions.

An additional problem that we dialogued about was the unfairness of focusing solely on "lower kids'" grades. If teachers added ten percent back to students who scored an *M*, some of those students would score an *E*. But the directive from the principal stated that the teachers were not to do this. They should only add those points back if students scored an *M*- or *DNM*. Lily argued, "There are a lot of traditional things that I don't agree with, but I am beginning to think that old school grades are alright. There are ways to show parents what a student knows or where they are, but this is not it. We can grade standards without this mess. This is not the way." Lily decided to pull back into and rely on herself. She needed to figure out how this information given by the principal would play out in her room. Her reflections on the meeting did not end that day

as the same grading issues control how she assigned grades to students, how she taught in her classroom, and how she operated within the system that she was given.

My understandings. In analyzing Lily's responses to the meeting directives, it was important to consider how she could or could not contribute to renewing a liberating and democratic framework for teachers and students. In considering the role of the "teacher" in modern compulsory schools, teachers are losing more and more of their autonomy to stricter, ready-made, cookie cutter identities (Bryan 2004). For example, teacher professionalism from a government perspective is seen as something to be "earned" by teachers, which takes "autonomy away from teachers, together with the right to call oneself a 'professional' in terms of autonomous practice" (Bryan, 2004, p. 142). "Professionalism in this sense is re-conceptualized as teachers' ability to show government…that they are following policy documentation" (p. 142). This influenced Lily's teaching identities by creating insecurities about her abilities as a teacher. Lily works in a school district that is undergoing much change and waves of reform, reforms that must be transmitted by administration and accepted by teachers who in turn transmit them to students. Lily viewed this latest wave of centralizing assessments and curving grades of students who scored poorly as the wrong solution for helping, as the principal phrased it, "lower kids" achieve. How would Lily negotiate this mandate and her personal teaching philosophy?

One of Freire's contributions to education and educational research is that education is not neutral. It is a political act that must be handled as such. Lily had learned in her experiences with many different principals that some could be questioned and dialogue invited in a whole group setting. However, Lily's administration at the time of the study did not open the floor for dialogue. Teachers who had concerns had to take them directly to the principal for a private conversation.

A few days after the ten percent directive was given, Lily approached the principal with her concerns. In the closed-door meeting, Lily told the principal that she would not add back ten percent to the lowest scores. Lily was frustrated and irritated with the policy, but as seen in the above narrative, she negotiated with herself to not question or speak in public meetings. Moreover, she had negotiated that she would not let it slide, but she would privately discuss her trepidations with the principal. Addressing an authoritative principal with concerns about a new mandate and suggesting that she herself would reject that mandate be a little risky. However, Lily had enough autonomy as a well-respected, veteran teacher that if she was going to disobey the policy she wanted the principal to know.

Ironically, Lily does not ~~t~~think that she [the principal] necessarily caught that [rejecting policy] from me because she was on her own topic." Clearly, in an environment where public dialogue is discouraged, addressing the principal privately could be the way to address concerns. However, even in a space where dialogue could be rendered useful to work through the concerns, in Lily's opinion, the principal seemed not to be listening. Outside of this private session, Lily did not dialogue with her teammates about the directive, nor did she tell them of her refusal to comply. This furthers the ideas from the earlier quote from Quantz, Rogers, and Dunley (1991); earlier we saw Lily's use of authority to create community in her classroom, but here we see the principal's use of authoritarianism to create isolation among teachers. In a democratic society where schools should reflect some similar characteristics of society at large, oftentimes schools do exactly the opposite by forcing teachers into silence.

Being silenced, or in Lily's case, choosing silence in public spaces possibly allowed administrators to treat Lily and other teachers as blank slates. Oppressive directives discouraged questions, including clarifying questions, and ignored the experience and knowledge of the

teacher, thus, giving power to the authoritarian principal to state the "Truth" without offering explanation (Aoki, 2002; Bacharach; McGrath, 2000; Smith, 2000). However, some teachers continue to reflect and act in their private space, negotiating the complexities of the mandates and policies. Lily privately reflected on and thought about the policy that had been given, leading to the question of accountability. Lily explained,

> No one is going to question it . . . Which I guess means that I could just sit there and question her [a student] orally on what's this or this. Then why should she even do the project. That is one of the things that gets me about the low expectations because they [administration] say to have high expectations about things . . . They [students] don't even really have to perform. I could ask them questions. And if they can answer it than they get a *M*. Where's the rigor in that? The whole goal is for everything in my grade book columns to be a *Meets*'. That's the goal we have been given. That's unrealistic…. I guess I need to roll with it and let it pass. I will do what I want and need to in my room.

Lily used the lack of accountability and direction as a pathway to make her classroom an effective place for learning. The idea that "no one is going to check up" contradicted authoritative directive from the onset, which was why Lily did not feel the need to question or comment in the whole group meeting. She could "roll with it and let it pass." However, Lily's complex response to the new policy, while not rogue since she tried to inform the principal of her dissatisfaction and noncompliance, was concerning.

Lack of follow through on accountability could benefit or hurt students and teachers. In some cases, teachers could see the lack of authority as a way to do absolutely nothing all day. Or it could leave some teachers so stifled that they could not make their classrooms productive and meaningful the lack of pedagogical autonomy causing them to have a hard time being effective

teachers. The lack of accountability seemed positive for Lily. Her students generally performed well on any high stakes tests so she felt free to abandon this policy to ―get done what needs to get done…learn and accomplish a lot of many good things" with or without accountability to the ten percent directive.

In the previous quote, Lily said, ―The whole goal is for everything in my grade book columns to be a _*Meets*'. That's the goal we have been given. That's unrealistic." Upon reflection of this quote in a data meeting, Lily unpacked this idea further. One reason Lily felt that the goal was unrealistic was that she was given a timeline; students had to meet the standard by ―progress report or report card time." This idea was out of line with Lily's practices as it did not allow for student differences in learning. The National Commission of Time and Learning declared, ―Time is learning's warden" meaning that students and teachers are bound by the time allotted for the subject matter. For Lily, this was unrealistic as she felt most students would learn the necessary material, but not all of them would learn it by the county required deadlines for progress reports.

Additionally, this goal was ―unrealistic" for Lily in that the goal was to have Meets in each row and column in the grade book reducing learning to a mechanical action of writing an ―M" by each student's name, creating a boundary for students to be able to answer a few multiple-choice test items before moving onto a new topic instead of learning for the sake of learning. Lily argued, ―The goal should be to learn, not to simply _meet' a standard." Lily desired for students to learn the standards and reach beyond the standards to explore and engage with the content. Her concern was that the emphasis was for the student to meet the standard on paper, not necessarily show true understanding of the standard. The push to show mastery on paper meant that the assessment of standard mastery was now driving instruction, rather than student learning needs.

In sum, many educators, Lily included, are working to understand and re/conceptualize the way that they learn and teach. Teachers have many choices that they can make in regards to unquestionable mandates. Teachers can respond from anywhere within the range of these two poles: They can choose to equip themselves and others to act and change the situations they are given, or they can act within the confines of the policies. The ultimate choice lies within the answer to the question as a teacher, on whose behalf am I working? (Freire, 1985). Lily negotiated that the ten percent directive would have no effect on her classroom grading procedures. Immediately after the meeting, Lily felt like her teaching was ~~n~~not as strong and that striving for mediocre was the expectation." After reflecting, Lily addressed the principal with her concerns and returned to her normal pedagogical decisions of fostering creativity and inquiry with her students. The final vignette in this section will further problematize Lily's views, decisions, and understandings of new policies and procedures that were required of her during the study.

Vignette 3: Data Driven Policies

One afternoon, Lily and I are chatting about pre- and post- tests that are required with every unit from county level administration. Lily explains why the county requires every student to take identical assessments across the county., She says, "The big buzzword right now is 'data driven schools. So we [Harmony] are trying to be a data driven school. [Teachers] are required to give a pre and post test with each unit so that we can track progress. We must keep data and every bit of our teaching is supposed to come from that data."

I look inquisitively at Lily and ask, "Why?"

