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# Accountability and transformative literacy

Kristin Williams

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# **ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSFORMATIVE LITERACY**

by  
Kristin K. Williams

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Language, Literacy and Special Education  
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
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Thesis Chair:           Dr. Valerie Lee

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## **Abstract**

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EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSFORMATIVE  
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In a conceptual study of accountability measures and transformative teaching practices, this extensive literature review investigates the accountability measures in schools such as high-stakes tests and teacher evaluation methods. The study also examines how teachers and schools can meet obligations by federal mandates while still incorporating effective and critical literacy practices using democratic literacy frameworks and approaches toward democratic whole school reform.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction to the Study

This inquiry into current accountability measures and transformative pedagogy in schools is framed around the theory of Paulo Freire. The system of accountability in schools has been compared to a banking method of education (Freire, 2005) where information is transferred from teacher to student. Freire (2005) embraced the idea of transformative pedagogy or a problem-posing education where learners based learning on social realities and produced knowledge through discussion and debate. He supported learning where students were given opportunities to dialogue with one another about issues pertinent to their personal lives, rejecting prescribed programs. In addition, he believed that program content should be organized, systematized and developed on topics which students are interested in and want to know more about. In Freire's seminal piece *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005), Freire describes the oppressor-oppressed contradiction encouraging the oppressed to be part of creating his or her own pedagogy and taking action in order to change social issues affecting their personal lives.

Other constructivist theorists and researchers that frame this study are Dewey's theory of democratic education, Gee's theory of Discourse, Rosenblatt's reader response theory, Au's theory of culturally responsive education, and Guthrie's theory of motivation and engagement. The common theme is that the personal experience and background of the learner becomes the most valuable resource in the classroom. In addition, a student's education is individualized and his or her ways of knowing and learning are considered in instruction (Au 2010; Buxton, Kayumova & Alleksaht-Snider, 2013; Coburn, 2006; Barno, 2014). Students are engaged in their learning with active



participation and are encouraged to become involved in making changes to themselves and the world around them. Current research has been influenced by these concepts to further investigate social imbalances and their impact on education today.

Furthermore, according to Morrison & Marshall (2003), the majority of teacher preparation programs teach educators to be learning-centered and stress a constructivist approach to learning. However, practices that students see modeled are inconsistent in most classrooms. While best practice is to focus on active learning and plan around student interest, the common practice found is a focus on requirements, standards and skills. Also, reminded of the limitations and restrictions placed on public schools, my inquiry question is during a time of accountability and high-stakes tests, what does transformative literacy instruction look like? A supporting question in this study is how can accountability measures be bridged with effective and quality literacy instruction?

The purpose of this study is to examine, review and organize current research on accountability measures as well as effective and transformative literacy instruction in spite of these accountability measures. I am also investigating how teachers balance quality instruction while meeting state and federal mandates; and ultimately seeking to find out how I can achieve a flexible approach to teaching within the parameters of such a rigid system. Research will be reviewed in order to thoroughly examine the effects of accountability on teachers and instruction and the effects on students' achievement, performance, and attitudes about learning. In addition, this study will review research regarding more democratic accountability measures and alternative efforts where schools have regained control and autonomy. Once reviewed, research will be analyzed in order to draw on themes and implications that impact effective and transformative literacy

instruction. In addition, implications will be drawn from the studies to suggest further research.

### **Research Method**

To conduct this study on the effects of accountability and transformative literacy and practice, EBSCO host electronic database was used to search for relevant literature. The search terms included “accountability pressure,” “progressive literacy instruction,” “teaching to the test,” “teacher evaluations,” “effects of high-stakes tests,” “transformative literacy curriculum,” “policy” and “practice.” By pursuing references cited in the articles reviewed, further research was gathered. Articles and books used in this study include empirical studies as well as case studies that used a variety of data sources.

### **Substance of Inquiry**

In Chapter one, critiques of accountability systems will be discussed along with the impact of high-stakes tests on teachers, instruction, leadership and student achievement as well as the current system of teacher evaluations.

In Chapter two, research is reviewed in order to better understand the differing perspectives of the accountability mandates. Topics discussed are the benefits of accountability as well as understanding standards and their intentions and utility in schools. In addition, the issue of teacher evaluation is thoroughly examined. Lastly, numerous studies are reviewed regarding whole school reform efforts and effective literacy practices while obliging to accountability mandates in schools.

In Chapter three, the inquiry is centered on research supporting alternative assessment. Studies include the use of alternative assessment measures in conjunction

with high-stakes tests. Also, innovative alternative assessment or technology-based assessments is discussed, specifically, current research about the PARCC and SBAC.

The focus then shifts in Chapter four to democratic and critical literacy practices. Specifically, undemocratic practices in schools are examined and case studies of schools implementing democratic practices are reviewed. The inquiry into democratic literacy moves to transformative schools, democratic literacy programs being implemented in schools, and also the struggles that educators encounter implementing critical literacy in schools.

Lastly, with the interpretation of the studies and articles discussed, the paper concludes in Chapter five with 1) implications and recommendations for literacy professionals and 2) further research suggestions.

## **Definition of Terms**

Accountability: informing parents and the public about how well a school is educating its students and about the quality of the social and learning environment (Fair Test, 2014); includes how a school evaluates, supports staff, and relates to students and parents (McMary, 1997).

No Child Left Behind: Legislation from 2001 that ensures that all schools and all students meet the same academic standards in reading and mathematics by the 2013-2014 school year, requiring all students meet an absolute level of performance and is uniformly applied to all subgroups of students within a school (Kim and Sunderman, 2005).

High-stakes Tests: A high-stakes test is a test that is utilized in order to make important decisions about students, educators, schools, or districts (Dorn, 1998).

Value-Added: using student achievement scores as a percentage of teachers' evaluations; uses standardized test scores to predict how much a student may learn in a particular year. If the student makes that gain or more, systems that use this methodology may credit it to a teacher's effectiveness, or "value." If the student does not progress as predicted, the teacher may be deemed to be less effective. (Weingarten, R., 2010).

Educational Triage: schools allocate more time, resources and planning to target students who are close to proficiency on standardized testing. These students are known as "bubble" students (Lauen & Gaddis, 2012).

Constructivist Approach: Students are viewed as active constructors of knowledge involved in hands-on and approaches to learning that involve projects, discussions, community involvement and choice over curriculum and resources (Janisch, Liu, & Akrofi, 2007).

Bottom-up Decision-Making: Input and opinions that influence policy and practices within the school come from teachers and administration involved (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000); systematic plan within the school (Hansen 1993).

Top-Down Pressure: Policy and mandates on schools that come from government and policymakers not working within the schools; external guidance (Mintrop, 2012).

Grass Roots Movement: Support from parents, teachers and students within an organization to create change and alter policy (BAT, 2014).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): These models determine AYP by comparing the performance of individual students from year to year, over two or more years. It uses the student as his or her own control and calculates whether the school has made the “expected growth” toward meeting the 2014 proficiency requirements (Foote, 2007).

Charter Schools: alternative and independent schools generally publicly funded according to their enrollment (Sizer, 2005).

Teacher autonomy: the ability to make knowledgeable decisions by taking all relevant factors into account, independently of rewards and punishments (Kamii, 1994).

English Language Learners (ELL): students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses (Great Schools, 2014).

Ethnographic Study: a type of research where researcher immerses him or herself in the life of the group, culture or community they are studying (Coburn, 2006).

Disadvantaged: where people are unfairly treated relative to others (Watson, 2003).

Academic Performance Index (API): Annual measure of academic performance of schools (Fisher and Frey, 2007).

Pull-out programs -consist of pulling students out for qualified services and instruction (gifted or special education) (Souto-manning, 2009).

Alternative Assessment: Alternatives to standardized multiple-choice testing which focuses on performance (Alternative Assessment, 2003).

Summative Assessment: Assessing learning after instruction by use of testing (Black and William, 1998).

Formative Assessment: Assessing learning occurs in the process of teaching and learning in order to provide feedback to students and teachers to inform practice (Johnston and Costello, 2005).

Metacognition: includes a variety of self-awareness processes to help plan, monitor, orchestrate, and control one's own learning (Alternative Assessment, 2003).

## **Background Information about Accountability in Schools**

Educational reform has become a constant in the United States. Teaching is an extremely complex practice. Therefore, many programs, initiatives, funds and research have been produced in order to help students achieve to their full potential. Over the past fifty years, schools have been a target, and have been accused of soft standards and not effectively preparing students to become productive citizens in the workforce; and as a result, statistical accountability systems were put in place. In the last two decades education policy has shifted control to bureaucratic institutions that emphasize high-stakes tests, high-quality teachers, and rigorous standards. According to Dorn (1998), in statistical accountability systems, educators are required to continually test students through standardized testing, and schools and students are judged solely by test scores. Although test scores are not new in the United States, the public judging of schools by test scores have become the norm. This is a drastic shift from the past when test scores were used by schools as internal information only, in order to determine a student's status.

Statistical accountability systems have developed and evolved over the past few decades through a series of events. In the 1970s, a decline in student performance on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was reported in the media, even though a decline in scores happened a decade earlier. Leon Lessinger, who was a prime supporter for accountability during this time period, called for the application of engineering principles to education to attain better control over the educational process (Hansen, 1993). Soon after in 1983, the *Nation at Risk* Report (National Commission on Excellence in Education) argued that education in the United States was lacking the basic principles

and was becoming too permissive, and as a result, the United States lost its economic competitiveness in the world. Thereafter, the government and general public started to no longer view administrators and teachers as autonomous professionals, but rather ones that were in need of financial and political support. State legislators and powerful business leaders began to take on the task to shape the education curriculum back to drill and practice through legislated policy. The policy that was enacted emphasized a shift away from elective classes and project-based learning and moved toward direct instruction. Regulations were established with standardized skills, uniform curriculums, teacher evaluations and promotion and retention policies (Glickman, 1990).

In January, 2002, accountability efforts strengthened more with the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) with the objective to eliminate the achievement gap evident among subgroup populations. In addition, other reasons for policymaker support of state-mandated testing was measuring student achievement, improving performance, improving teacher and school performance, providing information to make instructional choices, and comparing schools (Johnson, 2005).

Through the NCLB Act, states were given twelve years to bring all students up to proficiency level in reading and mathematics (Cruz & Brown, 2010). NCLB included numerous federal programs, but testing, accountability and school improvement were the main focus. Testing was the core requirement of NCLB Act and all schools needed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP). States were empowered to determine the standards that students needed to learn. Teachers then taught the standards and tests measured whether the standards have been met. According to Foote 2007, since the NCLB Act was enacted, the number of students tested has increased dramatically in all



fifty states, with seven grades in all being tested. Third through fifth grades, sixth through ninth grades and tenth through twelfth grades are tested annually. Based on the test results, punishments and rewards, such as restructuring or loss of jobs for administrators and teachers, were enforced (Foote, 2007). As a reward for meeting expectations, schools were given high ratings made publicly available.

If a state did not participate in the NCLB Act, they would be ineligible for Title I funding, which 58% of public schools in the United States rely on to operate. However, all schools were required to implement a system to measure progress, if not participating (Cruz and Brown, 2010). This meaning that it left little choice to many schools to take part in the NCLB Act since they would lose resources as a result of not participating.

In regards to political support at the time, it was a bipartisan agreement to back the NCLB Act since both parties had come to the consensus that the achievement gap between white and minority students needed to be addressed. This means that students of poverty and diverse backgrounds like black and Latino should not be underperforming compared to their white peers. Both democrats and republicans strongly believed that poverty, culture and family background were no reasons for poor performance. Furthermore, both parties agreed that that local educational politics such as school boards and administrations needed strong pressure to address teacher quality and resources in schools. Democrats were in support because of the ideals for minority and poor students to achieve proficiency which is a form of affirmative action where policy favors those who are victim to discrimination (Hess & Petrilli, 2004).

Since the NCLB Act, there have been other initiatives that have become widespread. As many states did not meet the proficiency level by 2014, waivers were

granted to states in order to have flexibility to meet the demands. Individual schools that did not make AYP had to draft improvement plans. These plans included professional development and intervention plans for the different subgroups of students within the schools. In addition, with the waivers, states had to adopt college-ready standards and adopt comprehensive teacher evaluation plans that were tied to testing (Klein, 2014).

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative is the most recent movement developed by teacher organizations, parents, the National Governor's Association, and Council of Chief State School Officers. In 2009, President Obama initiated "Race to the Top", which was a grant incentive to gain support for the CCSS initiative by offering money to states who adopt the best practices of the standards (Abrevaya, 2010). In addition, some states formed consortiums in order to invest in new assessments that provided critical thinking tasks rather than multiple-choice questions. These include Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) in thirty-one states and The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). These assessments are technology-based and are aligned with the standards (Beelman, 2014).

The notion behind the standards is to create educational equity and create a stronger work force. More specifically, as opposed to allowing states to determine their own individual standards, national standards were created in order for all students to attain excellence, no matter where they live. The standards for the CCSS initiative were developed using a backward design in order to prepare students for college and work-related skills. In other words, the standards were created by initially determining what skills and attributes college-level students would require. These skills include deep understanding, analysis and synthesis abilities (Beelman, 2014). The key changes called

for by the CCSS initiative are regular practice with complex texts and focus on academic vocabulary that is developed through conversation, instruction and reading. In addition, the CCSS initiative calls for changes in reading, writing and speaking instruction involving students grounding information in text (locating and inferring evidence in text) and building knowledge through content-rich non-fiction (Core Standards, 2014).

The CCSS initiative has been supported by various government associations and political leaders. The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers (2012) asserted that the standards promote equity since all students despite where they live in the United States are well prepared with the skills and knowledge to compete with peers internationally (as cited in Beelman, 2014). In addition, educational advocacy organizations such as National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) support the CCSS initiative with the stipulation that there is careful consideration for students' needs, implementation of a quality curriculum and professional development opportunities. However, the organizations support assessments that are not punitive and offer timely and quality information to teachers regarding student needs.

In sum, the reasoning behind test-based accountability is it will provide an incentive for teachers and schools to work harder while also identifying students that are struggling. Advocates believe test-based accountability will also raise performance by increasing motivation and parent involvement. In addition, the premise of more test-based accountability is that teachers and students in low performing schools will work more effectively, thereby increasing what all students learn (Glass & Berliner, 2012; Jacob, 2004). Nonetheless, the purpose of accountability in education can take on

numerous roles depending on who is asking the question of whether a school is effective. Politicians seek to discover whether a school is meeting a national standard, business leaders are asking about work-place related skills, college faculty want students to have intellectual foundations, while parents may be asking if their child is getting individual attention (Dorn, 1998).

### **Critiques of Current Accountability Systems**

Despite the support for current accountability systems, there are also critics of these accountability systems. The International Reading Association (IRA) issued a statement that it recognizes the need to improve the literacy achievement of many students. However, high-stakes tests do not give a complete picture of a student's learning and are limited when the tests are aligned with prescribed standards. In the IRA's statement, it lists other dimensions of learning that are not measured by tests including: prior knowledge, cognitive experiences, language diversity and experiences, family, community and cultural experiences, linguistic and cognitive strategy use and motivations and goals. Moreover, the IRA is concerned that testing has become a way to control instruction instead of improving students' ability to read (2014).

More specifically, the IRA's position statement regarding high-stakes tests is:

It is the position of the International Reading Association (IRA) that grade retention and high school graduation decisions must be based on a more complete picture of a student's literacy performance, obtained from a variety of systematic assessments, including informal observations, formative assessments of schoolwork, and consideration of out-of-school literacies, as well as results on standardized formal measures. Further, it is the position of IRA that in addition to these considerations, teachers' professional judgment should be a major factor in such decisions, along with input from students and their families. (p. 1)

The goal of accountability systems is to raise and clarify expectations of teachers and administrators. While test score statistics are just one type of evidence that is used in a public debate, other types of evidence could be a representative story or direct observation. However, test score statistics over the quality of education is what the nation relies on and solely focuses on. The practice of publishing test scores overshadows other ways to judge a school's performance. According to Dorn (1998), since simply observing classrooms is a more challenging way for the local public to judge schools, reliance on calculated statistics tends to override local independent judgment of schools. However, to base school improvement on test score statistics makes it a political process, rather than a technical way to improve schools. Because of the difficulty to create a system of accountability, the United States believes that an accountability system is objective and ignores the details that truly make a school effective.

Other experts in the field also believe that there are weaknesses to the current accountability systems. For example, Gorlewski, 2013, argues that while having standards and aims for students can be positive and open to interpretation, on the contrary, standardization implies a one-size-fits-all approach and pushes students to demonstrate achievement at an unreasonable pace or unobtainable level. This results in devastating effects on learning. Having high standards for all students is acceptable and necessary, yet it becomes prescriptive and standardized when test content inevitably determines the curriculum embedded into the standards.

According to Bracey (1990), the validity of standardized tests to measure what a student knows is under scrutiny and using such indicators does not accurately demonstrate educational decline (as cited in Glickman, 1990). This meaning that test

scores may not be able to indicate that a student is making adequate progress in reading or math. Moreover, changes in test scores do not necessarily mean the quality of instruction is decreasing. According to Dorn (1998) “the mundane details of statistical accountability encourage fads. Without a concrete sense of what children and teachers should be and are doing, the public compares statistics against a set of arbitrary benchmarks” (p. 14). Test scores and percentages do not provide any specific information for schools to use in order to address the factors involved in student achievement. However, the public is convinced by political advocates that numbers provide valid information about a school. However, policy changes cannot change classroom practices on the fundamental level and fail to measure broader changes in schools. While testing will likely strengthen and remain present, local victories against high-stakes testing are important to children involved.

In some states, policymakers provide financial incentives to schools as well as public acknowledgement of achievement, making accountability the same as a public display of judgment. Although it may appear that the accountability movement has increased learning with an increase in scores, questions emerge as to whether a rise in scores truly indicates increased learning. In addition, accountability measures that link an exam to the ability of a student to graduate causes a higher drop-out rate for lower-achieving students, which limits students’ futures (Foote, 2007).

The current accountability system creates a “blame game,” making it extremely difficult to find constructive solutions. In the rush to develop accountability systems, what matters most to parents and the public may be forgotten (Tacheny, 1999). A major goal of the high-stakes accountability movement is to reduce the achievement gap

between income groups as well as racial and ethnic groups; however, this goal was not achieved, resulting in the accountability movement being only marginally effective. It can be assumed this is due to tests not measuring other observable changes in schools that are impossible to measure with numbers. In addition, this failure is due to the bell curve on standardized tests that guarantee a percentage of schools will fail (Nichols, Glass & Berliner, 2012; Dorn, 1998; Holmstrom & Milgrom, 1991).

Furthermore, the NCLB Act defines disadvantaged students as underachievers (Cruz and Brown, 2010). It is believed that testing is harmful to low-income and minority students since test content is correlated with lower level thinking skills that does not require students to think deeply. In addition, research (Kohn, 2010; Au, 2007; Boardman & Woodruff, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Hamilton, 2003; Lam & Bordignon, 2001; McNeil, 2000) confirms that testing discourages creative pedagogical practices due to the testing craze and reduces the possibility for progressive testing practices. Schools with lower test scores will tend to focus the most on test preparation and test-taking skills, abandoning practices that take up more time, such as discussions and projects. Another area that inhibits children from succeeding on these tests is the mismatch of culture since many tests are written and produced with the dominant culture in mind. Therefore, students who have had more rich experiences outside of school will have an increased chance of interpreting the test content with ease.

To support the findings discussed above, Kim and Sundermann (2005) examined how AYP requirements affect high-poverty schools with significant black and Latino enrollments. Their research found the requirements for meeting AYP pose the greatest challenges to high-poverty schools which enroll a large percentage of students who have

traditionally scored poorly on standardized achievement tests. As such, the use of mean proficiency levels of subgroup rules in federal accountability policy has prompted researchers to challenge the validity of AYP because they fail to account for selection biases. By analyzing student performance, accountability systems based on mean proficiency levels were biased against high-poverty schools. Students with black or Latino background have lower average test scores and will have higher probability of failing to meet AYP. Despite generating annual learning gains indicated elsewhere, mean proficiency measures treated high-poverty schools as failing, even though their students' achievement test scores as a whole improved at equal rate as low-poverty schools. The reason being, students may fall into multiple subgroups, such as economically disadvantaged and limited English, or English as a second language, therefore increasing chances of not meeting AYP. In their 2005 study, Kim & Sunderman found that 48% of 352 schools failing to meet AYP had more than three subgroup targets as compared with 15% of 824 schools meeting AYP. Therefore, subgroup accountability policies have little evidence to improve achievement and indicate high failure rates. The researchers suggest that multiple indicators of school performance could address these design flaws in the accountability system.

Popham (1999) argues that the amount of knowledge and skills that children at any grade level are likely to know cannot be adequately measured by a test due to the content domain being much smaller. He argues that standardized tests do have utility but only to recognize an approximation of a students' status and areas they may be weak, not to measure the quality of education. Another weakness in testing is that the tests may not be aligned with what is emphasized in instruction, or the tests do not mesh with how



reading comprehension is taught locally. Out of school learning is also a factor in determining success on a test. Outside environments add to a student's repertoire of knowledge and impacts a student's ability to answer questions correctly. To support this further, Holmstrom and Milgrom (1991) contend that incentive schemes based on certain criteria will force all involved to focus on the observable aspects of a task (as cited in Jacob, 2004). This means, teachers will distribute more time to specific elements that are deemed to be most important.

According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), the accountability movement assumes that all cultures and people in society agree about all aspects of education, while teaching will always be a local endeavor founded on relationships between teachers and students and the culture of the school and community. The CCSS initiative linked with high-stakes testing demands that all students in every state meet the same requirements without taking into account the developmental level or personal experiences of the learner. In sum, critics of accountability systems firmly believe that there will not be an increase in learning from top-down pressure. In addition, there will be detrimental effects on instruction in school; and as a result, there will be negative effects on students, particularly low-income students.

### **Impact of High-Stakes Tests on Teachers, Instruction, Leadership and Student Achievement**

An abundance of research regarding high-stakes tests shows that accountability systems put demands on teachers that impact their instructional practices used in the classroom. The main impacts include "educational triage" or focusing on students close to proficiency, time spent on test preparation activities, negative views of educational accountability by educators, and labeling of students as low achieving.

Some research has shown that higher test scores do not necessarily indicate that meaningful learning is occurring in the classroom. A study by Cruz and Brown, 2010, explored the effects of testing on instruction in diverse South Texas schools. The study design was by way of surveying teachers across eleven districts on the topics of pressure, instruction and perceptions. The study found that teachers feel the most pressure from administration (i.e. principals and the central office), and teachers find the least amount of pressure from the community and professional organizations. Teachers strongly agreed that the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), which is a high-stakes exam, is a key consideration when planning, and that the TAKS forces the learning structures that teachers must use. In the study, an average amount of teachers' responses indicated that the TAKS had become the curriculum. Furthermore, questions about whether instruction is based on current research in the field and the use of discovery learning had lower than average scores in the study. Finally, teachers felt neutral about whether accountability is improving learning, and whether the TAKS is a valid measure of student learning.

Overall, the common theme that emerged from the study included negativity about the current system of accountability. In addition to the study, interviews provided anecdotes from the teachers regarding the impact that they have seen and experienced first-hand regarding high-stakes tests. Some of the thoughts from the teachers interviewed included that benchmark and TAKS results are stressed over curriculum, test-taking strategies and skills are emphasized over lessons, and the impact of test-taking strategies on student success. This means that instead of focusing on quality instruction for students and a rich curriculum, more time is allocated to prepare students to do well on tests.

Additionally, the interviewed teachers consistently indicated that measuring academic growth was important, but they did not value the current method being used.

Assessment is a crucial piece of quality instruction, but standardized test scores were not providing sufficient information to improve teacher practice. As such, this study concluded that through the lenses of teachers, the curriculum is being narrowed to focus on what will be tested. In addition, activities are less student-centered. Lastly, it is assumed that an increase in scores is due to an increase in “teaching to the test,” which is not believed to be the best practices educationally (Cruz & Brown, 2010).

An additional study by Moon, Brighton, Callahan, and Robinson (2005) concluded that the demand to improve test results has changed the delivery of instruction and has taken away emphasis on non-tested material. The study found that teachers meet to discuss ways and strategies to improve test scores. In addition, the study found that the higher the poverty level, the higher the percentage of teachers reporting these specific teaching methods and behaviors. In economically impoverished schools, there has become an emphasis on drill and practice, worksheets and direct instruction in test-taking strategies.

Furthermore, Lauen and Gaddis (2012) found that status-based accountability systems that hold schools accountable for test-score levels rather than growth or gain, cause the phenomenon of “educational triage.” This means that schools allocate more time, resources and planning to target students who are close to proficiency on standardized testing. These students are known as “bubble” students. According to Krieg (2008), quantitative studies of the NCLB Act show that accountability reported larger increases in scores of students in the middle of the test score distribution (as cited by

Lauen and Gaddis, 2012). This proves that schools are strategically changing the framework of their literacy and math instruction in order to provide more individualized and focused teaching on students who have the greatest chance of meeting the proficiency level on the tests. Thus, an improvement in tests scores can be perceived an improvement in instruction and teacher quality, yet in reality, there was only reallocating of resources to certain students.

An additional study that supports these similar findings was done by researchers Lauen and Gaddis (2012) who used student-level micro data to examine the effect of accountability pressure on educational triage for public school students enrolled in third through eighth grade between 2004 and 2009. More specifically, the study explored whether there was an increase in educational triage at the expense of low or high achievers. The results from the statistical analysis provided evidence that high achieving students benefitted less than students that were near or below grade level. The study also determined that raising academic standards can promote triage.

Other researchers have also found that there is a focus on the “bubble” students. Because this is an effective strategy for raising scores, teachers change how they allocate instructional time to the detriment of students at the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile and those at the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile. In addition, teachers have an incentive to narrow instruction to focus on predictable material on state tests. As a result, there is score inflation which means that scores overstate skills in tested areas, and do not allow for valid inferences of skills in broader realms of academics (Jennings & Sohn, 2014).

In another study, Jacob (2004) sought to examine test-based accountability policy that was implemented in Chicago Public Schools in 1997, questioning whether teachers

and administrators respond strategically to testing. The study used longitudinal student-level data from Chicago to examine changes in achievement for various groups of students. The study's objective was to look for a sharp increase in achievement following the introduction of high-stakes testing as evidence of a policy effect. The analysis concluded that students improved more than twice as much on basic skills that are easier to teach. Furthermore, the study sought to determine if teachers strategically responded to tests by labeling more students as special education since many special education students' scores are not counted toward the schools' overall rating; and the results from the study suggest that the accountability policy did indeed increase the proportion of students in special education. This practice of labeling more students as special education was found more among low-achieving schools. In addition, retention rates increased in low-achieving schools, indicating an additional strategic response by schools. As such, it was concluded that achievement gains and students' placement are driven primarily by skills emphasized on the tests and students closest to passing.

Furthermore, Johnson (2005) focused on teachers and their reactions to test pressure and the influence that the test pressure has on their instruction. He argued that although teachers and students share power in decision-making in the classroom, the teachers carry more power shaping the agenda of test-taking experiences. During observations, the teachers developed literacy routines where students self-selected books, wrote about books and wrote memoirs. Reading workshop and writing workshop were models that were followed. The teachers positioned students as quality-minded readers and writers. During the months where literacy routines were authentic and the literacy

teachers in the classroom were confident that their instruction was aligned with the test, the teachers did not have to change their literacy practices.

However, as the test approached and/or there was a new format of the test that was going to be implemented, Johnson observed and gathered information from the teachers that revealed otherwise. When there was concern over the amount of connections between texts being created, literacy structures in the classroom changed. Also, pressure for students to do well on the test caused a deviation from typical classroom routine. Johnson believes that students were not only just taught how to make connections, but also provided with two texts to do so; and these connections were being forced to be made for “the sake of making connections” and not for students to make meaning out of the connection. As such, students were encouraged to create a certain amount of connections in their writing, devaluing quality over quantity.

The study also noted that there was less freedom in writing choice. In addition, quality work was deemphasized, while structure of writing was pushed. Time for reading and writing workshop was shortened or omitted leading up to the test. Mini-lessons were changed and reading strategies were not emphasized during students’ time to read “just-right books”. More time was spent on technical test preparation like filling in bubbles and transferring answers. Johnson concludes that the students were repositioned from readers and writers to test-takers who needed to prepare in order to do well. Despite students wanting more time for readers and writers workshop and rejecting the newer model in their classroom, the teachers rejected this request by students.

Overall, Johnson’s (2005) study revealed several interesting observations about the influence that test preparation has on teaching. A literacy community where students

developed thoughtfulness, quality-orientation, industriousness and independence changed since students were working silently and less time was spent in group work; and, instruction moved to more low-level activity. Even further, this study revealed that educational policies put in place with the overall goal to improve teaching and learning may in fact cause the opposite to occur within the classroom.

In addition, Johnson realized that literacy practices and test preparation become difficult to integrate or balance in the classroom since the type of activities for each differ. While maintaining the position that tests have importance to reveal an achievement gap, Johnson states that the authoritative route to policy is counterproductive as it takes away from teachers' commitment to a greater purpose for literacy learning. Lastly, this study shows how teachers need to consider how they are positioning students, and the outlooks about literacy they are developing with their actions and words regarding test preparation.

In a survey study conducted by Jones, Jones and Hardin (1999), the impact of high-stakes test was gathered from 236 elementary teachers in North Carolina following the new accountability program called "The New ABCs of Public Education." Results from the survey indicated that the teachers spent more instructional time on reading and writing. When asked how much time is spent preparing for tests, 80% of the teachers in the study said that students spent more than 20% of time on test preparation activities, while 20% of teachers indicated students spend over 60% of instructional time on test preparation activities. 70% of the teachers indicated that this was more time spent on test preparation than in the past. In addition, 67% of the teachers said that they changed their teaching methods; and, 37% of the teachers said that they are using more tests to prepare

students for the accountability test, indicating a move toward less meaningful and lasting forms of test pedagogy. Lastly, 77% of the teachers surveyed thought that morale was lower because of the accountability program. In summary, the conclusions drawn from the study were that high-stakes tests altered instruction into an intense focus on test preparation in a high percentage of classrooms.

Studies involving principals and other administration have also provided insight on the ineffectiveness of accountability systems. McGhee & Nelson (2005) conducted case studies of three successful principals all of whom were removed from their positions as a result of student test scores in Texas. The studies included interviews of the three principals. Although this particular study was small in scope, the researchers felt the scope included three critical cases that displayed a clear picture of thoughtless decision-making during an age of accountability. The research found that common themes emerged, which included accomplished careers and isolation. Despite action plans for the schools, including the analysis of test data within their staff and collaboration with peers, test scores fell, and the three principals were all removed from their respective positions shortly after. The removal from their respective positions indicates that there is little shared accountability within each district. With the principals' contracts not technically being violated since they were reassigned, professional organizations had no reason to intervene on the issue. These cases provide evidence that high-stakes accountability have negative effects on school leaders who are in direct contact with teachers, and suggest that test scores are the main gauge of a principal's performance. Furthermore, McGhee & Nelson suggest when the main concern is test scores, the complexity of the principalship is diminished. The study also noted that the schools in the case studies were at-risk with



high percentages of students of color, poor students, and English-language learners eliciting the question that if principals at schools that are considered at-risk are at greater risk of being removed from their positions, how will these schools attract and sustain high-quality leadership that is desperately needed at these schools? As such, schools lose quality educators that serve students with the greatest needs; therefore NCLB is having negative effects on students which is not what the act was intended to do.

Nichols, Glass & Berliner (2012) sought out the connection between tests and achievement in opposition to the claims of some researchers (Raymond & Hanushek, 2003) who argue there are many benefits of testing. The study used Academic Progress Rate (APR) measures as it relates to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data in twenty-five states from 2005-2009, seeking to uncover student achievement on fourth and eighth grade reading and math tests over time, and when disaggregated by student ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The analysis of data found that APR is weakly connected to white student reading performance across both time spans and inconsistently related to African American performance. The research concluded that the achievement gaps have insignificantly changed as a result of the NCLB policies, and testing pressure related to increases in achievement is more consistent in math than in reading.

Similarly, Lesley, Gee and Matthews (2010) conducted a qualitative study interviewing seventeen teachers from the same teacher education program along with five administrators who hired these teachers. In addition, six local policymakers were interviewed in order to determine how the policymakers' views aligned with the views of teachers, who are directly affected in the local region. The intent of the study was to

discover factors affecting teacher quality, and how effective teacher education programs are at preparing teachers for issues in the classroom. The teachers represented various ages, ethnicity, genders and grade levels taught, and had all graduated within the last three years.

In addition, another objective of the study was to understand what hindered teachers from using quality instructional techniques. Using open coding and selective coding with the interview transcripts, the themes that emerged were quality classroom practice, hindrances in practice, positive impacts on quality teaching and lack of alignment between teacher preparation programs and educational mandates. One teacher reported her frustration with feeling like she is being told to do things against her own beliefs and that do not make sense. She feels obligated to conduct her instruction against what she has learned is best practice in her education program. In current education programs, teachers are encouraged to put educational theories into practice, and analyze them against the experiences of teaching. When prompted, the teachers identified a wide range of pedagogical skills and active learning strategies, and detailed specific instances of what quality teaching looked like. Neither administrators nor policymakers were able to do the same and were more general in their responses.