Lily responds, "Oh, I could look in the books and tell you where this comes from but I can't spout it off right now. We get percentages from the pre and post tests. [However] I don't

need a percentage to know who knows what. But I think that comes from No Child Left Behind. It [also] comes from school improvement plans and the one way that we show improvement is on the high stakes test. We have to have baseline data to determine which kids need improvement. It has to be a number. And when we set goals for the year, both student achievement and professional, they have to be data driven . . . I guess that the data is just meant to drive instruction so that we know who needs improvement. Maybe there is a problem with other teachers not knowing what kids need . . . I don't have that trouble. I think it takes away from the pure learning for learning completely. And it really goes against standards-based instruction because we are not allowed to use percentages and we are not supposed to use numbers. We are supposed to use a rubric (and) that is completely not what we are doing by using that sort of data. Multiple choice and percentages-- that bothers me. But then again I guess I see the need for data because we have to have it for the state of Georgia, I believe . . . I don't know if it is state driven or not. Whoever we need a school improvement plan for, we have to have data.

"So then it trickles down. Because our school has to provide data to see if we met AYP, and we have to have a school improvement plan that is based on data, we have to have personal development and student plans that is based on data. And for me to produce that for them my kids have to have data. It trickles down. This is from the county. At least the county unless they are being told by someone else and I don't know . . . . We have been using pre and post tests for several years now. The problem was that between the 3 middle schools in the county we had the same topics we didn't have exactly the same pre and post tests so the data may not have been as valid to compare."

I ask, "What if you blew off the pre- and post-tests and did your own thing?"

Lily responds, "I am a rule following kind of gal. I never thought of not doing it. Actually, I am going to give a pre and post test anyway so if that is there I might as well use it. Also, I will go ahead and use the small formative things. It is just one of those things that if I have to do it, I will, but I will do my own things as well."

My understandings. Lily began our discussion of why there were so many tests administered and required by calling attention, almost sarcastically, to the "big buzzword" of "data driven schools." From Lily's perspective, the central problem for data driven decision-making was that the new accountability practices were not in alignment with her personal teaching and learning beliefs, nor did they seem to be in alignment with the standards-based reporting initiative. Due to Lily's relationships and interactions with her students she felt confident that she knew where her students were on given topics, who was struggling, who was getting it, and who needed more.

The pre- and post- tests were identical except that the order of the questions was shuffled. The county's administration required each student take each test so that teachers could base their instruction from the results. In addition, the county level administrators generated reports comparing schools and teachers percentages on each unit's test. Possibly as motivation for some or scare tactics to try and improve test score data.

Prior to this new data-driven enterprise, Lily admitted she already made most of her decisions about instruction and student placement by using a variety of data including pre- and post- assessments, observations, writing samples, lab experiments, warm-up questions, and conversations. Prior to NCLB, she used many different assessments to decide what each student would need. In light of the data driven movement, teachers at Harmony were forced to narrow

what counts as learning and reporting to the pre- and post- tests. Lily decided to comply by having the students take each pre- and post- test, but she maintained that she would continue to ―do my own things. And my own things are not lengthy multiple choice tests."

Two additional ―buzzwords" during the time of the study were directly tied to data-driven schools: Response to Intervention and Progress Monitoring. Teachers at Harmony were required to have percentage-based, common assessment scores at school meetings where each child was discussed according to his/her area of difficulties. Data had to be tracked on each of these students to show growth in the given area. This was done through bi-weekly assessments and pre- and post-tests as proof that students were learning as they were hopefully showing gains on these multiple-choice tests. Reducing assessment and learning to a traditional multiple-choice test was problematic for Lily as she believed there are multiple ways to show understanding and knowledge, which led to her decision to maintain her smaller formative assessments as well as work within the framework provided by the school stems from a high level of personal and external accountability.

Moreover, we see in the above vignette is Lily's uncertainty as to why she ―must" do certain tasks. She said, ―I could look in the books and tell you where this comes from, but I can't spout it off right now" and ―I think that [having percentages] comes from No Child Left Behind." Lily added, ―I guess I see the need for data because we have to have it for the state of Georgia, I believe . . . I guess that the data is just meant to drive instruction . . . I don't know if it is state driven or not. Whoever we need a school improvement plan for, we have to have data." These statements among others showed the shift of accountability from Lily and her students to Lily and her students performing for an external person or plan. Lily was working within the framework even though she did not know why, nor did she really care why. While this lack of

engagement with policy might be seen as negative, for Lily it was a way to build autonomy in her teaching practices and decisions. She would follow the rules as necessary so she and her students accomplished their goals inside the classroom regardless of what happened outside the classroom.

Administrators were responding to external demands from county, state, and federal requirements and it ―trickles down" into the classroom. In a time where teachers are required to differentiate instruction, environment, assessment, and product, external influences required that teachers standardize materials in the classroom. Creating an ironic situation, this standardization was at odds with standards. Standards allow teachers to teach and students to learn for ―the sake of learning," but having to report out and reduce students to the sum of their test scores resulted in standardizing many instructional and assessment practices, such as requiring the exact same pre- and post- tests that are given county wide within days of each other.

Meta-Analysis

Individual stories were analyzed to provide an understanding of Lily's relationships, instructional strategies, and policy decisions. I generated understandings of their purposes, outcomes, and factors that seemed to influence these decisions. The emergent insights from the stories were based on not just the various decisions and practices but also the decision-making process. This meta-analysis was completed in order to build a better understanding of Lily's strategic and reactive decision-making process.

As a result of this analysis, I identified three understandings. First, Lily as a general rule, placed the students' interests and learning at the forefront of her decisions. Second, Lily's decisions inside the classroom afforded her pedagogical freedom from many administrative expectations, as she chose to continue doing what she did and doing it well. Finally, looking

across Lily's stories, we begin to see the necessary practices that teachers need to navigate the rocky terrain of current standardization of many schools.

The first understanding seen in all the stories was Lily's decision to consider students and students' learning as the most essential component of her classroom. She did this by building respectful relationships, engaging materials, and maintaining high expectations. Lily worked in opposition to defensive teaching, a term defined by McNeil (1986) as teaching in such ways that ask students to do very little productive work in order to "satisfy institutional requirements . . . and they used strategies to silence student questions or discussions" (McNeil, 2009, p. 390). Throughout the data set, we see Lily take an offensive approach. Lily engaged with students following their curiosities--for example, the involuntary muscle discussion--to enhance student learning, adding to the baseline standard rather than detracting from it. Lily did not normally shy away from questions or tricky conversations. She fed off their inquiries to fuel classroom learning, pulling from outside resources to make content and learning applicable to the real world. Lily used her time with students productively with little down time, allowing for these deviations from the scope and sequence. As Lily said, "We work hard every day," and from what I observed, this was true. Effectively using time even with the laughs and silliness, students "got done what needed to get done" to surpass the standards. Lily wanted more for her students than to blindly fulfill the state requirements and definition of learning.

Another way that Lily engaged in respectful teaching and placing the students first was her belief that all students are able to succeed and meet high expectations. Lily often made statements to the students that conveyed her belief of working hard and achieving their goals. For example, in the vignette Using Authority Positively, she said, "The way I talked to him, the expectation was there. He was going to do it for me or for himself or for whatever reason. Not

doing it was not an option." She spoke to Shawn and other students in such a way that they knew they were going to complete the assigned work. Students had lots of options in Lily's class; the one option that she did not permit was not working. Everyone would work every day to the best of their ability. This counters the deficit model of teaching (Delpit, 1995; Franzak, 2008; Langer 2002) as she worked within the students' strengths to help each student achieve the goals set forth by themselves and others. Lily argued for this offensive, supportive pedagogy and really said it best, "I really try to look at the positives in the kids. I try to point out what they are doing right so they are motivated to keep working. I hope that I haven't been insensitive. I am more aware now that I have [my own child]; I am more sensitive. Every child is precious. If they only hear negative things, it is self-fulfilling prophecy. I try to purposefully tell parents the great things that their kids can do." Lily seemed to default to respect and honor of individual students, seeking out strengths to build a practice that was centered on student learning and high expectations.

The second understanding across all vignettes is the complexity of schools and learning. Under the current administration there appeared to be a feeling of micromanagement and strict administrative expectations governing many classroom decisions. These complex situations that Lily worked within provide the framework for many of her decisions; however, the ultimate decisions still resided with Lily. For example, Lily complied with the testing requirements although she did not necessarily agree with them. She said, "I'm going to use a pretest anyway so I might as well use theirs, but I will still do my own little things (formative assessments that helped her know where students are in their learning)." This practice of complying with administrative expectations that were visible to others was a key tool for providing pedagogical autonomy within the classroom walls. The complex situation of county office personnel, a

principal, two assistant principals, 114 students and their guardians, other teachers, and crowded curriculum forced Lily to continually reflect on her practice and act as she saw was in the best interest of everyone, yet, students and student-learning remained first most often. Lily showed that while policies and administration can be difficult to navigate, it is possible to create a supportive, respectful environment and practice that fosters student learning rather than an environment that is complicated by worrying about meeting the needs of pervasive standardization. Still, that supportive atmosphere is somewhat compromised by such efforts to standardize and thus control classrooms, and the teachers & students within. Respect for students was a non-negotiable belief of Lily's, which translated into her practice as love for individual students and learning. Freire (1992) required progressive educators to respect students without manipulating them to facilitate teaching and learning. We see this thought play out in Lily's classroom as a fundamental belief in her teaching practice.

The final meta-analysis construct, tools to navigate, help educators see that meeting expectations of administrative and maintaining personal pedagogical beliefs requires careful decisions and practices. Many times as in the 10% directive vignette, new policies or expectations were introduced during planning periods; often right before the teachers were to return to their classrooms to work with the students. This did not afford Lily the space she needed to reflect on the new mandate. Lily related that this was difficult for her as she needed time to think about and understand the new information. Running down the hall to return to students after a tense meeting had effects on her practice. Stressed and thinking about many questions that went unanswered during the meeting left her feeling inadequate and not ready to respectfully engage with students.

Lily said, —My first reaction to [policy] was that it made me more of a mediocre teacher. I don‘t know but I felt like I couldn‘t be as creative as I usually was.” Over time and with enough space to reflect, Lily figured out how to be creative and supportive within the given frameworks, even as they shifted. Returning directly to her room after stressful meetings was often a struggle for Lily. This quick return made it difficult for her to process all of the information given and nearly impossible to focus her full attention on the students. Through all of the changes in policies and administration, Lily argued, —The lack of continuity maybe gave me more continuity in my classroom because I know that on so many levels there is so much going on in the outside world, and I can‘t let it affect me. I know what I need to accomplish in here, I know my kids, and I know how they learn . . . I know what they need to learn and we learn and we have a good time, we do cool activities, we pass the big test in the end. All I can control is my own room. I can NOT fix anyone else‘s room.”

Lily developed pedagogical tools to negotiate how administrative expectations would play out in her classroom practice. One tool Lily diligently engaged in within her classroom was to be widely versed in various learning methods to be able to do whatever it takes to help students learn. As we saw across most of Lily‘s stories, she had fun and inquired into the world around her, and she defined her learning theory as co-constructed inquiry. Yet, as I specifically looked at her decisions and practices, Lily engaged the students in a wide-range of activities and learning styles from traditional direct instruction and flashcards to student-centered inquiry. Moreover, this approach of drawing from a variety of teaching practices aligned with her beliefs that all students were capable and deserved respect. Her fundamental belief of respecting students may have driven these varying practices as she diligently worked to make decisions that supported student learning and met the expectations of administration.

An additional tool Lily developed was to fly low, meaning she continued to creatively teach and learn with the students, but she kept it behind closed doors. This tool appears to be a tool that promotes longevity. We know from Lambert, et al (2009) and McCarthy, et al (2009) that teacher exhaustion is a key indicator for potential burnout. I argue that teachers who try to publicly negotiate every policy or pick apart every outside decision often tire and leave the profession. Lily maintained that she decided to keep her questions to herself and figure out implementation of an administrative expectation within the walls of her classroom. She decided that she would not fight every battle and she would work hard in her classroom to respect students and develop their learning. Given all of the changes that took place at Harmony, this seemed to be a safe strategy for Lily.

Another tool that Lily used was her practice of having high expectations for all learners and conveying those expectations to the students. For Lily, standards were not a problem as they were the baseline for everything that was done in the classroom. Students explored and inquired into subjects and topics beyond the standards. For example in the vignettes, Lily took the Georgia Performance Standard on body systems and ensured student learning by strategically grouping the students so that the information was met, applied, or extended. Specifically, the students in the group that was struggling with the content worked to meet the standard, whereas the students who grasped the basic knowledge applied the information to conduct an experiment. And the final group of students, who were familiar with the standard, used their information to analyze, critique, apply, and synthesize new material that extended the standard and student learning to deeper understandings of the content.

A final tool that Lily spoke of often was the tool of trust and respect: trust between students and teacher, trust between parents and teacher, and trust between administrators and

teacher. Lily said, ―I hope they [teammates] trust me" and know that I'm ―not a rumor mill person. And I think that helps [build trust and respect]. That makes me happy; I don't want to be a part of that mess. Don't trash talk your school or colleagues." Building trust and respect with different stakeholders was important to Lily, and I think an important survival tool in today's public schools. If the biggest stakeholders, the students, trust and respect the teacher and vice versa, I believe that education would see a positive reform that would influence the myriad parts of schooling. These decisions to gain trust, to be positive, and to not conform to the ―negative indoctrination" (Delpit, 1995) are essential decisions that serve as tools for Lily and other teachers. Lily argued for this idea, ―I guess this is my own personal responsibility: I try to lift people up. It is easy to get down and let things turn into complaint sessions. There is so much to be thankful for. If we are in a meeting and everyone is down, down, down, I will personally bring up something great that we have done just to try and lift the spirits." This focus on the positive, as often as possible, served Lily as an important tool to work and enjoy her job even in the complex setting offered within the school.

This meta-analysis across all these stories of Lily's decisions further shows the complex nature of making decisions in today's schools that align with personal pedagogical beliefs and administrative expectations. By necessity, I made choices from the vastness of Lily's teaching stories. Choices like these are always artificial as I constructed vignettes and understandings that drew from all portions of the data. I chose to show how a teacher can operate creatively within the framework given to build supportive relationships and productive pedagogies.

Summary

This chapter discussed the understandings gained from Lily's stories and meta-analysis. These insights revealed that Lily used a variety of processes and considerations to arrive at

decisions regarding her practices and beliefs. These stories capture a small slice of Lily's pedagogical experiences eleven years after the passage of NCLB. Business jargon of efficiency, accountability, standards, and students as products dominates language in policy discussions at most schools, and Harmony Middle School embodies these reforms and initiatives. Under NCLB, Harmony requires every teacher decision and action to be data-driven, sanctioned, and, in some cases, scripted (with tools like strict curriculum maps, pre/post-tests, and commercial programs). In practice different teachers make different decisions for many different and complex reasons.

Lily had a specific history with her own set of particularities. What happened inside her closed classroom door was only partially controlled by mandates, reforms, expectations, and initiatives from external sources. These stories are but a brief snapshot into how Lily operated within the framework that she was given. I am not suggesting that Lily is a perfect teacher; I am suggesting we look at her decisions and practices as possible training tools for other teachers. Thus, the scope of this research project is to say something that can be transferred to other contexts, where classroom teachers can build agency and develop tools to meet expectations with pedagogical autonomy, offering students a more engaging learning experience, and experiencing job satisfaction for themselves and other teachers.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Public school teachers in the United States seem to always have their feet to the fire as schools, practices, expectations, and policies are in continual processes of change and reform. At the heart of this change lays the ideas of teacher decision-making and pedagogical practices as the front line of carrying out or following through on these expectations that seek to control classroom practices. Teacher decisions are the very place where action and reflection occur on the myriad influences that determine what happens in the classroom. One outside influence might believe that teacher decision-making should be strictly limited; for example, the Georgia Department of Education website states that the state standards provide ~~–e~~lear, focused expectations that assist them [teachers] in being on the same page . . . for shared goals" (http://www.gadoe.org/CCGPS.aspx) In contrast, others might believe that teacher decision-making and planning should be done locally (Gandal 1995; Tanner & Tanner, 2007). Both are tricky places for teachers and researchers to be.

Much of the literature on teacher decision-making focuses on one aspect of expectations; such as teachers and policy, teachers and curricula, or teachers and interactions with students/parents. This idea of focusing on teachers‘ decision-making and a single expectation seems constrained as classrooms are greatly affected by many influences daily. Thus, I began to question what practices teachers embrace with all of these influences and expectations exerting some level of control in the classroom. Wondering about this convergence is why I decided to conduct this study of what practices does a teacher engage in within the political and

instructional structures of a school with a detailed look into classroom practices, meeting participation, and reactions to mandates. In other words, what practices does a teacher engage in within these structures so that her decisions meet the expectations of administration and still enact her pedagogical beliefs?