The study by Lesley, Gee and Matthews found that obstacles identified by teachers were mandates, lack of support and time. However, the teachers were most passionate about the mandates. One teacher explained how testing is the only priority, which leads to unethical pedagogical decisions and superficial learning. This pressure to teach in a different way is not child-centered, and does not support the education that the teachers received from their preparation program. Teachers also emphasized how facts

and figures are priority over thinking and problem-solving and how curriculum is textbook driven and scripted. Administrators did not specifically mention mandates as a hindrance. Only two of the six policymakers identified mandated curriculum as an issue, however three policymakers identified testing as a hindrance to learning. One policymaker noted that the tests do not show where the student started. Most of the teachers stated the program positively influenced their teaching while some discussed how restrictions keep them from utilizing what they have learned.

A key finding was that collaboration between teachers is an important support for quality instruction. Therefore, mentoring, coaching and study groups should be incorporated into supports in the school. Interestingly, the teachers stated that theory is something beneficial in their teaching, while policymakers criticized university coursework that emphasized theory since it was not connected to the realities in the classroom. Thus, this finding reveals discrepancies between the perspectives of different groups of educational stakeholders.

In addition, it is important to note that the teachers' views remained unified, while policymakers differed in responses. This study illustrates there is disconnect between teachers, administration and policymakers about the characteristics of quality instruction. It also shows how teacher education differs from the practices of schools. The implications from this study include the need for there to be more communication and collaboration between teachers, teacher educators and policymakers. The study also supports the argument that policymakers with the most control over education have the least amount of ideas in the area of quality teaching calling for more respect for the

knowledge base of teachers and collaborative decision making between the groups. To that point, Lesley, Gee & Matthews (2010) state:

Educators must all be willing to speak out against practices that hurt K-12 students. Otherwise, teacher preparation programs are serving little more than providing grist for a bureaucratic mill. We have to use what we have learned to separate the debilitating chaff of bureaucracies from the grain of good teaching and good teacher education. (p. 48)

In summary, numerous studies, including the studies discussed above support the conclusion that high-stakes testing has not been correlated with increasing student achievement (Nichols, Glass & Berliner, 2012 ) and increases teaching to the test (Cruz & Brown, 2010; Johnson, 2005; Jones and Hardin, 1999; Jacob, 2004; Jennings & Sohn, 2014; Lesley, Gee and Matthews, 2010); and, increases the chances that teachers will be strategic with instruction and focus on students close to proficiency (Lauen and Gaddis, 2012). While teachers desire to use effective instruction in class, many studies indicate there is a need to focus on test preparation activities in order for students to be successful. Thus, the pressure for all students to succeed on high-stakes test preparation has impacted the frameworks of instruction in schools and the way educators are teaching. More specifically, teachers and administrators have felt pressure to spend more time preparing students for tests, resulting in a mismatch between quality instruction and test preparation (McGhee & Nelson, 2005; Cruz & Brown, 2010; Lesley, Gee and Matthews, 2010).

### **Teacher Evaluations**

In addition to the impact of high-stakes tests, teacher evaluation measures also have an effect on the way instruction is taking place within the classroom. Recently, efforts to tie high-stakes testing achievement to teacher evaluations have come to the forefront. This means teachers will be judged by how well students perform on high-

stakes tests, not taking into account other factors that may affect scores. In addition, evaluations may be affected by many variables such as the students or the relationship between the teacher and the evaluator. An additional issue is the large amount of criteria that teachers are expected to incorporate into lessons.

Harris and Sass (2014) explain that traditionally teacher compensation is linked to credentials. However, the notion of linking compensation to performance is based on research that indicates “teacher productivity as most important indicator of student learning” (p.183). The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has worked with evaluation experts to help develop a system that helps teachers improve and identifies those that should not be in the classroom. However, political leaders created incentives to reform teacher evaluations. Grants were awarded if states met certain criteria, including reforms in how teachers were evaluated. One factor required within these grants was student achievement tied to evaluations. In addition, federal incentives from Race to the Top (RTTT) prompted states to add measures of student growth in evaluation systems. More explicitly, Student Growth Percentiles (SGP) or a norm-referenced model, assigns percentile rankings to students based on the amount of growth compared to students with similar scores the previous years (Bylsma, 2014). This is referred to as a value-added system.

While accountability for teachers is crucial since teacher effectiveness is the number one variable for student achievement, according to Florida Times Union (2012) “isolating and measuring teacher performance is subject to all kinds of variables” (p. 1). The effects of this type of system could cause additional stress to teachers and could also cause a risk of losing quality teachers because of invalid data used on the evaluations

(Florida Times Union, 2012; Sawchuk, 2014). Moreover, teachers are worried about student achievement being tied to their evaluations since there are factors they cannot control, like how home life affects academic achievement. Also, union leaders contend that student discipline, attendance, and student population stabilization are other indicators of student performance that need to be addressed (Florida Times Union, 2012). Further to this point, Weingarten (2010) questions how teachers should be accurately determined as “quality” when teaching is a complex process of nurturing individual gifts and knowledge of content pedagogy. He believes that value-added models are not dependable and cannot be a precise measure to judge teacher’s performance.

According to Long (2011) effective teachers are vital to improving schools, however, confusing incentive, rewards, and effectiveness is a classic mistake due to many teachers who work for non-incentive rewards or job satisfaction. In other words, compensation leads to low-producing employees and undermines team work and long term goals. Marshall (2013) states “standardized test scores are meant to measure the learning of groups of students, not the productivity of teachers over a school year” (p. 39). Therefore, a value-added system is an inaccurate method to judge teacher quality. In addition, tying student performance to teacher evaluations could lead teachers to implementing even more low-level test preparation.

Numerous research studies have analyzed the effectiveness of teacher evaluations. A study by Newton, Darling-Hammond, Haertel and Thomas (2010) investigated the relationship among teaching variables and pupil learning within a value-added system. They analyzed 250 teachers who taught 3,500 students in San Francisco focusing on mathematics and English language arts teachers. They concluded that educators who

teach less advantaged students typically receive lower effectiveness than the same teacher teaching more advantaged students. This study further confirmed how value-added systems are inaccurate in determining teacher effectiveness.

In addition, within the current evaluation system, most teachers receive high marks making the system ineffective to measure who is most effective versus least effective in the classroom. Diana Ravitch (2010) argues that teachers who receive good evaluations can do poorly when shifted to a classroom where they are not as prepared (as cited in Long, 2011). Therefore, measuring teacher effectiveness with one factor (test scores) is ineffectual. Multiple indicators of effective practice and teacher growth should be additional factors that are included in rating teacher effectiveness. Further to the point, the evaluation system also needs to include teacher input and have multiple sources evaluating (Long, 2011).

Kimball and Milanowski (2009) conducted quantitative and qualitative research in order to add to the body of research regarding teacher evaluations and student achievement. In prior research Kimball, White, Milanowski and Borman (2004) found that there are moderate correlations between evaluations and student outcomes (as cited in Kimball and Milanowski, 2009). These findings support research by Jacob and Lefgren (2006) which determined that principals' judgments correlated with student achievement (as cited by Kimball and Milanowski, 2009). However, due to considerable variations in strength of the evaluation rating and student achievement relationships across grades and subjects, the researchers further sought out to determine other factors such as the validity of the evaluations.

An additional purpose of this study was to determine what the recommendations should be for improving teacher evaluation practices. Due to frameworks such as Danielson, which use standards and four domains of teacher practices to evaluate teacher performance and effectiveness being linked to compensation systems, the researchers believe this area needs careful examination. Kimball and Milanowki (2009) concluded that motivation of evaluators affects the degree of leniency since they may want to maintain a good relationship with the teacher. Therefore an ineffective teacher may yield effective ratings. With analysis of student achievement compared with teacher ratings, the study also concluded that evaluators ratings do not consistently relate to student achievement and it will take more than specific rubrics and basic training of evaluators in the process to achieve this strong relationship. The potential for inconsistency among evaluators was present adding to the idea that evaluation results depend on who is evaluating, and training evaluators is critical.

To further support these findings, Marshall (2013) states that “the current system of teacher evaluation is broken” (p. 21). In an anonymous vote conducted on Long Island, New York with a diverse group of teachers, it was found that teacher evaluations were ranked as having the littlest influence for improving student learning and instruction. Evaluations are not helping teachers determine what areas they need improvement. Teachers are being observed a small fraction of time (only .1% of the school year). In addition, announced evaluations lead teachers to change the way they may teach on normal days. Another downside about evaluations is that teachers are evaluated on one lesson, instead of unit plans or strings of lessons that would better show coherence and alignment to standards. In addition, with principals being required to write narrative



write-ups, this process is time-consuming, limiting time they are in the classrooms, and do little to nothing to improve teacher instruction. Danielson (2009) describes this process as a passive activity, and believes adults get nothing out of this process because they are not active and reflective participants (as cited in Marshall, 2013). Lastly, student learning is not a factor in the process.

In summary, linking high-stakes testing outcomes to teacher evaluations is an inadequate way to measure teacher performance (Long, 2011). As a result of a value-added system, teachers may feel additional pressure to focus solely on test preparation. Furthermore, additional research found that motivations on part of the evaluator and differing contexts could yield varying results on evaluations and therefore, linking scores to evaluations should be done with caution (Kimball & Milanowski, 2009). These differing contexts may include the dynamics and motivations of the students within the classroom where the evaluation is taking place or the relationship between the teacher and the evaluator. These variables can affect the outcome of an evaluation. Furthermore, high-stakes test scores has been found to not be a valid measure for teacher performance which further supports the theory that testing outcomes should not be used as a basis to evaluate teachers and/or schools, and additionally should not be used as a focus for decisions within a classroom or school. In addition, the current evaluation system does not allow principals and teachers to deeply discuss teaching and learning and is not linked to improving instruction.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Mediating the Conflict**

#### **Benefits of Accountability**

Despite the numerous disadvantages of accountability systems, there is research that is supportive. Accountability systems provide for equal access to knowledge and require necessary documentation of achieved goals (Glickman, 1998). While the accountability policies like NCLB may be assumed to undermine teachers' sense of community, it has been found to actually promote more progressive forms of teaching. In fact, as accountability measures get stronger, teachers do not divide, but rather organize and cooperate for their rights. As found in research by Cuban (2009) and Rowan (1990), accountability policies may lead to productive and positive actions by teachers (as cited in Weathers, 2011).

While research studies by many experts (Cooper, 1988, Rosenholtz, 1991, Sarason 1990, Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985, Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003, Smith, 1991) proclaim that external policies will limit teacher community, Weathers (2011) discovered an opposite relationship. In order to understand and implement standards, teachers are led to cooperate more and are likely to develop a shared set of values and core mission. As a result of accountability, teachers take part in joint learning and mentoring as well as active collaboration leading to improved instruction.

In his 2011 study, Weathers examined the importance of schools fostering a professional community of teachers with shared values and mutual accountability in order to improve student achievement. Basing the study on previous research correlating

teachers' community with student achievement, Weathers wanted to determine the effect of principal leadership and policies on teachers' sense of community.

Surveys across an extensive amount of public, private and charter schools, focused primarily on urban K-5 schools. Several interesting findings were found in this study. First, it was found that principal leadership has the strongest influence over teachers' sense of community. Second, when principals recognize the effort of teachers and communicate expectations, the community among teachers builds. Third, under demands, teachers increase their sense of connectedness. Therefore, state initiated bureaucratic accountability has a positive effect on teachers' collaborative efforts and also has influenced more focused professional development. Further to the point, teachers may share specific strategies or frameworks for instruction in order to increase student achievement.

Other studies have concluded that there are many benefits to accountability as well. Griffith, Koeppen, Timion (2002) conducted a study on pre-service, cooperating teachers and teacher educators, to examine educators' views regarding accountability. Using a questionnaire and open-ended questions, the researchers gathered many negative responses regarding accountability and testing. However, when educators were prompted about the benefits of accountability, several educators mentioned that accountability can force better record-keeping and collection of reliable information. In addition, some educators mentioned that accountability can support personal reflection of practices and help to keep a professional focus. Furthermore, other responses from the survey indicated that the tests demonstrate that the educators are teaching what they are required to teach, and provide evidence they are doing their job. Lastly, the study found that additional

benefits of accountability include clear expectations of the educators as well as the educators being made more aware of areas that need improvement.

According to Cunningham, Zibulsky, Stanovich & Stanovich (2009), teacher quality is a central issue for researchers and policymakers. In their study of 121 first grade teachers, they analyzed how teachers match their instructional practices to research-based practices from recent policy and initiatives (National Reading Panel, 2001; Reading First; U.S. Department of Education's Reading Excellence Program and Act). In addition, the researchers gathered information about the teachers' beliefs and knowledge about reading development. The study found that many teachers possess inadequate knowledge about reading development and base their instruction on their own beliefs. Additionally, the study found that many teachers reject a balanced approach to instruction and rather favor a whole language approach, which does not reflect what current policy supports.

From this research study, Cunningham et. al. (2009) argue that teacher education programs need to spend more time on disciplinary knowledge essential for teaching reading. In addition, the research supports the notion of large-scale professional development and structured core reading programs. As such, the researchers support top-down pressure in order to make fundamental and necessary changes in teacher practice.

To further support the accountability movement, Perry (2000) asserts that teachers can place an additional obstacle in front of the students by having a negative attitude about standardized tests and takes an accepting stance to the testing paradigm. According to Perry, if teachers have negative attitudes about testing, these attitudes may be adopted by the students. Perry fundamentally believes that tests ensure all teachers are high

quality, and that students should be taught how to successfully achieve on high-stakes tests. In addition, Perry believes that the disaggregation of data from the test results is critical information for improving the effectiveness in the classroom since it unveils which groups of students require more attention. Furthermore, Perry believes test-taking strategies should not be taught in isolation as many currently teachers practice; but rather, test-taking strategies should be integrated into instruction by teaching required content and assessing learning using the format of district and national tests. Perry is of the position that this linking of instruction prepares students for high-stakes tests, and should not be negatively viewed as just “teaching to the test”.

Even further, Perry (2000) believes that although alternative assessment has gained momentum in reading education, testing will remain the same and we owe it to our students to provide them with the best instruction about how to be successful on tests. Some examples of instruction that Perry believes is necessary include teaching students about test formats, allowing time to practice, and familiarizing them with test vocabulary. He also suggests providing workshops for test-taking, motivational posters and pep rallies to raise students’ confidence about taking tests. Similarly, Honig (2004) agrees that outside federal pressure provides schools with a language and response with activities to bind them together in an effort to improve student achievement. In addition, it provides opportunity for schools to thrive due to additional resources available to the school.

### **Understanding Standards**

As standards become the guide in most classrooms, it is crucial for educators to understand how standards impact instruction. Apple (1998) explains that while some educational standards are broad goals that serve to guide learning, others are narrow,

reductive, and ultimately prescriptive. Accountability standards are often decontextualized and can present a barrier to innovative and wise practices (as cited in Quinn and Ethridge, 2006). While the CCSS initiative could be interpreted as a way for the government to control the curriculum in schools, it can also be construed as a flexible framework for teachers. Fontichiaro (2011) states that “the Common Core Standards discuss the ‘what’ of curriculum: what students should know and be able to do, but it does not mandate the how or by whom” (p. 1). This means the CCSS encourages educators to collaborate together in order to decide on strategies that will help individual students reach the same goal.

To clarify this, Gorlewski (2013) explains the difference between standards and standardization and explains what is productive and unproductive in teaching and learning. Standards are meaningful expectations and allows for flexibility in interpretation by teachers and administrators. In contrast, standardization implies a one-size-fits-all model. Within the CCSS movement, standards can offer possibilities that are aspirational and interdisciplinary. Teachers are able to create meaningful activities around standards. Standardization, on the other hand, implies using common instruments for instruction and seeks conformity and narrowing curriculum to specific tasks, which does not promote excellence. Standardization occurs when specific criteria to be taught is determined usually by scripted basal programs that align with standardized tests.

Therefore, one implication from the differences between standards and standardization is that as standards become more specific, they are less valuable. While high standards are necessary and an important piece of the education system, when standardized measures are used to evaluate a school, lower expectations are being put on

the students. That is, when we focus on specific terms and content based on what a test asks, we are narrowing the curriculum. Thus, standardized measures should not be the primary focus for determining school needs. Rather, teachers and students need to think outside the box, and be creative and innovative with standards (Gorlewski, 2013).

Therefore, standards do not promote “one size fits all.”