Overview of the Study

I used a qualitative single case study design to explore the practices and decisions of a teacher in a public middle school. This study explored the different decisions, their purposes, the outcomes, the influence on practices, and the factors that seemed to influence the decision-making process. The following question guided my study: What practices does Lily engage in within the political and instructional structures of the school so that her decisions meet the expectations of administration and she is still able to enact her pedagogical beliefs?

Harmony Middle School mirrors many other schools around the country as school personnel interpret and respond to the myriad demands and expectations from various stakeholders. I met the participant, Lily, nearly a decade ago in a July meeting where teachers new to the school (me) worked with veteran teachers (Lily) to be oriented to the particularities of Harmony Middle and McKenzie School System. Due to the changing nature of schools and in particular the shifting demographics, Harmony was selected as the focal school for this study. I worked alongside Lily to generate data in the fall of 2010. I observed Lily in her classroom, in team meetings, in grade level meetings, in faculty meetings, in planning times, and in parent conferences. These observations of Lily‘s practices generated questions and discussions during our formal interviews and informal conversations.

Data analysis revealed Lily‘s complex practices, decisions, and decision-making processes including navigating in and around the expectations of others. Lily‘s decision-making

skills helped her traverse the rocky and sometimes shaky terrain of her school and classroom, reflect on her practices, establish and maintain her core beliefs, and respond to expectations from others. Although the conversations with Lily were often hard, she enjoyed reflecting on her practices and articulating her decisions and reasonings. This reflection on her practice afforded educational stakeholders a detailed glance of classroom practices and decision-making processes that we can use to generate a greater understanding for preparing teacher candidates.

I see this convergence of teacher decision-making as a river flowing through the mountains with the teacher being a rock in the water. The water is the multiple influences, experiences, expectations, and interpretations that help form the practice of the teacher. As the water flows around the rock, the rock is shaped and changed just as the teacher is shaped and responds to factors influencing classroom pedagogy. In this same river as the rock is being changed by the water, the rock alters the flow of the water, in a similar way a teacher can influence situations and students within his/her context. The teacher not only negotiates and tries to understand these influences, but also holds responsibility for drawing his/her own understandings as to what works best inside the classroom for the given students.

Continuing with the teacher as a rock metaphor and applying it to the changing nature of schools, the amount of teacher control shifts depending on the surrounding context. For example, after a hard rain, the river flows more quickly around the rock, possibly shifting and turning the rock until it lands safely. While at other times, the water slows to a trickle and the rock is more exposed to other physical elements, such as sunshine, all the while having a larger impact on the flow of the water. I see the teacher in the school setting much the same way. Sometimes teacher autonomy is stripped and replaced by fast flowing reform that leaves little wiggle room for teachers to make decisions. Other times, the teacher has more freedom or chooses a political

stance causing waves in the given context. Since I am not a biologist, it is essentially impossible for me to separate all the different molecules of water, bacteria, and organisms in the river. This holds true for teachers; they are unable to separate the different forces at work in the educational setting. As we saw with Lily, teachers must consider, reflect, negotiate, and respond to these expectations to make their classrooms meaningful and productive for the students.

Teacher decision-making processes and practices are complex; therefore, taking a close look at a teacher who by all appearances seemed to be making decisions that work for her and her students is imperative in gaining understandings of how to creatively work in standardization. While I would like for standardization to disappear and truly have students' interests drive learning, I think that, for now, teachers must work creatively within the given framework. So, what we need is a greater understanding of what practices teachers engage in and what decisions are made to balance administrative expectations and personal pedagogical beliefs. This chapter contains my interpretations and understandings of Lily's practices and decision-making processes; furthermore, this chapter discusses how we as teachers and researchers can help ourselves and others develop tools to negotiate their own set of tools to make decisions that support their teaching philosophies in their own river. Following this, I will discuss a need for future research and a reflection as well as recommendations that go beyond the data and conventions of this single case study.

What Can Be Learned through Lily's Praxis

This study of how Lily negotiated her practices and decisions between her teaching beliefs and administrative expectations is crucial in helping teachers and students learn together. In answer to the research question, I discovered that Lily used student stories, administrative interpretations, personal experience and beliefs, intuition, and a variety of practices to make

decisions within her classroom. Understandings from this discovery can be grouped into three ideas generated from the data: teachers can be creative in their decision-making and classroom practices despite standardization, teachers must respect and care for students first and foremost, and teachers must decide what is non-negotiable for themselves and their pedagogy. This section discusses each understanding and how each understanding extends, complements, and/or contrasts the existing research.

Teachers' Creative Decision-Making Processes

One of the most important that things that we can learn from this study is that in today's often micro-managed schools, teachers have to work within the given framework in creative ways. Findlay (2006) and Smagorinsky (2004) argued that schools and teachers operate within a complex political arena at both a micro- and macro-level politics, which influence individual teachers. In the hopes of job satisfaction and longevity in the classroom, teachers need to operate creatively within the sanctioned structures of content standards and/or administrative expectations. For Lily, this meant using the standards as a jumping off point and not an ending point. Lily worked diligently to ensure that her students moved beyond the general standards to a deeper understanding of the world around them.

Reigeluth (1997) stated that the purpose of standards seems to be ~~"o~~ne of minimum standards to ensure competence in basic skills for all students" (p. 2). This idea of basic skill competence was problematic for Lily. As we saw in chapter 5, Lily worked diligently to extend the students' knowledge past the standard. For Lily, meeting the standard was where she began her lessons. Through differentiation as seen in the Curriculum and Assessment Choices vignette, Lily decided that all the students would, at a minimum, understand the parts and functions of the nervous system, which was a requirement in the Georgia Performance Standards. Yet, she did

not stop when the students scored a 100 on the basic knowledge; the students conducted experiments and worked on the computers to more fully understand the standard.

Lily shared that the stated goal of her county office was for all the students to have a ―meets" for each standard. The standard is the minimum that students need to know. Many students knew the basic content, as we saw with the Lily's students who answered every question correctly on the pre-test. She could have bored them by trudging on and teaching them the basic information, yet, she chose to use the standard as place for learning to begin. She was not willing to ―cap" the students with the rudimentary skills and knowledge of the standards. Using the standards as a starting point rather than an ending point could be freeing for teachers. One, to do so is operating within the framework given by politicians and administrators and, two; it can allow the teacher to open up the content beyond the baseline of the standard. The students can learn the textbook knowledge and content of the standard, but can creatively engage with the content in engaging ways that allow the students and teachers freedom from the buckle down rigor of schools.

Government officials seem extremely interested in improving America's academic ranking in comparison to countries around the world. School and county level administrators seem more interested in scoring higher on state assessments that would prove their school/district is better than the neighboring one. These ideas of being better than another group are not necessarily wrong, but to truly enhance student learning and take students to higher level where they could compete on more than a multiple-choice test requires far more from teachers than ensuring basic skills are attained. The basic standards or core curriculum should be the minimum required and teachers should be encouraged to engage their students in creative ways that move them beyond a basic, text-book knowledge of information.

Lily used this idea of moving students beyond the standards to generate high expectations through a variety of methods where students and teacher work and learn together through dialogue. Freire‘s (1970) pedagogical ideas depended on a dialogical theory of praxis, knowledge, and a transformed relationship between student and teacher. Teachers need not only depend on systematic information such as test scores to engage in creative decision-making. Teacher intuition and anecdotal information must be accessed as teachers are people who are dealing with people. As we saw in the vignettes of Lily‘s relationship with students, Lily engaged with students, as often as possible, to learn what makes each one stand out as unique and to celebrate these characteristics while still working alongside the students to meet their goals. Systematic or data-driven instruction can play a role in teaching the standards, but every teacher and child offer a unique perspective in the classroom, which in my view requires the teacher to be creative in our time of standardization of lessons and content. One way that teachers can work creatively to teach standards is to operationalize their teaching and learning practices to fully understand their pedagogical choices and decisions.

Teachers Embrace Personal Learning Theories

Learning to teach is a life-long process and commitment that begins with the teachers‘ experiences and interactions with learning from an early age. Coming from different social, cultural, historical, and economic backgrounds, educational stakeholders and teachers often differ in their beliefs about what counts as learning and teaching. Perhaps through exploring different theories pre-service teachers could avoid teaching their students the same way they were taught. Borg (2003) and Verloop, VanDriel, and Meijer (2001) recognized teachers‘ personal learning theories as imperative for further professional development and learning.