Standardized high-stakes tests and curricula also affect teachers and other educators. That is, in schools subjected to high-stakes tests, teachers are de-professionalized and demoralized. In such settings, reading and writing are disempowering and deadening, not liberating or transformative. For example, students are taking part in paper-based activities focused on skill, drill and practice while not allowing students as a means to understand the world around them. This does not create an environment with trust and open communication or embraces different learning styles and ways of learning, which is essential in a classroom. That being the case, standards should be explored collaboratively by teachers in a school community in order to differentiate by student need. Furthermore, teachers need to be aware as to what extent the testing culture has taken over his or her classroom (Gorlewski, 2013).

To add to this, Davis (2009) compares teachers who create real change in the classroom with entrepreneurs. A business person organizes a business venture. Teachers need to be held accountable to standards while being able to choose the tools necessary to do so. In addition, they should customize lessons shaping students to national standards. Similar to business people, teachers should be given autonomy. That is, teachers should have flexibility to build a learning structure and teach specific students lessons and skills based on need.

To further support this concept, Au (2010) advocates for Standards-Based Change (SBC) in schools where teachers have time to work collaboratively in order to build a staircase curriculum and use standards as a guide. Teachers are given the responsibility to make the needs of the school fit within the standards. As a result of SBC, teachers would take ownership and commit to the implementation of appropriate instructional activities in the classroom. More importantly, this would help teachers perceive the standards as more than just a top-down mandate.

SBC means problem-solving and being involved in an on-going process. By studying and discussing with colleagues, teachers can gain a deeper understanding of standards and how it relates to practice. For example, the standard of summarization can be interpreted in order to decide on a common understanding at a particular grade-level then align expectations of instruction and resources with all grade-levels. In other words, all grade levels would agree on common instructional frameworks and build upon skills from the previous years to make them more complex. In addition, materials, books and resources are decided upon to utilize for each standard. Furthermore, knowledge on the part of educators of literacy acquisition is imperative, since other factors for literacy success is not written in the standards. These include motivating students and using multicultural literature. Also, student work samples with rubrics need to be created using both teacher terminology and student terminology. Thus, in SBC, standards are interpreted in light of teacher's knowledge about their students and also knowledge about literacy instruction (Au, 2010).



## **Addressing the Issue of Teacher Evaluations**

As standards change, so do teacher evaluations. Since the *Nation At Risk* (1983) report published that teacher evaluation was a school reform strategy, the two evaluations that are now most widely used are Charlotte Danielson's *Framework for Teaching* and Robert Marzano's *Causal Teacher Evaluation Model*. In both evaluation instruments, teaching is divided up into domains and elements to attempt to define teaching in clear and succinct ways. Thus, evaluations now focus on professional development and an increased awareness of the complexity of teaching (Hazi, 2014). Within these systems the two main issues discussed by educators and researchers is the long lists of domains for teachers to meet, the value-added system, and the question of whether evaluations improve teacher performance. With that being said Schmoker (2012) supports the inclusion of a value-added system: "good teacher evaluation is a critical force for improvement. I'd even like to see carefully piloted inclusion of assessment scores in evaluations, but only if the assessments truly represent legitimate, curriculum-based knowledge and skills for each respective course" (p. 1).

Furthermore, Peter Smagorinsky suggests that teacher evaluations were once friendly and supportive, but now are long lists of domains to meet within one lesson. Schmoker (2012) also argues that teachers are challenged to design lessons that include up to 116 items of criteria. Due to this, Smagorinsky proposes for new teacher evaluations called "laboratory classrooms", where teachers observe one another in order to understand or question one domain of teaching then have a debriefing session afterwards. This allows for professional development and also eliminates pressure to meet a myriad of practices within one lesson (as cited in Rush & Scheff, 2014). Also,

Schmoker (2012) acknowledges that Marzano and other experts insist there should be routine components in every lesson, but Schmoker believes that less is more.

In addition, Carol Caref of the Chicago Teachers Union is also of the belief that teachers should have the opportunity to work with the evaluation framework (as cited by Ahmed-Ullah, 2011). Megan (2012) reports on Connecticut Teacher Union leaders who believed that teachers and evaluators should be able to set one or two goals for the teachers to focus on. They sought out to incorporate individual goals for teachers with multiple assessments used to link student achievement to teacher performance and a more comprehensive evaluation with more observations, leading to more in-depth feedback and dialogue (Ahmed-Ullah, 2011). In 2012, Connecticut teacher union leaders argued that the portion of the evaluation that would include student performance should include alternative demonstrations of performance such as portfolios, projects, and the like. (Megan, 2012).

Others also know that developing an effective evaluation system is a challenge. Traditionally, compensation has been linked to credentials of teachers. However, some researchers believe that a value-added system that rewards teachers for performance would be a better system. For example, Rockoff's (2004) research cites studies (Murnane, 1975; Armor et al., 1976) which conclude teacher quality is highly correlated with student test scores, and therefore evaluations are important to determine which teachers are effective. Research has determined that students taught by high value-added teachers are more likely to have desirable long-term outcomes and greater educational attainment. Nonetheless, Rockoff (2004) states, "variation in teacher quality is driven by characteristics that are difficult or impossible to measure" (p. 247). In her

empirical study which links student achievement to teacher effectiveness, she concluded that there are many observable teacher characteristics not related to teacher quality and she believes test scores should not be the only indicator of student achievement.

To further demonstrate this point, Rockoff and Speroni (2011) studied subjective and objective evaluations of teacher effectiveness in New York City in order to determine if there was a match between teacher evaluations from mentors and from the first year in a Teach Fellows Program to student achievement on high-stakes tests. They analyzed tested subjects in grades four to eight from 2004-2007. This study is relevant since it would demonstrate whether subjective evaluations of teachers from a mentor have a correlation with student test scores. Such a correlation would mean that quality instruction increases test scores, without teachers necessarily “teaching to the test”. However, a teacher may be rated highly effective due to a group of students that is highly motivated and well-behaved producing more student outcomes. The research found evidence that teachers who receive higher subjective evaluations of teaching ability also produce greater gains in achievement. The researchers also point out that subjective evaluations present significant and meaningful information of a teacher’s success that may not be captured by standardized tests. Considering that there are numerous factors leading to certain high-stakes outcomes, subjective evaluations offer the most potential for obtaining an adequate picture of teacher performance

In addition, Harris and Sass (2014) assert that “value added is a noisy measure of a teachers’ impact on current student achievement and may not capture other valuable contributions a teacher makes to a student’s long run success” (p. 199). More specifically, the researchers believe that non-cognitive skills like motivation and interpersonal skills

need to be incorporated into evaluations, supporting subjective evaluations as the most effective evaluation practice. Also, students may be making gains in many areas of literacy that would not be measured on a standardized test.

Moreover, Marshall (2013) mediates the issue of new teacher evaluation systems by addressing the problems that keep the system from being ineffective. She acknowledges the fact that although teachers want affirmation about their instruction and most teachers want to be left alone in fear they will be contested or have their feelings hurt. However, she believes that the system of evaluation that entails one lesson per year is not effective and is a disservice to students if there is no guidance for improvement on the part of the teacher.

As a principal, Marshall transformed her evaluation at her school by conducting rounds of mini-observations and was able to visit four to five teachers a day. She noted that teachers were at first apprehensive to her observing them, but was able to provide more helpful feedback with “teaching points.” She offered praise, reinforcement, suggestions and criticism. With no external pressure to conduct these mini-observations, Marshall stated that the only thing that motivated her to keep it up was that it raised teacher morale, improved relationships within the school and helped student learning. This led to richer conversations about teaching and what was actually happening in the classroom.

This progress with observations Marshall presents provides some perspective about the current evaluations systems since they will be geared more toward improving teacher’s instruction. As professionals and advocates for our students, educators should want to improve their practice and welcome administrative feedback. All studies

discussed imply there needs to be more constructive feedback and dialogue between teachers and administration regarding teacher evaluations.

### **External Mandates and School Reform**

Guthrie's (1988) theory of motivation and engagement suggests that when given the choice and the time for peer collaboration, students will be more apt to take ownership over their learning. This same concept can be applied to teachers working to negotiate curriculum, instruction and assessment as it relates to federal mandates on schools (as cited in Coburn, 2006). The combination of both top-down and bottom-up approaches are necessary to create change within a school, in an environment where teachers are able to construct their own interpretations of policies (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000; Glickman, 1998). Thus, in order for there to be an increase in student achievement, there needs to be a strong initiative on part of teachers to ensure that standards and other federal mandates are interpreted and agreed upon.

Furthermore, teachers must acknowledge that the accountability movement is flawed but should attempt to address it in a constructive fashion. As such, accountability could be productive when reform is systematic and planned within the school (bottom-up decision-making). Change occurs when values and contextual variables within a school are addressed, such as instruction that works best for specific groups of kids. Also, staff development should be the focus with the development of assessment tools to drive instruction. While data, rewards and incentives in educational policy are inevitable and necessary, they are not sufficient. Objectives and outcomes are still needed but teachers need to be able to define his or her contributions to meeting them in palpable ways (Hansen, 1993).

Moreover, an effective management system is also a critical piece for change to occur. Tacheny (1999) asserts that schools considered leaders in accountability possess one common thread; they have strong management systems that are open to teacher input and engage teachers in passion to fuel change. Instead of blame on parents, administration, policy-makers or teachers and punishment on school systems, cooperation and problem-solving are essential.

Additionally, accountability is a value which must be cultivated with intention throughout an organization. While society focuses so much on the accountability systems, the concerns that matter most tend to be easily forgotten. That said, accountability must be developed through relationships to guide daily practice in a school. In order to create real change in schools, the focus needs to move from scores that are abstract to the teacher's vision and passion. Rather than threats and fear, teachers need autonomy and to be trusted so that they are engaged in embracing change together (Tacheny, 1999).

In order to demonstrate these findings, Fisher and Frey (2007) discuss how Rosa Parks Community School in San Diego with a large percentage of English Language Learners (ELL), was able to raise achievement without teaching to the test or using a prescriptive program. Their Academic Progress Index (API) score grew 291 points between 1999 and 2005. The challenge was to assure that all teachers in the school had the knowledge, skills and followed the same agreed-upon framework for the literacy block. The school focused their professional development using learning communities (self-studies). The teachers designed and implemented their own professional development. The teachers decided on their own topic from the framework then formed

groups accordingly. They chose books for studies and decided on meeting times in order to foster an on-going professional development community. This paradigm is contrary to formal professional development that is referred to as “sea-gull consulting” where a literacy professional comes, drops something off and leaves. A governance committee was formed and the team clarified their beliefs about literacy. It was decided that learning is social and conversations are critical for learning.

Also, Fisher and Frey (2007) acknowledge Pearson & Gallagher (1983) describing how reading, writing and speaking need to be integrated and learners need a gradual release of responsibility. Therefore, the school decided to use a reader and writers’ workshop where students would be in flexible and heterogeneous groups. Small, needs-based groups were used for modeling/direct instruction and for time to practice important reading skills. Independent work during guided reading time needed to be social and not busy work since the students were spending too much time on worksheets.

Specific instructional approaches that were used included reciprocal teaching, literature circles, sustained silent reading, and journal writing. If students were being taught in a whole group, the school decided on specific strategies like shared reading, read-alouds (with think alouds), Language Experience Approach, interactive writing and write-alouds to provide direct instruction. The school utilized the standards as a place to begin to decide where students should be at each level. Additionally, the teachers collectively decided to use Lapp, Flood & Goss’s (2000) Center Activity Rotation System.

Across the grade levels, common language was used and there was an increase in instructional time since teachers had a better grasp about what they should be doing

during the literacy block. This example has many implications for schools that are seeking changes and increased achievement of all students. Instead of scripted programs, quality literacy instruction should be the focus. It entails a collective effort on part of all educators in a community with many meetings, disagreements and refining practices. An important factor in the success of the school is that teachers were trusted as professionals by the principal and not given a “one-size fits all” program.

Other researchers of whole school reform, such as Honig (2004) describes how schools manage multiple external demands and craft coherence. Honig defines coherence as a dynamic process where school personnel craft and negotiate between external demands and the school’s needs and goals. He believes this is a more productive use of external demands, creating a buffer between policy and practice. It also provides opportunity for students to learn and improve. Additionally, Honig claims that coherence depends on how implementers make sense of policy and to what extent outside mandates fit a particular school’s culture, interests and ongoing operations. When reviewing literature on policy implementation, Honig (2004) determined creative collective decision-making and trust among staff as important conditions. Most importantly, administration needs to reframe authority into a transfer of responsibility. Teachers need to build professional communities that have consensus with all school employees, including principals and central office officials. Coherence is a social construction produced by teachers, administration, teachers and curriculum. Inside-out coherence or bottom-up coherence mean that school leaders set their own goals and improvement strategies to fit local circumstances. For example, Title I programs promote this set of activities by determining the means of delivering instruction to students. However,



school-level decisions may lack the capacity to make change due to conflict with parties such as unions and parents.

Honig (2004) also believes that external demands are not problems to be solved, but rather ongoing challenges to be managed. External pressure is also an opportunity for schools to increase necessary resources and activities. Bridging strategies to manage external demands include communicating with policymakers and setting goals to align schools goals and mission to external demands. Schools must also have buffering strategies, such as ignoring negative feedback or adopting a common language but not specific activities. For example, teachers may decide to adjust the framework of their literacy block in order to allow for mini-lessons of modeled strategies and allocate time for students to practice specific skills and strategies in authentic social situations; as opposed to specific instructional strategies. For this reason, information needs to be managed by teachers collectively where goals and strategies are written in order to make decisions that reflect shared values.

Likewise, Mintrop (2012) further describes the concept of coherence using a case study of a school which successfully meets all requirements of state mandates, but preserves the shared values of the school staff. Before discussing the details of the study, some background information is necessary. In response to accountability systems, schools either resist (which is most uncommon), align, or cohere. When schools align, they develop systems focused on data within the school to raise scores, and teach content that is primarily tested with standards-based materials. Alignment is strategic and does not take into account any moral concerns within the school. On the other hand, coherence means that the school comes together to develop common goals and a shared sense of

responsibility. Bridging the demands of accountability with professional values and students' needs can be challenging however. This challenge is due to the push for curricular alignment, prescriptive programs, and pacing guides to ensure that there is baseline proficiency for all students. Simultaneously, students' needs are becoming more diverse. As such, the case study addresses the contradiction between the practices of the system and the values of teachers about teaching and learning.

In this case study, Mintrop (2012) explores the concept of integrity which he believes to be at the heart of the coherence pattern in response to accountability. Mintrop defines integrity as developing a sense of right or wrong, honesty, sticking to one's principles, courage in the face of challenges, and wholeness in the face of conflict. According to Bryk and Schneider (n.d), integrity is the consistency between word and deed around core educational values (as cited in Mintrop, 2012). Integrity cannot exist where there is complete harmony. In any case, teachers must stay true to their principles even when not rewarded by the environment, which involves risk for the teachers.

Furthermore, the concept of integrity supports the notion of balance within a rigid system since teachers are not being blindly obedient to top-down pressure. External guidance is taken seriously in light of one's own commitments. By cohering, teachers actively forge congruence between external demands and internal programs. Child-centered concerns are kept in educators' conversations. Thus, elements of resistance could exist, but within acceptable limitations; and, teachers retain their own values and beliefs about teaching and learning (Mintrop, 2012).

In his empirical study of nine urban schools in 2004-2005, Mintrop (2012) used quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to find out how the schools

respond to accountability pressure. From the surveys, interviews and classroom observations that were conducted, it was found that two out of nine schools were able to establish coherence to external pressure. These two schools that practiced coherence had higher API scores as well as responses indicating that teacher values and students' needs are important factors in planning. Furthermore, in these two schools, the teachers take external pressure seriously, and also create common goals and leave room for debate. Not surprisingly, teacher satisfaction ratings were also highest in these schools.

In observations and interviews within one of the high integrity schools, it was found that the principal guided teachers in focusing on quality instruction. In addition, raising test scores was seen as a moral obligation for the students within the school. However, it was not seen as an end in itself. The school de-departmentalized content areas into literacy programs to better address the needs of the students. In addition, a shared faculty commitment was evident, as all teachers were committed to responding to student needs. Most importantly, leadership was associated with a more strongly developed pattern of integrity across the nine schools. In this school, the principal stressed to teachers that the system would take care of itself if they just focused on good instruction. Despite her personal views, the principal did not negatively portray high-stakes testing, and maintained to the teachers that the system provided helpful goals and guidance. That said, external accountability was not disregarded, but school's values were put first. In addition, the principal welcomed the teachers' personal opinions and created an open learning community. Instructional strategies were regularly discussed by teachers, yet the teachers were given space to be flexible based on student needs.

Across the nine schools, the schools that fared better in the accountability system tended to be the schools that were also able to effectively bridge accountability obligations, teachers' goals and values, and their perceptions of student needs with a stronger sense of integrity. Even further, instead of fragmenting content and settling on triage and exclusion of content, there was inner strength around values around these schools (Mintrop, 2012).

Additional research regarding policy supports the concept that local actors are also policymakers. Accordingly, teachers must actively construct their understanding of policy, and view their understanding of policy through the lens of their own beliefs and practices in order to enact policy in their own school. In another policy study, Coburn (2006) conducted a yearlong study of one school's response to the California Reading Initiative. The study explored how teachers and administration made sense of new policy, and created a framework for the school and influencing beliefs and practices. As the school developed a plan on how to make improvements in reading, there were ongoing discussions and framing of the problem, which helped shape the course of action to be taken. Even though policy is not easily implemented without addressing specific issues within a school and providing solutions, this practice implies that there is room for flexibility and negotiation among educators when dealing with educational policy.

By drawing on frame analysis theoretical work by Goffman (1974), Coburn (2006) observed how one school framed the issues and then made sense of the policy. Diagnostic and Prognostic framing took place which means members of the community attributed blame and provided solutions. When a problem is framed, it is attempted to be aligned with the interests and beliefs of the group then in order to mobilize, it must have

resonance or create a connection to motivate members to act. Therefore, the problem must be agreed upon by the group of educators.

Coburn (2006) argues that framing the problem is a crucial step in order to motivate and coordinate effort within school. Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller (1989) state that sense-making theory is when people select information from the environment, make meaning of the information and then act on the interpretations building routines over time. In addition, school leaders influence teacher sense-making focusing teachers' attention on certain aspects of policy and providing frameworks for teachers to adopt or reject. Teachers must construct responses to policy that align in order to move forward as a school.

Furthermore, the educators within the school both framed and reframed the problems of reading comprehension and standardized testing. While attempting to develop grade-level indicators in reading instruction aligned with standards, the school had to identify what the issue with reading comprehension was. Within the process, the teachers blamed family deficits (limited vocabulary), class sizes, student placement, and particular grade levels. For instance, the lower-grades believed it was an upper-grade issue because they did not conduct enough reading groups. However, upper-grade teachers blamed the lack of phonics skills taught in the lower grades. The point being, the way the problem was framed influenced the steps taken and since the different members of the school community could not agree, it became a challenge for the school to take action (2006).

Coburn (2006) observed that the principal and her authority had great influence in this interactive process. For example, when the principal brought focus to one area of

reading comprehension (metacognitive strategies and identifying evidence), it created resonance among the majority of the members of the school community. While many grade-level meetings addressed the issues within their conversations, other grade-levels did not take responsibility and continued to blame others. Due to this, the principal had to reframe the problem as a “whole-school” issue as opposed to just an upper-grade issue. This brought about the solution of identifying gaps between grade-levels and aligning the curriculum. They wanted to create a framework that would call for greater consistency in instructional approaches but left room for flexibility with differing teaching styles.

Furthermore, the issue of standardized testing brought about more discourse in the school community since many did not believe it was a valid measure of student achievement. The principal attempted to convince the members of the school community that standardized testing was an appropriate measure of achievement, but the school could not move forward with a plan until they agreed on a mutual response. While the principal framed the issue as a way to provide equal opportunities for all students to help them be better prepared to get into college, teachers provided counter-frames drawing on social-justice themes. Some teachers argued that raising test scores does not mean that the students are getting an education that will help better them in life. In response, the principal framed the issue as linking testing to standards-based reform, asserting that the standards will be sufficient for doing well on the tests. In response, many teachers adopted this idea and accepted that tests were a part of life. In order for one frame to gain resonance, evidence was required in order to prove to the teachers it was a legitimate claim. For example, specific student cases regarding strategies were required by teachers and also evidence was requested to prove that standards matched the tests.

Research by Goodlad (1984) suggests that there are widespread norms of teacher autonomy over classroom practices. This means that teachers need to feel as if their beliefs and values are represented within the school approach to reform. Each teacher and their individual beliefs and values play an important role within a school structure in contributing to a school plan for instructional changes. This study acknowledges how shared understandings of problems and coordinated effort are crucial for change to happen within a school (as cited in Coburn, 2006).

To further support these findings, Johnston and Hedemann (1994) concur that collaboration is a positive response to policy. Collaboration moves beyond just talking and sharing to working together in specific ways with a common goal in mind (Johnson & Hedemann, 1994). For example, effective instructional strategies should be shared within a school community in order to expand on teachers' body of pedagogical knowledge about literacy and learning and better their practices. Problems of teaching and schooling cannot be dealt with alone and there are benefits, such as higher teacher morale and professional growth.

Based on research by Conley et. al. (1988), many teaching assignments, time constraints and school lay outs/floor plans contribute to the solitary nature of teaching (as cited by Johnston & Hedemann, 1994). Teachers find themselves alone in their classroom for majority of the school day, isolated from other colleagues without substantial time to collaborate. Indeed, teachers must see their roles as more than just instruction in their own private classroom. In a study of school-level curriculum decision-making, it was found that many teachers' decisions were heavily controlled and guided by the beliefs of administration, specifying priorities and resources. Thus, there needs to be changes in

power relationships within schools where decisions can be derived by all teachers. Teachers' roles should be re-conceptualized to involve school level decisions and become important components of their work. That said, in order to solve issues such as time constraints and isolation, teachers should be able to voice concerns and propose plans for change to administration for consideration.

Other research confirms how teachers lack voice in school-wide concerns. Ingersoll (1994) researched school control in secondary schools and found that teacher autonomy includes order and educational processes, exercising a wide range of latitude over curriculum; however, teachers lacked control over larger policies in the school that influenced the curriculum. These policies include standardized curricula, tracking, testing, evaluation procedures, and disciplinary codes. He believes that teachers need input into more than just instructional activities and curricular innovation, but also into other issues like discipline, budgets and hiring. The reason being that these areas of concern have effects on the way students are learning. He argues that teachers can improve when they better understand how their work as a teacher is organized and controlled (as cited in Plaut & Sharkey, 2003).

Ryan (2005) explains how educational accountability is a right of citizens however there is a lack of equal discussion or shared governance between stakeholders and citizens regarding educational outcomes. He describes how accountability needs to be built with the local school and district and not just be one-way (schools accountable to government). This means schools need to become proactive and not reactive to federal mandates and define what effective and quality instruction is within their context. Schools must create internal evaluation or self-evaluation frameworks to self-monitor



programs within the school. The principles involved are inclusion (stakeholders, citizens, parents, students, teachers), dialogue, and liberation. Test scores can be seen as a signal rather than a remedy therefore the issues addressed should not entail low test scores. All parties involved should look at curriculum, instruction and school issues like resources, and expectations of students. Issues can be listed then addressed with stakeholders to hold them accountable as well. Value inquiry was solicited to the stakeholders using questionnaires to understand their knowledge and values.

As an example, Ryan (2005) uses a vignette about Plains Township High School which experienced low test scores and educational achievement gaps in a diverse population. In response, the school created a school improvement committee (SIC) whom identified issues like test scores not providing enough information and how to broadly represent student achievement. The members took part in a self-reflective cycle of activity by planning change, enacting change and observing the consequences. Teachers used dialogue to clarify issues within the group if there was differing perspectives with the goal of developing steps for improvement or solutions to agreed-upon issues. The teachers completed action research and could increase student achievement since they developed evidence of student learning within the context of their classroom. Also, teachers are able to better their teaching practice in specific areas by paying close attention to students and learning then sharing their findings with colleagues.

Similarly, McMary (1997) reports on a four year plan to improve schools in a school district within North Carolina by developing a locally-owned accountability system. The plan is based in part on the belief of Linda Darling-Hammond (1993), which is that accountability will fail unless there is an inner commitment and a self-directed

sense of responsibility in response to external observers and evaluators. Teachers must be honest and committed to doing their best while evaluating both their own progress and student progress.

According to McMary (1997), accountability includes how a school evaluates, supports staff, and relates to students and parents. Based on the plan, the district implemented a series of changes. For example, the district developed entrance requirements to promote students to the next level of schooling. This was done in district-wide committees. Furthermore, the district developed goals for students that emphasized problem-solving and self-directed learning. Another key component of the changes was community involvement and incorporating “real-life” problems into school work. Students had to create community service projects and increase their community involvement. Parent involvement was also proposed in order to hold students more accountable. Thus, the district monitored the number of parent conferences and increased workshops. Furthermore, professional development became a focus with an emphasis on better use of assessment to increase student achievement. Teachers increased their level of collegiality and decision-making to sustain a long-term commitment to improvement. Quality assignments were proposed that were authentic and allowed for student choice. More specifically, students were involved in decision-making and given surveys to convey their thoughts about quality projects and services within the school.

While these efforts by the school increased the outcomes on the open-ended portions of state tests in grades three through eight, the multiple-choice tests showed no change. The school agreed that the tests could not determine how well they were preparing students to be successful in the twenty-first century. In order to address this, the

school decided that teachers needed better training in reading and writing strategies. As a result, teachers became engaged in action research to collect data that informs practice. The goal was for teacher to make an effort at implementing research-based strategies and collect data that would enable them to establish cultural norms. This culture of inquiry helped reduce the pressure to “teach to the test” and helped keep an ongoing dialogue about what really matters.

McMary (1997) maintains that even though focusing on improving practice results in long-term improvement, attention must also be given to preparing students for tests for short-term survival. However, she cautions that addressing this issue does not mean a school district should become solely preoccupied with improving test scores. In sum, this report about one school district’s plan to transform education in their school demonstrates how process is more important than a bottom-line on state assessments and quality must come before profits.

Similar to McMary’s views, Lingenfelter (2003) also believes that not one actor can be entirely responsible for results. The objective of accountability systems stimulates effective and innovative approaches on the part of each school system, with the primary goal of improved performance by the students. Both extrinsic and intrinsic incentives are necessary to achieve higher performance. Not only are strategies for standards important, but curricular improvement and teacher development of strategies must have the same capacity. As Jerold and Fedor (2008) state, there is no such thing as organizational change but many individuals who collectively change behaviors (as cited in Davis, 2009). Effective promoters of change incorporate the input of teachers, specialists, and curriculum directors on staff in the planning process for schools and all parties must be

on board. In addition, teachers need to be empowered while also not expected to shoulder the demands alone (Davis, 2009).

Last, educator, reformer and historian Larry Cuban believes that school reform efforts need constituencies to grow around them in order to be sustainable. For example, along with policymakers, parents and educators need to support an effort as well. Change that does not endure is usually developed solely by policymakers without real knowledge about classrooms. Thus, many proposals end up colliding with the reality of the classroom and as a result produce counter-movements where schools must adjust again. Furthermore, he states that schools continually adapt to external pressure maintaining old practices as they invent new ones. This implies that educators in schools must continue to deal with the differing pressures from government while still maintaining their deep-rooted values and beliefs about the purpose of school (O'Neil, 2000).

### **External Mandates and Literacy Practices**

Teachers face a challenging task when trying to balance students' needs with reform mandates. Some educators respond to mandates without considering their own personal beliefs about curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. However, there are many educators who work within the reform mandates while still making sure to meet students' needs (Beelman, 2014).

There is a balance that is required between the interest of parents and the public to know what is happening in schools and the needs and knowledge of teachers.

Accountability requires a deeper discussion of educational problems without simplifying the discussion of schools with test scores alone. Furthermore, accountability should connect student performance with classroom practice and make the interests of all

students common. Also, the context of a classroom needs to be in the conversation when discussing results and it should not promote “educational triage” where students who are close to the proficiency line are targeted for additional instruction and resources (Dorn, 1998).

Additionally, Elmore (1996) argues that although schools are constantly changing and calling for new protocols for reform, the fundamentals of teaching and learning remain unchanged. That said, Elmore calls for solving the problem of change by creating reform in instructional approaches in the classroom. He states that schools are changing all the time regarding tracking, textbooks, teaching positions, and curriculum but do not change what teachers and students are actually doing together. Instead of changing schedules within a school, he believes there needs to be changes to the fundamentals of teaching (as cited in Plaut & Sharkey, 2003).

Further to the point, many students do well on lower level tests, but do poorly on tests that require complex reasoning and judgment. Moving away from teacher-centered instruction where pieces of knowledge and information are proved to be learned by recall on worksheets and tests, there needs to be a move towards student-centered learning. Open-ended questions need to elicit students thinking and oral and written responses should be complex and constructed between students. Students should be negotiating information to determine what is appropriate and important. In addition, student learning should be across an array of tasks, problems and ways of expressions. Engaging practices should not be seen in one or two classrooms in a school, but rather should become the norm.

While schools seem to be changing all of the time, Elmore (1996) asks why schools are adapting to specific background and interests of students and families and engaging in more ambitious practices that give students more time to complete authentic tasks. This cannot be done on a large scale since change needs to be specific to the context of an individual school. For example, a project in one particular classroom may not be of interest or applicable to students in a different classroom due to the differing funds of knowledge and interests students bring into the context of the classroom. Moreover, the feedback that teachers receive for the effects of their practice should not come in generalized test scores but through observations of student learning (as cited in Plaut & Sharkey, 2003).

According to Glickman (1998), teachers need choice about their own work with fifty percent of the instructional day of locally developed curriculum, which is not based on basal readers but on real books and teacher-chosen materials. Ideally, instruction should be project-centered with a focus on cooperative learning and flexible grouping.

To further support these findings, Wray, Medwell, Fox and Poulson (2000) studied a close sample of teachers whose pupils made effective gains in literacy gains versus a sample of teachers whose pupils did not make effective gains in literacy. The findings further support that effective literacy methods are student-centered, rejecting the idea that teachers should teach students specific skills that help them achieve solely on tests. According to their findings, maximizing time on task with engaging academic activities in reading and writing are crucial. Tasks must be matched to the ability of students as opposed to one-size-fits all curricula and activities. Skills are taught within the context of authentic reading activities as opposed to paper-based activities. In addition, students

need modeling and time to practice specific behaviors, such as comprehension strategies and writing processes. Interaction between the teacher and student with high levels of student dialogue is important. In addition, effective teachers reported using published materials minimally in lessons, and lessons that did use published material included a combination of methods that were constructed by the teacher to meet student needs.

To further support this approach to teaching, Johnson (2005) states that exemplary literacy instruction should be comprised of mini-lessons including visible thinking, student-selected work, explicitly taught writing and reading strategies, collaborative learning, increased student-to-student interaction, and a balance of teacher and student dialogue. Johnson also suggests that not only should there be balance between skill and authentic literacy instruction, but also there needs to be balance between local and state control of curriculum and between student-centered curriculum schoolwork and curriculum-centered schoolwork. This suggests a negotiation between effective literacy practices and practices that intend to assist students in achieving on tests.

Moreover, Eisenbach (2012) reveals a conflict of educators who are held to a high moral and ethical standard to meet the needs of students yet are controlled by political mandates. He implies teachers must make mindful choices and consider their contract and the needs of students. More specifically, he found that educators within a language arts department showed discontent about a scripted curriculum. Scripted curriculum sends the message that educators cannot be trusted to make decisions about instruction and generate lessons that promote intellectual growth.

Eisenbach wanted to determine how educators deal with this adversity and conflict and conducted a qualitative study of three secondary educators whose schools

have adopted stricter scripted curriculums. The purpose was to discover what happens when teachers' beliefs are at odds with said curriculums. He noted research by Van Der Schaaf, Stokking and Verlopp (2008), who found that quality teaching is bred when competent teachers align their personal beliefs with professional practice. Eisenbach acknowledged Fang (1996) who believes that observed needs of students are important for planning instruction.

One educator who was interviewed in Eisenbach's (2012) study felt obligated to follow mandates and disregarded her own personal feelings as an educator. However, another educator negotiated mandates and her own beliefs by infusing her own ideas into the prepackaged agenda infusing project-based learning with the scripted curriculum and workbooks. In addition, another educator's instruction was literature-based, student-centered and focused on group work and projects while still attempting to adhere to standards and curriculum (2012).

Lastly, Pogrow (1995) advises teachers to proceed with their own instincts based on what they experience with students and teachers. Additionally, educators should only trust what they can actually make happen in their classrooms and not what they are told. Most importantly, the focus should be on producing student learning.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Mediating the Conflict Continued: Alternative Assessment**

#### **The Case for Alternative Assessment**

Assessment serves many purposes in the field of education other than judging the quality of schools. These purposes include improving learning, informing instruction, grades, promotion, and placement. There are many different types of assessments that provide quality information about students and instruction. Educators use ongoing assessment measures daily in order to decide the best course of action for all students and mostly use these measures for the purposes of improving learning and informing instruction. Therefore, alternative assessment has an integral role in the everyday practice of educators. To further support this, the International Reading Association (2014) supports the use of multiple indicators to make decisions about students and instruction. The IRA warns policymakers and teachers to be aware of using tests to make high-stakes decisions. While accountability information is entirely summative, it cannot inform practice in responsive ways.