However, Hacker and Barkhuizen (2008) argued that teachers were at best, timid, about naming their personal learning and teaching theories.

I argue that teachers must explore theories of learning so that they can enact different and varying practices in the classroom in order to be able to meet students wherever they are and bring them forward. Additionally, teachers understanding why they are respectfully engaging students in particular activities allow them to operate with confidence and without operating blindly under others‘ theories. Oftentimes, teachers seem to conform to the idea that administrators or politicians –own" knowledge -- knowledge being the content of the grade and/or subject and the manner in which said content is delivered. This ownership of material, as being the force that defines what the student must learn in each grade, seems to entitle the owner to determine the length and depth of the content, the means of evaluations, and in some cases, the method in which the content is delivered. Therefore, many teachers may end up operating within others‘ theories and ownership, autonomy, and motivation may slacken. Teachers may resort to pedagogical matters as simple and soul deadening as —What page am I on today?"

This lack of teacher (and learner) autonomy strips the teacher of content and pedagogical knowledge where he/she simply enacts what Nicolaides (2008) called the –good teacher" or a teacher who covers all the states‘ predetermined standards. Forsaking personal and student motivation, abandoning discovery of content, and discarding learning for learning‘s sake to conform to others‘ expectations and classroom practices, in my opinion, is not why many individuals become teachers. Teachers, like Lily, seem to want to motivate students to learn and discover within their worlds as they continue to grow and learn about others‘ worlds.

Lily could quickly define her teaching and learning theory when asked, and she tried to enact these commitments to her theories with the students in her classroom. Regarding her

learning theory theories, Lily said, ―Constructivism. I want them to engage and explore and get to an answer on their own [mixing in] Gardner's (1983) Multiple Intelligences research." Borg (2003) described teachers as ―active, thinking decision makers who make instructional decisions by drawing on complex, practically oriented, and context sensitive networks" of thoughts and beliefs (p. 81). However, in light of classroom observations, Lily selected many different learning styles and methods as tools to engage her students. Teaching is not mechanical and requires teachers to be versed in a variety of practices that help students set and reach goals. I believe that teachers can use whatever practices they deem necessary if student learning and respect for students is authentically practiced and conveyed in the classroom. This study highlights the ways in which Lily used many, diverse teaching practices drawing from a comprehensive set of learning theories.

Thinking back to the rock in the river, teachers are influenced by the water as they influence the flow of the water. As the water flow hastens, slows, or steadies, teachers need to be vigilant of their decisions regarding their classroom practices and learning theories. My study adds to these thoughts in that teachers must be able to creatively maneuver within a variety strategies in order to actively draw from whatever practices are necessary to engage with students and others. A key component of actively engaging in learning and teaching theories is for teachers to determine what they consider to be non-negotiable for them within their practice.

Teachers Negotiate Gaps Between Non-negotiables

Lily decided to commit to her core philosophy of co-constructed, respectful learning while understanding the need to do what she called ―laundry." The laundry in the sense of school life is figuring out what is non-negotiable for authority figures, for example, for Lily this meant benchmark tests and standards-based grading. These non-negotiables from her principal

and county level administrators were elements that she was required to do to keep her from administrative scrutiny. Keeping her laundry clean afforded her the autonomy to make and stand by her decision to conduct a more inquiry-based learning approach. Lily knew that she had to use the common assessments and remain close to the required standards per the county curriculum map. If she did this, she was not checked up on as her scores would appear in the county reports, and since her scores were strong, she was left alone between reporting times. Furthermore, this decision to acquiesce to some mandates gave her the power to negotiate how content could be learned in her classroom, opening up and freeing her and the students from scripted, highly controlled learning.

Teachers must begin to realize that they have power to negotiate decisions within their control. Many school systems have common assessments or benchmark tests that must be completed by certain dates. In addition, state assessments are administered at a set time each year. Teachers, often, have no choice but to comply with these mandates and requirements, but they could choose how to prepare the students for these assessments. For many teachers this may feel risky, this breaking away from the mold or script. The question –What if students do not pass the required tests?" may tether teachers to the programs and instructional policies set forth by outside stakeholders such as principals, school system curriculum coordinators, or state officials. This is a scary place for teachers in Georgia as teacher paychecks will more than likely be tied to student performance in the coming years (Sarrio, 2011). However, I contend that if teachers hold true to purposeful and productive pedagogy, they will have the power and autonomy to break free from the scripts and standardization processes. From Lily, we learned that she chose her battles, acquiescing to non-negotiable directives and policies given to teachers from administrators. Through deciding to follow these directives (i.e. required assessments),

Lily was able to explore and discover through a variety of methods with her students. Lily's students often scored the highest in the county on the benchmark tests, which means no one questioned her practices. As Lily said, "It's like laundry. You may not want to do it, but you got to" in order to make teaching decisions that will benefit the individual students who are in each classroom.

In doing "my laundry," it is pertinent to return to three limitations of this study and explain how I worked around the complications that arose before I explore the implications of this study on teacher educators, educational stakeholders, and future research.

Limitations

Several factors limited the study. First I wanted to select a participant with whom I had a relationship with prior to the study. I thought having a long-term relationship would help garner intimate discussions with the participant. While this has been beneficial for data and analysis, I have had to diligently work to protect Lily, which required me to sometimes leave out sensitive material. Due to our close relationship, I chose to not to share some insider information as I did not want to place Lily in a treacherous spot. However, without the close relationship, I would not have been privy to the same level of information.

My friendship with Lily and my detailed knowledge of the school required me to access an analysis strategy Johnson (1997) called "peer review" (p. 283). The process of peer review entailed sharing my raw data, field notes, memos, and interview transcripts, along with my interpretations and conclusions with other people not directly involved with the study. This peer group helped me gain understandings of Lily's processes that may have been blocked or overlooked by my closeness with the participant. This data group was vital to opening my eyes to see various interpretations and understandings that could be drawn from the data.

Second, I originally planned to interview Lily on a formal basis weekly for at least an hour. Unfortunately, some weeks due to multiple school meetings we had several mini-interviews that lasted 10-20 minutes on multiple days, which limited the depth we could go into a topic. Short bursts on multiple days did allow for Lily to immediately unpack smaller or reactive decisions that may have seemed insignificant had we waited for the longer interview sessions. Working within the time constraints may have forced us to use our time wisely when we did sit down for a formal interview. Many of these formal conversations lasted well over an hour where we were more fully able to develop a deeper understanding of her decision-making processes.

Third, I had to rely on the honesty of Lily‘s responses during interview conversations. A goal of many qualitative studies is to represent the participants in an ethical and authentic manner. Building trust and respect between the researcher and the participant was vital so that the participant would feel confident to openly and honestly answer questions. I approached this representation with Lily very candidly; she knew that I was going to explore the details of her practice. Through my candidness of the process and Lily‘s willingness to ask me to turn off the digital recorder, I feel that Lily gave me an honest account of her views. During the interviews, Lily discussed her practices and decision-making processes, reflecting on decisions I had witnessed during observations and those made at other times in the school week. Our conversations during interview times were an important data source as they unpacked many of the processes and decisions that I observed during observations. Using both interviews and observations strengthened the study as I not only listened to Lily recount her decisions, but also, I saw many of these decisions and how they were enacted within the school setting.

Finally, my observations of Lily, while they took place in the school, may be considered a limitation because of the potential effects of my presence on her decision-making and behavior while I observed the class. I tried to negate this effect through multiple means of data collection over an extended amount of time and in a variety of contexts. Through my observations, I learned about Lily‘s reactive and strategic decisions and decision-making processes. Observations also led to questions and interview conversations.

Despite these limitations, I was able to generate a wealth of data from multiple sources. The different strategies allowed me access to Lily‘s experiences and practices both in action as I observed and in her reflection during interview conversations. As it was my goal to explore and develop an understanding of what practices does Lily engage in and influences a teacher‘s decision-making processes, generating stories with Lily was imperative. Furthermore, the detailed accounts and analyses of Lily‘s classroom experiences allowed me to explore the implications of this research for teacher educators, teachers, and future research.