Teachers may see meaningful learning happening in their classroom; however, results from traditional tests may not truly reflect this meaningful learning that is taking place. One principal described this conflict for teachers as “having your feet in two different countries” and another as “serving two masters” (Mitchell, 1997, p. 46). Teachers within schools where active and meaningful learning is occurring also feel pressure to work on practice tests and practice test-taking skills. This conflict may be a challenge for teachers, lending itself to the question of how teachers should approach

teaching and learning when there is such a focus on tests. Should teachers believe their own judgments about students or believe in the tests? (Mitchell, 1997).

Educators are caught between accountability and improvement, and therefore need to embrace the principles of formativity, looking closely at what is happening within a program or school closely. Formative information allows for improvements and refinements in instruction and effort. The accountability movement is a policy problem; therefore, formativity requires there to be communication between policymakers and educators, which is difficult at times, but essential when planning the assessment of schools. As such, educational planning needs the principles of formativity within planning and program evaluation (Myran and Clayton, 2011).

A number of researchers (Au & Jordan, 1981; Bredekamp, 1987; Heath, 1983; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1991; National Research Council, 2000a; Resnick, 1987; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978) believe assessment should not solely be about accumulating facts, but rather participating in the process of mental construction affected by interest and backgrounds within real-world settings (as cited in Falk, Ort and Moir, 2007). Further to that point, alternative assessment is aligned with constructivist theory, which views learners as active constructors of knowledge (Janisch et. al , 2007). This meaning that assessment entails a student demonstrating his or her understanding of curriculum or understanding of a process by creating a real product or performing a task. This is opposed to students solely regurgitating facts.

In addition, Dull and Hughes (2011) assert that in order to bridge the divide, assessment should be continuous, comprehensive, consist of multiple formats, and be

integrated into instruction (as cited in Pyle and Deluca, 2013). Furthermore, assessment systems that are used in the classroom need to be aligned with the teacher's belief about learning (Black and William, 1998; Alternative Assessment, 2003). Teachers' use of assessment needs to match closely with how instruction is implemented in the classroom in order for it to be effective. Therefore, if a teacher believes a standardized test does not provide valid information, it will not be a useful guide for instruction. On the contrary, if an educator believes that learning is socially constructed, assessment may involve students creating a product collaboratively by problem-solving and negotiating with peers.

Furthermore, Darling-Hammond (1997) states that authentic assessments or performance-based assessments engage students as opposed to multiple-choice tests, "where teachers gain richer instructional information about students useful for modifying instruction" (as cited in Olele, 2005, p. 121). This entails higher-order thinking skills and holistic performance criteria. Therefore, alternative assessment is a broad term for assessments which are flexible, learning-based and student-centered and do not include a multiple-choice format (Alternative Assessment, 2003; Hargreaves & Earl, 2002). That said, ongoing assessment by teachers such as informal observations can be seamless with quality instruction. While a student is involved in an activity, the teachers' assessment of his or her learning determines the next step in the instructional process.

Likewise, Johnston and Costello (2005) describe how assessment and instruction integrate closely and argue that assessment is a set of social practices used for various purposes. In other words, assessment involves teachers noticing literate behaviors closely and responding with feedback. For example, they describe how teachers assess a student

using a leveled reader while simultaneously providing instruction or asking comprehension questions to socialize students into common literacy practices. In sum, teacher feedback to students is assessment just as much as a grade. Johnston and Costello (2005) state:

The essence of formative assessment is noticing details of literate behavior, imagining what they mean from the child's perspective, knowing what the child knows and can do, and knowing how to arrange for that knowledge and competence to be displayed, engaged, and extended. This requires a "sensitive observer" (Clay, 1993) or "kid-watcher" (Goodman, 1978), a teacher who is "present" in the classroom— focused and receptive to noticing the children's literate behavior (Rodgers, 2002). (p. 259)

To further support these findings, Black and William (1998) assert that formative assessment is an imperative piece of classroom work to raise standards and achievement in the classroom. The researchers believe that to date, no reform effort has been effective because of the lack of acknowledgement for the role of formative assessment. Formative assessment is an interactive process and "provides information or feedback to modify teaching and learning activities" (p. 140). The researchers conducted a meta-analysis of 580 articles and studies, which established that formative assessment helps low achieving students, and likewise advances learning of all students in general. In addition, the researchers found that better results are achieved when teachers find ways to allow all students to answer questions in the classroom. Some ways include discussing in pairs, additional thinking time, and voting on options.

Formative assessment allows teachers to gather information that a standardized test would not provide. To demonstrate this point, Buly and Valencia (2002) determined ten different areas of reading issues among 108 students who scored below proficient on state reading tests. They believe diagnostic assessments are required to pinpoint weakness

so that ultimately, these students can obtain comprehensive literacy instruction that includes differentiation to target their needs (i.e. decoding, fluency, vocabulary, self-regulation, meaning making). These areas of reading difficulty are not apparent to teachers based on standardized test scores, and require different forms of formative assessments in order to gain this specific information. In addition, students need research-based instructional techniques targeting their areas of need, not test prep drills (as cited in Stahl and Dougherty, 2013).

To be more specific about different types of alternative assessment, Taylor and Nolen (2005) describe performance assessment as live performances, projects, writing, or demonstrating skills outside of the context of a test, that involve decision-making and critical thinking. Performance assessment requires planning, clear directions and feedback for revision and learning (as cited by Olele, 2012). Other examples of performance-based assessments are debates, simulations, and presentations (Moon et al., 2005). These types of assessments are engaging for students, involve active participation and are part of instruction. In addition, alternative assessment of a student includes a detailed record or profile of observations of the student's reading using check-lists and anecdotal notes, records of students' interests, strategies and difficulties gathered from one-on-one conferences. In this type of assessment and many alternative assessments, the relationship of the teacher and student is not hierarchical. Rather, the student has a role in discussing beliefs about reading and interests (Alternative Assessment, 2003).

Alternative assessment can also incorporate the use of technology. Salend (2009) discusses how different types of assessments using technology can be beneficial for struggling students. Examples of these assessments are Technology-Based Active

Responding Systems (Clickers), Digital Observations (videoing), presentation software, podcasts, or educational games. The benefits of these types of assessments using information-technology include the opportunity for teachers to engage students and increase motivation to learn. Despite inevitable issues such as access to technological resources in the classroom, teachers should incorporate technology-based assessment and explicitly teach the skills to utilize these resources to the benefit of engaging students. Using technology for assessment demonstrates how assessment and instruction are incorporated as one. For example, students may read and learn about a particular topic in a content area, extend their knowledge with research and discussion, then create a PowerPoint presentation or a Podcast demonstrating their learning.

A popular type of alternative assessment utilized by many districts and teachers is portfolios. Portfolio assessment means that students self-select evidence of learning, reflect on each piece, and set new goals. During this assessment, students take control of their learning and develop positive attitudes about their work. These types of assessment should not be detached from learning, rather they should be integrated into instruction. When alternative assessment is used, it reveals abilities and capabilities of students that testing would not otherwise make evident to teachers (Janisch et al. (2007).

Furthermore, according to Hargreaves and Earl (2002), portfolio assessment makes diversity visible and also does not rank student achievement. The students have a choice of work and showcase his or her specific talents and demonstrate growth over time. Black and William (1998) concur that assessment should avoid comparisons and allow for teachers to offer advice to improve. Portfolios communicate standards and help students develop self-evaluation skills and demonstrate knowledge and skills in personal

ways. Thus, students will take ownership over his or her work and be able to assess ways they could improve on particular skills.

Other research presented by Moon et al. (2005) included a study of middle school teachers using authentic assessment measures in their classrooms aligned with curriculum and instruction. Students had a choice of various assessments which were integrated into different content areas, such as studying and creating a project about cultures around the world or writing a fable or folktale integrating various sources of information. The teachers used rubrics to plan and assess themselves. The information provided quality information to the teachers pertaining to the instructional process as well as the students' learning. Based on student feedback to the teachers, in general, the students enjoyed the process and were more motivated to learn. This type of assessment allowed students to be involved in their learning and understand criteria for achievement. The teachers also reported that the students were challenged with planning a project, constructing their own knowledge, and self-evaluating themselves to keep on track. These skills require critical thinking while tying facts and concepts together.

Other research within the primary grades includes a study from Pyle and Deluca (2013), who studied kindergarten teachers' approaches to assessment while faced with the challenge of balancing current academically oriented curricula with developmental program. With state mandates requiring standardized assessments of kindergarten students and reporting procedures, the researchers sought out to find how teachers' pedagogy adapts to the required assessments. The academic curricula consisted of standards, while the developmental stance of the teacher is to teach at students' social and developmental level. Pyle and Deluca found evidence that the use of assessment is linked

to the teachers' curricular stance. Thus, the researchers concluded that some educators assessed students based on their developmental levels, while other educators used a blended approach or assessed students solely on academic learning. The educators implementing the latter two approaches explained that they used these approaches because of the teachers' commitment to mandates and standards. The teachers' curricular stances were interpreted within a framework of educational accountability. The teachers using the blended approach acknowledged academic standards and the importance of students to achieve these standards, but the teachers did not let the standards guide all of their instruction. Teachers with this stance believed that the curriculum was flexible and allowed freedom for teacher-directed instruction as well as child-directed instruction, where the needs of each child are a priority when planning instruction. For example, one educator observed students to determine if the students were bringing the direct instruction that the teacher had implemented into their play. The researchers noted a difference in assessment programs in the classrooms while meeting the same academic standards, with observation and anecdotal notes having a crucial role in their programs. This proves that there are multiple instructional approaches that can be implemented to meet the same standards of performance. The teachers made decisions based on student needs. Most importantly, the researchers concluded that teacher-mediated diagnostic assessment assists in closing learning gaps for students.

Similarly, Falk, Ort, and Moirs (2007) argue that classroom-based performance assessment system offers information to teachers about how students are learning and believe it has a place in the state assessment system. In the 1990s, the Early Literacy Profile was created by the New York Department of Education in order to examine skills



within the context of classroom activities rather than creating an artificial testing situation. The profile used a holistic scale and allowed teachers to examine student work to provide evidence for their judgments regarding the stage the student was at. It also consists of an interview with each child. Early Literacy behaviors were observed like directionality of print, pretend reading, using picture clues, high-frequency words, cueing systems and reading stamina, etc. Out of sixty-three teachers that field-tested the profile, 98% felt the profile provided adequate information about a student's literacy level and information to guide instruction. They also reported that viewing the student's behaviors in relation to standards helped give more information to the teacher.

Furthermore, Teachers reported making changes to instruction like reading aloud, environmental print and differentiating instruction. Many schools within the study reported changing professional development in response to the assessment as well. The researchers argue that the Early Literacy Profile offers implications for students at all levels and can contribute to the need for reporting purposes at a large-scale and also be used to provide teachers with information about instruction. Likewise, the Primary Language Record (Falk, 1998) developed in London for multicultural communities allows for a complex assessment to provide information about a child's literacy development over time and informs and supports teaching. With numerical ratings, it allows for reporting at the bureaucratic level (Johnston & Costello, 2005).

Other researchers, such as Fuchs and Fuchs (2004), believe that Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) effectively ties traditional assessment and classroom-based observational assessment models to create an innovative approach to measurement. According to Deno (1985), CBM is a method for assessing academic competence which

is fluency-based and easy to implement (as cited in Fuchs and Fuchs). The reason CBM links traditional assessment and classroom-based observational assessment is because students participate in reading (an authentic task) and the score or words per minute are quantifiable and can be graphed. In addition, the researchers believe that the CBM framework provides schools with a practical strategy for tracking the effects of reform efforts and assisting in strengthening school reading programs.

An additional factor to consider when assessing students is the equity of the particular assessment. To demonstrate this claim, Gunzelmann (2005) states:

We need to break out of the mold of traditional assessment and develop assessment procedures that value the uniqueness of each individual. Bias leads to assessment discrimination against many students, including creative thinkers; students with learning differences; students with a preferred learning modality; boys (due to gender differences); students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds; and many students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. (p 215)

This is only possible when assessment is determined with collaboration by the school community since teachers have a deeper understanding of his or her students and their learning needs. When an assessment is tailored to a student's interest, ability and reality, it creates the possibility for assessment to provide valid information on a student. A student may score poorly on a test, yet his or her ability to problem-solve, role-play, or generate interesting ideas would not be indicated by this type of assessment. Alternative assessment provides the opportunity to gain critical information about students' cultures, social skills and attitudes.

Further to this point, Garcia and Pearson (1991) sought to discover if there can be equitable assessment practices in schools that sort and rank students. Therefore, in 2003-2004, they conducted professional development workshops with ten high school Social

Studies and English teachers, to explore connections between assessment and teaching for social justice. The teachers discussed readings about teaching for social justice and were encouraged to experiment with alternative assessments. The teachers discussed how standardized tests, year-end exams, textbooks with stereotypes, teachers' lack of pedagogical knowledge and inadequate teacher education contribute to inequitable practices within the classroom. Teachers discussed how assessment can have a negative impact on students when it labels them.

Furthermore, the teachers in the study found ways to counter marginalization of certain students by rewriting rubrics in simpler language, involving students in setting criteria, using self-assessment and student led-conference, and discussing the power dynamics between teacher and student in the evaluating process. Areas examined within portfolios were "habits of mind" which include persistence, listening with empathy, and taking responsibility in order to self-assess their own social responsibility. To the same point, Kelly and Brandes (2008) contend that "critical educators working in and across schools and universities need to envision and refine assessment practices that enhance both self-development and self-determination for marginalized groups and work against institutional constraints" (p. 70).

Nonetheless, alternative assessment such as portfolios can be difficult to implement in this time of accountability. To demonstrate this, Hargreaves and Earl (2002) investigated how "creative classroom assessment can mesh with standardized systematic ones" (p 70). The researchers studied twenty-nine teachers who taught seventh and eighth grade in Canada during the midst of educational reform, which encouraged curriculum integration and performance-based assessments. In this study, time, resources

and professional development were cited as issues that educators encountered while implementing alternative assessment. However, teachers reported becoming collaborators in their students' learning during this process of implementing alternative assessment. Nonetheless, the teachers struggled to implement the practices in schools where the administration embraced and was preoccupied with bureaucratic outlook on student performance. Through this study, the researchers confirmed that teachers are trying to combine methods of assessment that contradict one another. Therefore, the researchers concluded that "no assessment process or system can be fully comprehensive" (p. 88). This implies that there is a need for a combination of assessment methods in all classrooms to respond to the differing needs of students and to collect a myriad of information about students.

To further support this, Janisch et al. (2007) studied how graduate students implemented alternative assessments in their classroom. The teachers reported assessments were more culturally responsive to students (allowing English Language Learners to understand expectations) and students were more aware of their learning and goals (metacognitive awareness). However, these types of assessments were difficult for the graduate students to implement due to an emphasis on traditional assessment in his or her school. This demonstrates a mismatch between assessment that is proving to be valid within the classroom and the inherent values of the administration or school district. If there is pressure to raise scores on tests in a particular school, alternative assessment will not be valued to the same degree.

There may be valid reasons why portfolio assessment is not valued or used on a large-scale to judge schools. Performance assessments are not easily standardized and

reliable over. Kentucky and Vermont are examples of states that tried to implement portfolio assessment, yet it was deemed not reliable. Portfolios that are cumulative and contain diverse products by students therefore this type of assessment cannot be standardized since the collection of work differs across teachers. It was difficult for the states to compare portfolio results to other test measures and pressure for test scores to provide information on student performance gained more support. As a result, portfolios are much more likely to be used for assessment at the classroom level rather than at the provincial level for accountability. Despite this finding, alternative assessment still has an important place in the classroom (Alternative Assessment, 2003).

Unfortunately, there is no quick fix that can alter existing practices of assessment, since tests secure public confidence in a school and have a role in policy (Black & Williams, 1998). However, alternative assessments can be incorporated as well, depending on the goal of the teacher in the context of the learning situation. Likewise, Moon et al. (2005) avow that although little emphasis is placed on authentic assessment measures, these measures provide reliable and valid information. Even further, reform will not happen as a result of testing. Rather, classroom-based, qualitative, informal and performance assessment is the most effective way to gauge student learning (Janisch et. al, 2007). Therefore, teachers must find ways to incorporate formative assessment patterns within the classroom and into the culture and school community in which they teach and find ways to have external tests and formative assessments interact to be more a more useful tool in the classroom.

## **Innovative Standardized Assessment**

Technology-based assessment (TBA) is considered alternative assessment that has the potential to engage learners in innovative and dynamic tasks. This type of assessment has the ability to assess student performance. Darling-Hammond (2014) states "A critical piece in this roadmap toward alternative assessments will be new assessments, which have the potential to give school leaders new and better tools to guide instruction, support teachers, and improve outcomes" (p. 1). With CCSS implemented in most states, there is an opportunity to move toward a more rigorous system of assessment, which includes open-ended tasks and content that is reflective of instruction. That said, TBA has the potential to provide teachers with more timely formative and summative information and allows teachers to analyze information using graphs and charts. This would be useful for analyzing progress or grouping students to guide instruction.