Implications

I wanted my research that I have undertaken to matter. It already has enriched my thinking, learning, reflecting, and teaching, my praxis (Freire, 1970/1990) so to speak, and I hope that through this research teachers will begin or continue to think critically about their processes and decisions. At the very least, I want to encourage educators to wobble in their thinking (Fecho, Graham, & Hudson-Ross, 2005) and begin to see possibilities in their teaching. In this section, I explore some of the key implications of my research, taking care not to oversimplify. Some of the implications are comforting to me as a teacher and to other teachers, as they support work that has been done in the past. However, some are discomforting, as they challenge educators to move in new directions. The data, in fact, challenge us to rethink our answers to the

most fundamental questions we ask as teachers: Who do we teach? How do we teach? Why do we teach? For in the answers to these questions, our decisions of how to pedagogically navigate in classrooms, schools, and communities become prevalent.

The forthcoming implications overlap for all stakeholders in the process of education. However, I have separated them to focus specifically on teacher education and future research. Lily's decision-making experiences generate implications relevant to the field of teacher education, offering specific implications pertaining to teacher decision-making negotiations and how teacher educators can use these ideas to further prepare teacher candidates. These implications are not only relevant for teacher educators and teacher candidates, but for current teachers, instructional coaches, and other administrators who work closely with in-service teachers, as these tools could be used to further develop teaching practices and negotiation skills between expectations and personal philosophies. Finally, I will address future research ideas that were generated from the data and how this study can be expanded to further our understandings of how teachers work within their current framework while moving towards a more critical discussion of teaching decisions and practices. This study has reaffirmed my belief in the potential of teachers to influence students in positive negotiations of learning, but it has also convinced me that much work needs to be done in order to transform more classrooms and schools into the kinds of places where I think they should be: a place where students are valued.

Implications for Teacher Educators

Faculty in teacher education programs can teach a variety of learning theories alongside methods in such ways that are inviting to pre-service teachers. As an undergraduate student in teacher education, I remember many, many methods courses where we learned how to teach with only small portion focusing on why we might choose a particular method over another. Also, it

seems that today that many teacher educators have overcorrected in response to NCLB and standardization and there seems to be a tendency to teach only from certain theories and through certain methods. As we saw with Lily and her claim to be inquiry-driven, she augmented such a stance with a range of approaches. In all actuality she did pull from inquiry methods but she also pulled from many other traditions and methods. Accordingly, teacher candidates need exposure to a variety of learning theories where they can work to define their choices and practices with a wide repertoire of teaching strategies.

MacDonald, Badger, and White (2001) shared that many pre-service teachers did not want their university coursework to be heavily theoretical. The researchers admitted while there is a need for a distinction, teacher candidates need to see the link between teaching theories and classroom practices. One way teacher educators might be able to blend varieties of theories, methods, and content knowledge that would be acceptable to undergraduate students is to encourage teacher learning based on reflection and action. Reflection can be regarded as a way for teachers to construct meaning and knowledge that would guide their actions. For example, Chapman (1998) argued that reflection could be linked with developing teachers‘ skills with knowledge. In his case, metaphors were used to provide pre-service teachers with a framework for thinking and extending their theoretical processes. This conceptual framework can be shown through student teachers‘ writings and reflections about their beliefs and interpretations. Furthermore, teacher candidates might play with different learning theories to be able to generate a greater understanding of why teachers make particular choices or decisions. Without specific inquiry into learning and teaching theories teachers may be left to operate blindly within their classroom and succumb to scripted lessons.

In addition, calling special attention to how teachers‘ can use assessment to drive instruction is another crucial construct that teacher educators need to emphasize. Lily was a master assessor. She developed the skills to observe interactions, converse with students, and synthesize student work to determine what each student needs to learn. This view of assessment where students show or talk about what they are learning informed Lily‘s decisions and practices as she shifted her pedagogy to best serve the students. A way that teacher educators can help draw teacher candidates attention to how to use assessment to drive instruction is for teacher candidates to select an assessment, administer it, determine the needs, and then develop instructional plans, working in such a way that teacher candidates must use their knowledge of a variety of teaching strategies to meet the assessed needs.

In addition to content-area expertise, assessment tools, and knowledge of a variety of learning methods, teacher educators should work to ensure that pre-service teachers leave the program with non-deficit explanations for the students and families they will encounter. Learning to value each student and to reserve judgments will promote transformed relationships between students, between students and teachers, and between parents and teachers. Working alongside pre-service teachers and calling attention to teacher vocabulary around students and families, teacher educators can create awareness with new teachers about many of the deficit stances that teachers take. This inquiry into learning methods and practices will challenge teacher candidates to make a decision to stand up for and promote positive views of students to other stakeholders.

Teachers, like Lily, must participate with students in learning the required content while exploring the world around them. Teachers can learn to take seriously the Freirian (1970/1990) axiom of teacher-students and student-teachers as they creatively make decisions inside their

classroom. Teachers can make decisions to engage with students in interrogations into student interests and into the world at large needs to be considered a viable method for teachers to undertake using whatever classroom practices they have available.

Moreover, teachers also need to be treated as intellectuals (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Shulman, 1999)and given the space to create, innovate, and step outside the ―institution of old learning" (IOL) practices (O'Brien & Bauer, 2005). IOL protects and nurtures assessment and instruction that prevents students from exploring their world in engaging ways in the classroom. Teaching is regarded as a complex interaction that requires a teacher to have ―great breadth and depth of professional knowledge and judgment" (Cochran-Smith, 1993, p. 100; see also Freire, 1992; Dewey 1915). Attention needs to be paid to teachers who are working hard within the classroom to create a pedagogy that respects all students and works to create an environment where all students are learning. As we saw with Lily, her students benefited from her decisions within her classroom and to an extent she might rub off on her teaching team, yet very little work was done to influence the lock-step culture of the school or school system.

Implications for Future Research

This knowledge of Lily's decisions and practices generate questions regarding future research. Because case study research is not generalizable beyond the case itself, I envision several topics for further research that can be explored as a result of the understandings.

This study provided a framework for understanding the complicated and myriad decisions that influence a teacher's daily interactions; however, to begin to more fully understand this topic, research can be expanded to encompass several participants in several settings. Several participants would allow researchers to look across processes to further determine how teachers negotiate the administrative expectations and their personal pedagogical beliefs.

Expanding this study further to encompass multiple schools will allow researchers to explore the different practices, decisions, and levels of autonomy within different types of administration and stakeholders. Harmony was located in a rapidly changing demographic with a high turnover of teachers; a more stable school may present data differently. Broadening the number of participants and adding additional school settings will further add to understandings about how to best prepare teacher candidates and teachers to make decisions that truly benefit students' learning.

At Harmony Middle School at the time of the study, the principal wielded her authority by denying dialogue in public spaces. It would be interesting to work with groups of teachers, creating dialogical space between teachers. This space where teachers could work alongside each other to discuss and explore teaching ideas and strategies could be a productive and supportive place. It could be productive in that teachers could generate new ideas, negotiate creative ways to work with the framework, and share the variety of practices that they have found to work with students. In addition, this space could be supportive as teachers could further realize that many teachers want to engage students in pedagogy of respect. In many schools today, I think that teachers are overrun with logistical meetings where administrators give expectations without explanation as we saw with Lily and her principal in Chapter 5. If these meetings could be reduced and more productive inquiries into teaching and learning were more prevalent, I argue that teachers would be more energized in their interactions with students.

Additionally, it would be interesting to work with teachers and varying types of authority to create a more dialogical space. For example, teachers with authoritative principals and/or teachers with more dialogical principals might address their decision-making processes. The first group might present more of a challenge as authoritative principals often do not invite dialogue

into public spaces. However, researchers could work with teachers and administrators separately before bringing the groups together. This type of initiative would probably be best scheduled in the summer where volunteers could come in and explore practices and decisions. Following a potential summer session, times could be scheduled with the group to explore challenges and successes of creating this dialogical space and new avenues explored to address the challenges. The second group mentioned teachers with more dialogical principals, I argue could more easily dive into dialogue where ideas are explored and honored; however, these meetings could become logistical in manner, which might cause teachers to resent this time. Teachers and administrators might benefit from the space to share ideas and learn together about how they might best serve their greatest stakeholders, the students.

A final recommendation for future research would be for researchers to conduct studies with students and explore their responses to the myriad decisions teachers enact each moment of each day. As was done in this study, observations of teacher decisions and practices could lead to interview or focus group questions asking students why they think teachers maneuvered in such ways. Additionally, observations of student decisions or responses to teacher decisions could contribute to the interviews where students explain their personal decisions and actions within the classroom. Looking at both student and teacher decisions might provide a different understanding of how classrooms operate.