As standards call for more use of technology, technology is being embedded into assessments with the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBAC). PARCC is a consortium of twenty-two states funded by a grant from the U.S Department of Education to test the CCSS. The technology-based assessments (TBA) aim to assess the full range of the standards (Castelhano, 2013). In addition, the assessments are aimed to provide timely information to identify students who need extra help. The assessments will provide diagnostic information within mid-year assessments in reading, writing and mathematics; in addition to K-1 formative tools for speaking and listening that will be field-tested in 2015. The mix of formative and summative assessments will help provide detailed and specific information for teachers to adjust instruction. One of the components of

formative assessments is a written section that assesses students' ability to analyze complex texts (PARCC, 2014). Furthermore, Volante and Jaafar (2010) believe that assessments need to be authentic, reasonable, realistic, provide feedback about progress, reflect higher order skills and be a mixture of formative and summative assessment. The TBA such as PARCC and SBAC are showing the potential to contain all of these integral qualities of assessment.

Furthermore, Dougherty-Stahl and Schweid (2013) state that "the PARCC and SBAC call for us to take a fresh look at how teachers can most effectively prepare their students to be successful" (p. 121). Rich tasks will now be able to address various standards instead of narrow skills with traditional tests. The tests promise to match instruction that responds to the differing skills needed for comprehension since it provides diagnostic information to teachers. More specifically, the assessments include procedures which entail observing students' fluency, word recognition, working memory, prior knowledge and metacognition since they are all factors contributing to comprehension that work in non-linear ways. This is different than traditional tests since TBA incorporates both content with inquiry processes. The new tests reflect the complex practice of integrating skills in reading because they require students to supply text-based evidence for answers. The purpose of the test is to encourage teachers to implement rich instruction, teaching pertinent critical reading skills using complex texts with explicit instruction, modeling and guided practice. In sum, PARCC claims the tests will move teachers closer to aligning learning standards, effective instruction and equitable national assessment.

Other researchers believe that TBA has great use for teachers and school districts. Pellegrino and Quellmalz (2011) support using technology for both summative and formative assessment. They argue that the computer has the ability to capture processes such as sequencing tasks to determine how a student problem-solves and uses strategies based on information selected and number of attempts. In addition, the reporting and scoring that is timely and innovative provides teachers with valid and useful information. This means that teachers can center instruction around higher-level thinking and the diagnostic assessments will enhance student learning. In addition, the programs provide schools with a means to store a large amount of data and easily access the data as needed.

Although the PARCC and SBAC are new, other states have implemented TBA. For example, Mitchell (1997) studied schools where innovative programs of school reform are taking place. In four schools, principals explain how teaching students critical thinking and analyzing skills do not always transfer over to doing well on a test. However, interactive and project-based learning with performance-based assessment systems and professional development for teachers are important elements in school reform. With performance-based assessments, such as the NASDC, Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP), and Maine Educational Assessments (MEA), data is useful for school improvement because it focuses on standards and outcomes, assessing how teachers are teaching. Teachers are able to look at their teaching practices and think more about the learning process. The assessments focus on processes, allowing teachers to use thematic units, hands-on activities, and constructivist classrooms. This is in contrast to teaching solely out of the textbook, covering content. In summary, performance-based assessment systems promote an outcome-based culture



providing useful feedback about teaching practices and ways of learning. According to Mullen and Johnson (2006), artistic and creative students need performance-based assessments and portfolios in order to reach their full potential.

To demonstrate how TBA can lead to positive changes in schools, Morgan (2013) reports on the progress in a technical high school while preparing for the PARCC assessments. With the CCSS now in effect within this school, the school has implemented changes to better prepare students for the work place. These changes include shifting a focus on literacy instruction, creating a literacy team, creating literacy seminars with students to teach with more complex texts and research skills, revamping grade nine through twelve language arts curricula to include thematic units and more non-fiction, and creating school-wide summer reading programs. The school reported using texts that were more rigorous and which taught more writing and speaking skills. This indicates the potential for the PARCC assessment to have a positive impact on instruction.

Teachers from across states involved with AFT and NEA convened with PARCC for professional development to learn about the TBA. The professional development focused on learning about the questions that require students to indicate evidence from the test and create evidence statements. Using sample questions, the teachers were informed how to shape instruction in order to allow students to achieve on the assessment. As such, the PARCC aims to provide a more authentic way of assessing students and allows for the opportunity for teachers to structure learning in various ways. More specifically, tasks are authentic and involve the reader in drawing conclusions with textual evidence and closely reading. In addition, passages are paired in order for students

to compare and synthesize information. Therefore, students who read quality texts and take part in higher-level thinking, discussion and writing will be prepared for PARCC assessments (PARCC, 2014). The educational advocacy groups meeting with PARCC demonstrates how teachers seek to find ways to align his or her practice to the performance-based tasks on the PARCC assessment.

Nonetheless, there are critics of the technology-based high-stakes tests. A strong critic of assessments such as the PARCC is Ira Shor. He claims that the PARCC has no evidence that it can accurately report students' achievement. In addition, he contends that the additional testing students will be taking part in does not lead to outcomes or allow students to develop skills that employers are looking for. These skills include ability to work with others, questioning ability, and effective communication. Moreover, Shor advises parents to opt out of testing. However, many parents fear electing their child out of testing since funding to the school may be withheld if a large percentage of students do not participate (Ravitch, 2014).

Other critics of the PARCC and all standardized assessments are organizations such as the Bad Ass Teachers Association (BATS) and United Opt Out, whom urge both teachers and parents to opt out of testing. However, many teachers may fear losing his or her job as a result, so the BAT advises teachers close to retirement to take part in the refusal to test (BAT, 2014). To illustrate how a grassroots movement can make a difference, the BATS cited how in 2013, a high school in Washington opted out of the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) and although threatened by the superintendent to be suspended, parents supported the teachers with calls and emails forcing the superintendent to not punish teachers for opting out. In addition, in 2014, two elementary

schools in Illinois boycotted the Illinois Standard Achievement Test. Many parents, students and teachers were threatened with consequences, but refused to back down (Jones, D., 2014). This demonstrates how a united front of parents and teachers is able to achieve small victories against the detriment of testing.

Lane (2013) states that the assessments such as the PARCC and SBAC will need to provide evidence that the tests measure students' achievement of standards. Lane cites her research of the Maryland State Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) and the relationship between improving instruction and student learning. The results indicated a correlation between performance-based learning in the classroom and success on the MSPAP test. However, it was noted that schools increased instruction in the specific reading and writing tasks that were on the TBA. Therefore, it will be crucial for policymakers, test developers and the educational community to carefully examine how the TBA impacts teaching and learning. There are also implications for teachers to focus instruction on activities that are similar to the tasks on the PARCC and SBAC, therefore limiting opportunities for more innovative and engaging teaching practices.

Likewise, Herman, J. and Linn, R (2013) as part of UCLA's National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) are evaluating the PARCC and SBAC to assess how the assessments measure and support goals for deeper learning. In their preliminary report, it states that a possible effect of the new tests will be teachers aligning curriculum and teaching to what is tested. Therefore, they believe the consortiums have a large task in developing valid assessments and believe there will be political, technical, and financial challenges that will be barriers to their goals and plans.

CRESST plans to continue to monitor the validity and impacts of the assessments as they are implemented.

Hoffman, Assaf & Paris (2001) advise teachers and policymakers to seek alternatives to high-stakes test. They believe that student and local advocacy groups should take a bold stance against high-stakes assessments, and explore alternative assessments to make decisions about retention and graduation. According to Lambert & McCombs (Eds.), movements against testing are taking place. For example, the NEA and AFT created alliances with Reclaim Our Schools (AROS), and political units such as Bad Ass Teachers and United Opt Out have been formed. These organizations are being created to attempt to reduce NCLB-mandated testing. Furthermore, moratoriums, such as FairTest, advocate for classroom-based assessments. FairTest asserts that countries with a more balanced evaluation system produce better educational results. Teachers should advocate for alternatives and challenge the current system.

Lastly, Hoffman, Assaf & Paris (2001) speak directly to teachers when they state: “We urge teachers to stay the course. Be creatively compliant and selectively defiant as it fits the learning needs of your students. As leaders in reading and literacy education, we have an important role to play in the appropriate use of high-stakes assessment” (p. 491). This implies that despite pressure to focus on test scores from policymakers and administration, educators need to keep in mind the most appropriate and beneficial means to gain accurate information about students. As a result, teachers will be able to better close learning gaps in students’ achievement.

## Chapter 4

### Transformative Literacy

#### Current Undemocratic Literacy Practices in Schools

Many progressive educators and researchers in the field of education argue that the accountability practices in schools are undemocratic, giving little say to the students, teachers and administration in schools. Furthermore, researchers contend that schools have been expected to defuse or prevent social concerns that are actually caused by issues pertaining to governmental policy. For example, issues with poverty, environment, technology, equity, and health problems are left to schools to rectify.

Shannon (1993) and Edelsky (1992) concur that bad policy including corporate profits, tax policy and mismanagement of corporations redistributing wealth and jobs has caused economic decline, not schools. Furthermore, the current campaign against schools is based on misinformation and claims of schools not producing enough scientists and engineers is a distortion. To support these claims by Shannon, the 1995 article *A Crisis Created by Education Myths* reports on David Berliner's findings confirming myths about the achievement of students from 1978 to 1990. His findings confirm that the number of high school students taking the Advanced Placement (AP) tests for colleges jumped from 90,000 to 481,000. In addition, the numbers of Asians taking the AP tests tripled and African-Americans taking the test doubled, while the number of Hispanics taking AP tests quadrupled. As a matter of fact, citing a study by Sandia National Laboratories, using data from the National Science foundation, between 1960 and 1990 the percentage of 22-year-olds receiving science and engineering degrees remains steady and it estimated a surplus of scientists and engineers by 2010.

Moreover, Shannon (1993) states that poverty is a fact of American life and the rates have grown 7% over the last two decades. There is a negative correlation between students who are living in poverty and their academic achievement. Therefore, the issue of achievement should not be left solely to schools. Further, the government needs to address the issue of poverty since raising standards, rewriting textbooks and extending school days will not solve the problems. Policymakers are calling for demands that are most likely already being done, although the success is debated. Shannon contends that school can do something about this issue by helping students develop democratic voices to struggle against this reality in America. Schools need a new agenda focused on the ideals of Dewey where learning arrangements are planned and decided by students and involve complex projects and collective research (Hopmann, 1997).

An additional issue which adds to undemocratic practices in schools is the concept of a “hidden curriculum” or messages teachers and schools are sending to students based on what is valued and implemented. For example, if lessons are mostly led with lectures and students listening, it sends the message that these academic behaviors are most important. On the other hand, if a teacher uses strategies such as project-based learning or community based-learning, then critical thinking and problem solving are skills that students start to value (Noonan, 2009; Great Schools, 2014).

Gee (1996) would define this “hidden curriculum” as the Big D Discourse (based on his theory) which does not align with many student little-d Discourse or primary discourse that they bring to school. In short, a students’ socialization process may differ from the one that is employed by teachers (as cited in Souto-Manning, 2009). More

simply, students enter school with the ability to socialize and communicate, but it does not match the academic language we use in schools.

O'Quinn (2006) further describes the notion of a "hidden curriculum" when stating that there are how many political messages in schools such as the banning of books, or teachers being reprimanded for discussing issues of war and peace. He states that at some point, education became about economic function instead of liberal arts ideals where students discuss topics and ideas in an open-ended fashion. Thus, O'Quinn believes that teachers need to assist young people in pulling apart political messages with critical literacy skills. To accomplish this, he suggests assessing the media and creating lessons for students regarding propaganda techniques to teach students to question sources and information.

An additional issue is evidence from research that shows there is less time being spent on explicit teaching of democratic principles such as social studies and civics instruction, due to the emphasis on math and language arts skills to improve test scores (as cited by Buxton, Kayumova, Alleksaht-Snider, 2013). While democratic pedagogy should be at the heart of the curriculum, it is actually being deemphasized to focus on basic literacy skills instead.

Furthermore, Shannon (1993) argues that teachers need to take the opportunity to connect classroom and social life. He believes that the standards and high performance structures do not prepare students for jobs. This belief is supported by a Michigan Education Department employee survey, finding that skills such as respect and interpersonal skills are more important, and therefore high performance standards will not solve any problems. Goodlad (1996) explains how a business-type model for school is

more accepted than other types of models because the idea of more jobs and better preparing youth for jobs sounds better than education for democracy. A business model means that inputs and outputs, quality control, and productivity which are valued by businesses, are valued in schools as well (as cited in Hoffman, 2000). Furthermore, learning that can be measured is more accepted than democratic outcomes that are immeasurable.

To further support this claim, the CCSS illustrates the business model of education since within the standards, literacy is interpreted as a way to reason and logically untangle facts. Barno (2014) explains in depth the difference between critical use of literacy (as proposed by the CCSS) and critical literacy. He argues that critical literacy approaches offer more avenues of transformative education and better prepares students for college. Critical literacy is different since it focuses on the reader bringing context to the text, based on Rosenblatt's (1986) transactional theory that a reader makes meaning based on personal experiences and the text (as cited in Barno, 2014). Within the CCSS, critical literacy is omitted. Instead, the CCSS provides a framework to teach students to use the English language with proficiency to communicate and be competent, but not to be transformative.

Barno (2014) further believes that standards lack incorporating multiple perspectives, recognizing language in context and allowing students to explore how language is not neutral. He assumes writers of the CCSS initiative did not include the concept of critical literacy since it was abstract. However, he argues that research concludes that transformation is happening in many schools focused on critical literacy. For example, Shultz (2007) researched one group of fifth graders in Chicago to seek out



ways to improve housing; and, Wood (1998) conducted research on high school students who participated in interviews to hire a new teacher (as cited in Barno, 2014). These are some examples of students' interactions with real-time problems. If colleges want students with passion, leadership, initiative and curiosity, the current standards do not leave room for this type of opportunity for students.

To add to how the CCSS promotes undemocratic ideals by preparing all students for college, Noddings (2008) contends that the CCSS sends students the message that if they do not attend college, they will not become a contributing member of society. As a result, this divides students into winners and losers. In addition, most schools emphasize grades and academics over healthy use of leisure time or striving to find their individual talent. Noddings states that currently the greatest number of jobs is clerks, cashiers, cleaners, food prep workers and laborers. He supports providing a variety of programs to address different needs and interests as opposed to viewing the vocational track in school as "lower" than the "higher" academic track. As such, students should be able to take a field trip around the town and list the occupations that they see people doing. After doing so, students can debate insightful questions, such as "why are more women entering 'caring' professions?" and "what professions are poorly paid and why?" In addition, students would be able to discuss what occupations society depends on. Although the college track for students is created with good intentions, it is an antidemocratic message if the particular student's talents lie elsewhere.

Noddings further believes that forcing all students down the academic track sets them up for failure. To solve this problem, students should be provided with time to consider important personal and social issues, and decide how they can better themselves

with not only academic classes, but possibly vocational or commercial classes as well. Students who struggle in high school should be provided with the opportunity for a different path to learn in a different situation. Students who choose professions that do not require a degree still deserve a genuine education and should be respected (Noddings, 2008). Schools and educators need to change the stigma that comes with occupations that do not require college degrees.

Another issue in schools is that many diverse students are labeled as “at-risk” which is referred to as a deficit perception. This means students are viewed as flawed and not having the literacy skills of the dominant culture (Noonan, 2009). Edelsky (1992) argues that literacy should not be a way to rank or sort people. Continuing to test and label only worsens the failure instead of addressing the issue of inferior literacy instruction (as cited by Noonan, 2009). Students who do not score proficient on a standardized test may feel that they are lacking necessary skills, however, they may have many adequate skills that are not recognized by the test.

Furthermore, Jones, Jones & Hargrove (2003) found that students who are labeled “at-risk” end up being limited with opportunities to use creative problem-solving skills since it is viewed as taking up too much time, and there is an even greater emphasis on teaching to the test (as cited in Souto-Manning, 2009). Other leading scholars such as Goodlad (2004), Kincheloe & Weil (2004), Murphy (2005) and Wilburg (2003) advocate for change built on social-justice values against reductionist approaches to schooling or narrowing the curriculum (as cited by Mullen and Johnson, 2006). Thus, democratic teaching or critical literacy is imperative in schools in order to address the issues of

democracy such as the “hidden curriculum”, inferior literacy instruction, and too much time spent on test preparation.