Conclusion

To summarize, I selected Lily because I felt she was likely to provide examples of decision-making in action; moreover, providing much of the internal dialogue and real effort teachers engage in when making decisions. This process is complex as teachers must decipher and interpret many personal beliefs and outside expectations to arrive at decisions that are the

best decisions at that time and place in that particular classroom context. Moment-by-moment decisions made should vary to encompass the new context, class, or stakeholder. Lily used a variety of resources to make decisions and a variety of practices to make her classroom a place where her beliefs and administrative expectations melded together. She used personal beliefs, interpretations, and understandings conveyed through expectations from various levels of administration, student backgrounds, and her desire to serve students to the best of her ability. These ideas require stakeholders to trust teachers to enact their pedagogical methods within the political and instructional structures of the school as they seek to serve the students and the greater community.

As I look forward into the multiple possibilities of influencing schools, I am reminded of a particular day in Lily‘s classroom. In one of our final interviews in the study, Lily reflected on many of the decisions she made throughout the course of the study and in her career. Lily considered her students and the surrounding community when making decisions. She lovingly referred to the shifting demographics of the students as moving from the ―Skoal" demographic to the ―cell phone" demographic. The ―Skoal" demographic referred to the many students from Lily‘s earliest years who considered the ring of a tobacco can in the back pocket of jeans a status symbol. During the time of the study, the Skoal can had been replaced largely with a cell phone, and the students seemed to strive for the outline of the phone in the back pocket of their jeans. This idea stems from the recent shift in Harmony‘s demographics from a rural community to a more suburban community addressed in chapter three.

Lily and I are sitting on a blanket outside by a shallow watching our children play on the swings as we discuss Lily's views on literacy and how it has changed over the years. I begin our conversation by asking, "What does literacy mean to you?"

Lily contemplates for a minute or so before answering, "At the barest [minimum] it is to read and write. Then [it is to] read for specific information. When I started teaching here [at Harmony], our Skoal demographic had a fifty percent literacy rate. It [literacy rate] has really grown . . . [we now have] the Google generation who are able to find answers on their phones in split seconds. The thirst for knowledge and curiosity definitely comes into the quest for literacy."

Wishing for Lily to continue, I ask, "Have your teaching practices shifted with the shifting demographics?"

"Nah, I don't think the activities and sparking interests has changed much," Lily explains. "It [demographic shift] has most affected how I feel accountable to parents. The new parents are more invested in their kid's school . . . So, I haven't changed [many of my decisions] around the cool things we do. I just have to be more vocal with the parents about what we are doing. Like with weekly updates to my website, but I have to remember that we still have the Skoal demographic. We can't leave them behind or leave them out. So unconsciously, or maybe purposefully, I decided to keep my room the same. Let [my classroom] be the equalizer. Maybe this is another one of my responsibilities: I don't want kids to be limited. I want to open the door to possibilities of what is available out there in the world. Teachers are oftentimes really mean. It is sad . . . not all the kids have the same level of people fighting for them."

Lily starts to cry. "Teachers can be so mean. [For example], Susie is not a bad kid she needs limits and they [teachers] weren't giving her any. It really hurt me because I felt like they didn't like her. I think those type of things make me even more aware. I feel like any experience I have is meant to teach me something. I don't think that I have been insensitive in the past. I really hope that I haven't. I try to use all of experiences to help me be a better teacher. I really try to look at the positives in the kids. I try to point out what they are doing right so they are

motivated to keep working. I hope that I haven't been insensitive. Every child is precious. If they only hear negative things, it is self fulfilling prophecy. I try to purposefully tell parents the great things that their kids can do."

The decision to treat all students and their family background with honor plus the decision to seek out positives in children provided Lily a level autonomy that allowed her to maintain her pedagogical practices. These decisions afforded Lily a more stable ground in the rocky terrain of modern schools. I hope that Lily's story will fit into the context of an increasingly lengthy list of narratives written by teachers, for teachers, or about teachers and their practices, part of a growing effort to influence educational spaces. To make this change, we must continue to tell the stories of respectful, hard-working educators so that teachers and policymakers "wobble" under the current mandates to act upon their world to generate a progressive pedagogy.

In closing, Lily read and responded to the following quote about pedagogy and their commitment to students. Freire (1998) stated,

> I am a teacher who stands up for what is right against what is indecent, who is in favor of freedom against authoritarianism . . . I am a teacher who favors the permanent struggle against every form of bigotry and against the economic domination of individuals and social classes. . . I am a teacher full of the spirit of hope, in spite of all signs to the contrary. I am a teacher proud of the beauty of my teaching practice, a fragile beauty that may disappear if I do not care for the struggle and knowledge that I ought to teach. If I do not struggle for the material conditions without which my body [and mind] will suffer from neglect, thus running the risk of becoming frustrated and ineffective, then I will no longer be the witness I ought to be, no longer the tenacious fighter who may tire bit who

never gives up. This is a beauty that needs to be marveled at but that can easily slip away from me through arrogance or disdain toward my students (p. 94-95)

Lily responded, "[This] quote brings to mind so many of the huge struggles - authoritarianism, bigotry, economic domination, loss of hope, a beauty that may disappear, disdain toward students; if I thought about that all the time I would become terribly depressed. But I do think about it all the time, and [I] am not very vocal about it. Like I said, I am a peacemaker, a nonviolent fighter, and I try to lead by example, not by words. People believe what you do more than what you say."

Lily's words are powerful and show her commitment and desire to work alongside students to best meet their goals. She wrote the following "I am" statement as a further response to Freire's quote.

Lily's "I Am"

I am a teacher who . . .

Awakens and nurtures a sense of wonder in my students about the natural world.

Enjoys learning everyday alongside my students. They always teach me something new.

Believes that every child can learn, and ought to believe about themselves that they can learn, they just have to find the best way that fits them. Part of my job is to help them find the best way.

Knows that learning is sometimes not the most important thing a student needs. Sometimes they need an adult who cares about them, believes in them, teaches them to believe in themselves and teaches that being nice to each other matters.

Criticizes standardized testing, yet is still proud of my students when they achieve or surpass testing goals.

Is not very political. I know there are laws being made all the time, debates being had, and some of them make me angry. But I would rather forget about it all and just enjoy the moment learning with my students. (That sounds negative. I do care about all of that stuff, but usually it makes me feel powerless and frustrated to no end. So I try to let it go. Maybe I should be more of a fighter, but I am more of a peacemaker.)

Is young at heart. I love to have fun with my students. When people feel safe emotionally, they can let go and have fun, then their minds and hearts are open to learning and forming new ideas.

Is loud on the outside but inside I am quietly observing and processing everything each individual child needs minute by minute. And trying to meet those needs constantly.

Loves to teach, even though I sometimes feel disrespected for it because it is not a big money making career. It does not matter to me, I feel like it is a need within myself to teach, and I feel blessed to have found a career that I love, that makes me laugh, and I feel satisfied with that.

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APPENDIX A

RESEARCH TIMELINE

IRB Application—July 2010

Participant Selection—July-August 2010

Interviews and Observations- Mid-August— October 2010

[6:2 hours weekly (observation: interview)]

Mapping Interviews/Transcription—August 2010 – December 2010

Data Analysis—August 2010 – February 2011

Member Checks—December 2010

Writing—September 2010- March 2011

Full Draft to Bob— Early May 2011

Revisions—May 2011

Defense—June 2011

Final Draft to Graduate School -- June 2011

Graduation -- August 2011

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE INTERVIEW GUIDE

- Tell me about yourself. What are your experiences that have brought you to this place?
- Share with me about your teaching career. (grades, subjects, etc….)
- What changes have taken place in the county of your school since you began teaching here? How have they affected your instruction and decision-making?

POST OBSERVATION INTERVIEW GUIDE SAMPLING OF POSSIBLE PROBES

- How is the class going since our last visit?
- I noticed you did. . . . Why? How did you come to that decision?
- Why did you say….? Would you say …. to all students? What factors played into your decisions?
- How does a teacher know that the students got it? How do you know when your students understand? When do you decide to move on to a new topic? Share with a time that you knew that the students fully grasped the material you were teaching.
- How would you deal with ……?
- Would you do …. differently, if you could go back? Why or why not? Tell me about the factors that played into this decision?

IDENTITY QUESTION GUIDE

- Share with me how someone assumes the role of ~~te~~acher. How does one act like a teacher?

- Tell me about a teacher you admire and respect. What qualities does this teacher possess? How did he or she achieve these goals?
- Share with me some of the beliefs you hold as a teacher. Tell me about your non-negotiables when it comes to teaching and classroom practice. (probe: example)
- Tell me about the rights and responsibilities of a teacher. Do teachers have an obligation to follow all administrative directives? Why?
- Tell me about the rights and responsibilities of an administrator? Parent? Student? Parents from a different social class? Students from a different social class?
- Within the school setting, who has authority over whom and why?
- Share with me time(s) when you were able to make a decision (curricular, discipline, instructional, etc…) and you felt the decision was honored?
- Share with me times when you wanted to make a decision (curricular, discipline, instructional, etc…) and you felt the decision was silenced?
- How do you see yourself fitting in with your team? Grade level? School? County? How are you similar and different?

LITERACY QUESTION GUIDE

- What is literacy to you? Why? How did you come to feel that way?
- What are key components of literacy classroom discourse specific to rural contexts? Semi-suburban contexts? How have your styles, methods, and decisions altered based on shifting demographics?
- How are these components negotiated by you as teacher with other participants such as parents, students, colleagues?

- If you were responsible for planning and implementing a professional development seminar on literacy issues for teachers in your school district, what information would you include? What questions would you pose for discussion?
- How has NCLB affected your teaching and decisions? How is teaching pre-NCLB similar and different to post-NCLB?

LABELING OF STUDENTS QUESTION GUIDE

- What do you think the role of schools should be in regard to differences among students?
- Do you believe that social problems related to diversity are an issue for schools? How did you come to believe this?
- Share with me some times when you feel that students and parents were treated were fairly. Why?
- Share with me some times when you feel that students and parents were treated were unfairly. Why?
- Share with me your experiences of teaching students who have been labeled ~~–a~~t-risk" or ~~–s~~low". How were these students treated by you? By other teachers? By other students? Why? What factors played into your decisions?
- What is discipline? What counts as discipline in terms of the culture, and what doesn't? What is its importance and value? How are students with different labels treated?

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in my research project titled *"Navigating a Rocky Terrain."* Through this research study, I hope to learn about how teachers make pedagogical decisions in light of

If you decide to be part of this study, information will be gathered through a series of observations and interviews with you. I will ask to observe you teach 3 times a week for no more than3 months and meet weekly with you to discuss these observations as a teacher. These interviews will last no more than an hour and will be conducted at your convenience.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. I will not use your name on any papers that I write or publish about this research.

If you want to stop participating in this project, you are free to do so at any time. You can also choose not to answer any questions that you don‘t want to answer.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at: 706-983-9516.

Emily Pendergrass

_____ date _____

Researcher‘s Signature

Telephone: 706-983-9516

Email: ependergrass@gmail.com

My signature below indicates that I understand the research study described above. All of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I agree to participate in this study. I will be given a signed copy of this form.

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX D

IRB PERMISSION TO OBSERVE IN SCHOOLS

7/10/2010

Dear IRB Members,

After reviewing the proposed study, ―Navigating a Rocky Terrain", presented by Emily Pendergrass, a doctoral student at the University of Georgia, I have granted permission for the study to be conducted at [redacted] Middle School.

The purpose of this study is to explore the pedagogical moves and decisions that a middle school teacher makes as she works toward a productive and supportive classroom. This study will provide valuable insight into a teacher's decisions and decision-making processes that can contribute to teacher education training and development. The primary methods will be observing a teacher in her classroom with follow-up interviews to discuss the how and why of these decisions.

I understand that these observations will take place at school at a time that is mutually convenient and will not interfere with regular classroom activities. The observations will be conducted over a period of no more than 5 months. The interviews that will be conducted will be conducted off campus. Ms. Pendergrass will contact and recruit a teacher and will collect data on that teacher at [redacted] Middle School.

I understand that Ms. Pendergrass will receive consent from the teacher. Ms. Pendergrass has agreed to provide me any documents that I request in relation to the study. Any data collected will be kept confidential and will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the

researcher. Ms. Pendergrass has also agreed to provide me a copy of the aggregate results from this study.

If IRB has any concerns about the permission granted by this letter, please contact me at the phone number listed.

Sincerely,

SIGNED AND SUBMITTED TO IRB

[redacted]

Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning

[redacted] County Schools

APPENDIX E

PHONE RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello,

My name is Emily Pendergrass. I am a graduate student at the University of Georgia. I am conducting a study about how teachers make decisions.

May I have your permission to talk to you about this new study?

- If no, say ―Thank you for your time" and end the call.
- If yes, continue as below.

The title of the study is ―Navigating a Rocky Terrain: A Case Study of a Middle School Teacher's Practices." The purpose of this research study is to draw upon case study methods to develop an understanding of how a teacher of adolescents merges powerful teaching practices and what administrators have issued as directives while adhering to high standards for all students regardless of the students' demographics. I am interested in exploring a teacher's pedagogy who is struggling to maintain philosophical beliefs on what makes good learning and teaching while adhering to policies and mandates impressed upon teachers from policymakers and administrators.

I am looking for a literacy teacher who has been teaching for more than 10 years and has a GA teaching certificate in Reading or Language Arts.

Are you a teacher that has more than 10 years experience and holds a teaching certificate in the field of reading or language arts?

- If no, say Thank you for your time and end the call.
- If yes, continue as below.

Your participation will involve weekly interviews that are based on classroom observations. There will be 4-6 interviews that last about an hour each. I will also observe you teaching for 6 hours a week for 4-6 weeks. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. At UGA we are committed to protecting your privacy. I will keep all personal information confidential. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. In fact, the published results will be presented in summary form only. Your identity will not be associated with your responses in any published format

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at [706.983.9516] or send an e-mail to emilyp1@uga.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 612 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to participate. Your decision to be in any study is totally voluntary.

Do you think you would be interested?

- If no, say Thank you for your time and end the call.
- If yes, *establish a mutually agreed upon time to sign consent form and create an observation schedule.*

APPENDIX F

GENERAL OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

The purpose of observing the class is to gather as much information about the process of the lesson as possible. My primary task is to observe ***how the teacher interacts with the lesson and decision-making process that takes place to use in reflection and debriefing during interviews.*** In other words, I will note behaviors of the teacher and the benefits/difficulties of the lesson, NOT information about the students!

Description of Setting

- Classroom Arrangement
- Flow of the classroom
- Posters and bulletin boards displayed
- Time and location of observation

Teaching behaviors and decisions

- Design of the lesson, tasks, and role of the teacher in the lesson
- Purpose of the lesson
- Instructional strategies and activities in the lessons observed
- Planned and unplanned changes and deviations to lessons
- Content and climate of the classroom
- Duration of various activities (ex. group vs. independent activities, housekeeping or instructional time, etc…)
- Pedagogical moves teacher makes

APPENDIX G

MIDDLE SCHOOL STANDARDS-BASED REPORTING RUBRIC

Mark	Description	Criteria
E (Exceeds)	Student applies the learning related to the standard independently and correctly; demonstrates evidence of higher level thinking.	Score at EXCEEDS level on rubrics AND 90% to 100% accuracy by standard on **common** assessment(s)
M (Meets)	Student demonstrates understanding of the standard by showing clear though processes through demands of task independently.	Score at MEETS level on rubrics AND 80% to 100% accuracy by standard on **common** assessment(s)
M- (Meets the standard at a minimal level or inconsistently)	Student demonstrates understanding of the standard minimally or inconsistently.	Score at MEETS level on rubrics AND 70% to 79% accuracy by standard on **common** assessment(s)
DNM (Does not meet)	Student is **not** meeting the standard for the current term.	Does not meet standard based on rubric OR

		Less than 70% accuracy on **common** assessment(s)
Comments: When all of the criteria indicated (scores on rubrics, percentages) are appropriate for the learning goal, all should be used. Performance indicator documents will include designated common assessments.		

Formative assessment information should be collected regularly to determine if students are prepared to meet standards on summative assessments and to send home for parent review. Marks for formative assessments will be recorded in [redacted] to provide documentation of learning and communicate progress. Formative assessments should include observation, conversation, and products that demonstrate learning.