### **Democratic Literacy Practices**

Democratic Literacy instruction or transformative pedagogy is synonymous with the term critical literacy. Democratic literacy is based on the ideals of John Dewey, who believed the school is a place where students need to learn how to live. He argued for education to be primarily social and interactive processes and for students to be able to take part in their learning. Critical Literacy is defined by Irvine (1993) as using literacy in order to challenge an uneven power relationship. Students are challenged to critically analyze relationships and authority within the school system and in society. Larson and Marsh (2005) describe critical literacy as positioning learners as active agents in relation to texts and social practice (as cited in Johnson and Rosario-Ramos, 2012). Students use historical and current texts to make connections to issues in their local community.

Furthermore, critical literacy connects people with reading, writing and dialogue, and moves them toward shared goals (Freire, 2005; Glass, 2000). Students have an active role in sharing ideas and knowledge in the classroom. Critical literacy is a wide awareness and a means to imagine what life might be. More specifically, critical literacy is when students use the technical skills of reading and writing to move further and critique texts and their underlying message regarding power then take part in activism in order to be a good citizen (Wolk, 2003). From critical literacy, democracy is revealed in our daily lives, not textbooks and is created by dialogue of many different voices (Hoffman, 2000). As such, Barno (2014) describes how critical literacy is an avenue to engage students who have been uninterested and disengaged from learning. In sum, transformative

pedagogy consists of students using literacy to create change. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), students must engage in activities that allow them to solve higher-order problems, see their identities and cultures as strengths, and develop a critical consciousness that allows them to critique society. Most poignantly, literacy educators should ask students: What kind of lives do you want to live and what kind of people do you want to be? (Lee, 2011).

To counter the deficit perception and to work toward achieving critical literacy, Rogers, Tyson and Marshall (2000) state that teachers need to understand discourses of families as they relate to the school literacy practices. The interplay of these discourses is referred to as “living dialogues” where we include conversations with parents about language and culture in school and deeply examine our connectedness of school and community contexts. With a progressive pedagogy such as readers and writers workshop which are based on inclusiveness, educators must make sure all languages and literacy practices are supported within this context.

Many education researchers have suggestions for how to implement democratic literacy practices within the confines of the current curriculum in schools. Hoffman (2000) asserts that “educators have a fundamental role in preserving our democratic way of life” (p. 616). Hoffman also explains how critical reading of texts is a part of freedom of speech and freedom of the press which protect democracy in the United States. Reform that focuses on teaching the basics creates apathy for learning. Thus, teachers should seek ways to engage students in democratic practices within an accountability-driven system (Mullen and Johnson, 2006). Fortunately, Critical Literacy is possible to teach within the confines of the CCSS but it is not assessed or mandated (Barno, 2014).

“Democratic leaders often experience conflict between personal values-including a personal allegiance to the ethical mandate to provide democratically infused, collaborative educational experiences for students and federal or local accountability statutes to which they are legally or occupationally bound” (Mullen and Johnson, 2006, p 97). This conflict is apparent when comparing teacher education programs to accountability practices within schools. More specifically, many teacher education programs are encouraging teachers to be critical and empower students. In contrast, current top-down accountability practices are in contradiction to these teacher accreditation practices in the United States. Aronson and Anderson (2013) claim that in top-down accountability practices, teachers who are critically conscious are put into a teaching arena where their voices are silenced. However, this may be an assertion that teachers have and there are many variables and factors that affect teachers’ ability to have a democratic voice in the practices that are happening in schools.

Fortunately, the counter-culture of progressive ideas has made changes to the purpose of education and has brought attention to literature selections, media, and textbooks. Student-centered instructional approaches like whole language, literature circles, and portfolios are all examples of progressive ideas. Based on the progressive ideas of Freire (1968), Shor (1980) and Freebody & Luke (1990), critical literacy is an emerging concept (as cited in Barno, 2014). Critical literacy combines basic literacy skills with recognizing the power of language; and, it is coming to fruition in education law and higher education coursework.

Also linking literacy and democracy, Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) believe that literacy is never neutral and is always toward or for someone (as cited in O’Quinn, 2006).

They illustrate a classroom which mirrors a democratic society that is more inclusive and responds to individual needs of students incorporating reading projects and portfolios. Another example is reading and writing workshop that encourages reflective practices, creativity with literacy and collaboration to make meaning of texts. For example, they describe simple tasks like discussing inequalities and writing about what could be done to address these inequalities.

Furthermore, Jones, Webb & Newmann (2000) state “teaching literacy is inextricably meshed with the work of transformation” (p. 7). When students learn to read and write, they are learning the skills to participate in remaking their realities. The researchers describe “transformative practices” as developing students’ use of language to empower and transform themselves to participate within various social communities or discourses. In order for teachers to build this capacity in their students, it requires a rethinking of power within the organization of the school. This means that the principal facilitates a culture where input and decision-making can come from within the organization. Classroom practices include literature circles, reader response journals, writing to learn strategies, Socratic seminars, and readers’ theatre, in order to engage students in critically reflecting on text and different viewpoints. In addition, students should be involved in choosing research projects and taking social action.

Students’ use of transformative practices can better the school in which they learn at. Based on Vygotsky’s theory of social learning, students are believed to have the ability to understand emotions of others and to make moral and logical decisions that are more mature than many believe. Vygotsky explains how children have a right to decisions about their own actions, express their opinions, and be involved in institutional

decisions. This type of culture would not undermine the authority of all teachers; it only undermines the authority of teachers who claim to be all-knowing. This type of culture would illustrate to students the link between the management of schools and the management of society. This is called political literacy and can only be achieved if students are genuinely participating in the organization of the school. Unfortunately, giving students a right and voice in the management of school may seem ridiculous or impossible to some, and therefore is usually dismissed in schools. Nonetheless, teachers should not be afraid to incorporate controversial issues and use Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development where children can become aware of social injustices with adult help (Bottery 1990).

Democratic accountability means that tests should not be abolished, but also should not be the only determining factor to evaluate student performance because standardized tests are unable to tell us what is precisely wrong with student learning or school. Even further, Eisner (2003) compares testing to putting cattle on a scale. That is, you are not able to fatten cattle by measuring them; you have to pay attention to their diets (as cited by Stitzlein et al., 2007). Along this same line, testing scores do not tell us what we really need to know about students. Therefore, there needs to be a balance between accountability of tests and accountability of professional judgment by teachers or local knowledge. This means the knowledge about the local community. By implementing this philosophy, teachers attain practical knowledge with classroom experience and gain insights into the learning process through students.

Further to that point, Kelly and Brandes (2008) contend that students are often passive and disconnected from high-stakes test; and, in order to prepare young people for

democratic and participatory citizenship, it is critical that assessment is formative and involve students, address diverse needs, and include the negotiation of criteria. If students have control and a voice about how they are being assessed, then students will become more socially responsible and self-determined.

In order to effectively utilize critical literacy, schools and teachers need to work together. Aronson and Anderson (2013) seek to locate spaces of resistance where teachers can engage students in critical literacy and create excellent schools that have flexibility within a controlling system. The researchers assert that there is more to teaching and learning than content knowledge, which is what is measured by standardized tests, and believe it begins with teacher preparation programs. As such, these researchers suggest that policymakers and practitioners engage in conversations about the contradictions between teacher preparation programs and the classroom. All teachers have a responsibility to dialogue with other members of the school community regarding the practices of schooling. If teachers want to be effective in transforming literacy instruction and the organization, then they must raise critical questions about the best ways to teach all students.

Similarly, Nieto (2003) believes that while diversity and social justice have become key elements of higher education, educators need to look closely at the mismatch of theory that they learned in their programs and actual practices within the schools that they teach at. In addition, all students must be held to the same level of expectation by teachers and instruction should be modified in order to facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, cultural social class groups. This supports that standards are in fact important, but standards that do not allow students the freedom



to create curriculum around their culture and backgrounds is unjust (as cited in Plaut & Sharkey, 2003).

In order to effectively implement critical literacy, teachers may need to transform some practices in their classroom. Lee (2011) argues that teachers need to move past the argument of phonics versus literature based teaching since the consensus is now that to one degree or another, both practices work. In addition, teachers need to also move beyond the practice of using basic skills of literacy and shift to multiple literacies, which essentially means shifting to reading and writing for a greater purpose. Lee illustrates an example of literacy being action-oriented (Giroux, 2004) when students went on a field trip to the Indiana State House and learned about laws, and then wrote to legislators about gun violence, gambling and unemployment (as cited in Lee, 2011). Students were transformed from reluctant learners to writers when they used literacy in an attempt to change their status quo.

There is substantial research regarding transformative literacy practices in both progressive schools and also schools that have more rigid structures of accountability. Case studies and examples of transformative practices allow teachers to learn about examples and devise ways to make reading and writing more “emancipatory acts” (O’Quinn, 2006, p. 286). More specifically, these acts are literary behaviors that give students more understanding of the curriculum and their ability to use reading and writing to formulate new ideas and have their voices be heard. Moreover, Shannon (1993) claims that the challenge is to create students with democratic voices to engage in an active public life. Student voice is the tool and not basal readers with prepared skills and scripted lessons and language. Nevertheless, Shannon believes that constructivist and

whole language approaches are not solely enough. Teachers need to explicitly teach the political nature of voice and how society asserts privilege to one voice over another. He encourages teachers to seek examples of teachers who are engaged in these types of projects with students. Case studies provide “wise practices” which are contextualized and specific, rather than “best practices” which attempt to find a fix for all students in all conditions (Quinn and Ethridge, 2006, p. 118). As such, examples of critical literacy practices can be used to gain ideas and alter current practices, but should not be viewed as a prescription. The texts and topics that are chosen should be based on the specific students in the classroom.

### **Using Multicultural Literature and Critical Dialogue**

Many progressive educators and teachers who are seeking to teach about social justice and provide multiple perspectives of social issues. Social justice is defined as marginalized communities gaining access to and functioning in social institutions in part by not tolerating poverty or racism or sexism. When configuring students into situations where they can dialogue using multicultural texts, literacy is more than just acquiring reading and writing skills, but rather competencies to create personal and social change. With critical dialogue in the classroom, the students are the center of the activity and topics and opinions are generated by students.

Multicultural texts could include novels, newspaper articles, picture books, poetry or other media resources. The literature can be juxtaposed or used in conjunction with other resources in the classroom such as the textbook. The literature allows students to be more knowledgeable and caring citizens by having respect for human differences. The use of these critical texts allows for teachers to generate dialogue between students to

discuss varying perspectives of a situation from history in order to make comparisons and highlight on current social issues. The goal is to enlighten students about a particular situation and allow them to generate ways to become involved in change.

To demonstrate how multicultural literature and critical dialogue can be incorporated into classrooms, North (2009) conducted a qualitative study of using multicultural texts and dialogue in four socially just secondary classrooms from four different charter schools. He observed the structures and barriers contributing or inhibiting success. The four teachers met over a twelve month period to view and discuss videos pertaining to Socratic Seminars in inquiry groups, and then implement what they learned into their classrooms. Socratic Circles included students reading and using questions to help each other learn. In a Socratic Seminar and socially just classrooms, students recognize differences and make decisions across their differences. Students deeply listen and create effective dialogue surrounding a worthy goal. The four teachers in diverse settings needed to navigate the tension when helping students take part in democratic literacy. Students read, summarized, questioned, and then created inner and outer circles. In the inner circle, students discussed the text; and in the outer circle, students evaluated and gave feedback to the quality of the conversation. “Thin” questions were purposed to clarify ideas, and “thick” questions considered bigger issues. The students civilly debated controversial topics, such as same sex schools, while the teacher was a co-learner. The teacher did need to explicitly teach social behaviors for public discussions, for instance how to politely interrupt. Additionally, the teacher instructed students to make summarizing statements about the discussion. However, students were encouraged

to create their own topics and practice negotiation skills that will benefit them in their future workplaces, city halls or court rooms.

In one particular seminar, a student made a violent comment about undocumented workers, eliciting discussion in the inquiry group about how teachers should respond when comments are made in class that could be harmful. North (2009) cites Parker (2006) who advises to be cautious to not invalidate the viewpoint, use humility to recognize your own viewpoint as incomplete, and reciprocity. Using reciprocity means recognizing the speaker has a social position, emotions and beliefs behind their statement, and an attempt to try to take their perspective. In this particular instance, the teacher did not use caution and reacted harshly, missing an opportunity to discuss colonization and exploitation in the United States. The findings in the study conclude that schools that are not involved in dictates by No Child Left Behind provide the optimal space for meaningful discussions due to small class size and more time for repeated informal and formal interactions. However, North also concluded that the schools that contained more repressive systems did not mean that the teachers were powerless to create critical dialogue in their classrooms.

Supporting this idea, Castro (2010) presents a case study of three pre-service teachers who attempted to teach for critical multicultural citizenship in a Social Studies classroom during their student-teaching semester in an accountability-driven school context. Although all three participants felt constrained by the culture of accountability, two of the pre-service teachers were able to negotiate these constraints and implement critical multicultural citizenship education in their classrooms. Critical multicultural citizenship encourages asking questions about persistent injustices and advocates for

social change in and beyond the classroom. Critical literacy skills are taught within the context of social studies content.

Furthermore, the pre-service educators implemented strategies in order to overcome the obstacles they faced by accountability measures. They taught skills for social change which included making informed decisions using evidence from various perspectives, interacting with others to achieve democratic aims, critiquing official school knowledge and expanding on knowledge by centering instruction upon perspectives of marginalized groups.

Critical and reflective thought was the focus as teachers and students became partners when analyzing political and social structures. The participants felt that the testing did not align with their approaches to teaching citizenship education but two out of three of the pre-service teachers employed these strategies by deemphasizing standardized testing. More specifically, one participant described how the standardized test only allowed for one perspective, so she incorporated multicultural knowledge while also teaching students to be successful on the test by pointing out which perspective would be found on the test. She referred to this as “the white man’s perspective”. Furthermore, the three teachers aimed to teach the information in depth, resisting “spoon-feeding” information to students in order to cover what will be tested (Castro, 2010).

Even further, the cooperating teachers emphasized content over skill using worksheets and practice tests as opposed to using methods of other cooperating teachers who used standards strategically by deemphasizing or skipping topics depending on what is tested. However, some teachers negotiated the constraints by incorporating standards within larger thematic and interdisciplinary units. The teachers participating in the study

provided students with opportunity to analyze different types of texts and documents, and allowed time for reflection. Also, the participants in the study found ways to focus on multicultural knowledge and to increase time for critical inquiry, but also taught the facts necessary for standardized tests. For example, one participant realized most of the standardized test questions focused on vocabulary. Thus, she incorporated the vocabulary and timelines of major events into warm-up activities and review activities in the beginning of class, and then was able to free up time to teach in ways more consistent with her beliefs.

The participants in the study demonstrated the importance of having strong beliefs about teaching and making content relevant to students and teaching the skills that students will need to know for life. The study also illustrates the pressure of accountability and the possibility for a balance between test preparation and engaging literacy practices (Castro, 2010). The pre-service teachers in this study were able to forge ways into the rigid curriculum to incorporate critical literacy due to support from supervising teachers. Again, this illustrates the need for teachers to have a deep understanding of critical literacy practices from higher education programs and teachers also need collaboration to discuss strategies and ideas.

Additionally, Souto-Manning (2009) used multicultural literature in her first grade classroom to help her students take social action. Through read alouds about segregation, her students analyzed how pull-out programs in their own school represented racially and socioeconomically segregation. She used a certain process and tools to make her students more aware. More specifically, the process included using children's books and reading about multiple view-points. Although she points out that the books do not work by

themselves, she does believe that they are effective conversation starters. Her framework included culture circles (Freire), where participants built upon their strengths and backgrounds. An example of how Souto-Manning taught students about voice and perspective included using three different versions of *The Three Little Pigs* (Galdone 1970; Marshall, 1989; & Scieszka, 1996). She then facilitated a dialogue to uncover social issues in texts. Using this method, rather than knowledge being deposited into the students' brains (Freire), the students were introduced to democratization and became agentive subjects.

In addition, the civil rights movement was included in the standards, so Souto-Manning taught the students this topic by using books about Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. However, she went beyond these texts and the curriculum, and brought in media reports about discrimination, articles about unemployment rates, housing and educational opportunities to view the problem from multiple lenses. By doing this, Souto-Manning (2009) implemented critical literacy in spite of mandates and focused on the students' interests. Critical literacy became the curriculum rather than being an extra activity to complete.

Her students problematized the issue of sorting structures in the school after reading books such as *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001) and *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Coles, 1995). By charting, the students discovered that students who received English Language services were mostly Asian and Latinos, and special education services were received by mostly African American male students. The students also discussed the negative feelings that come with racial labels. They collectively decided to do something about it using the books as a reference. That is, the students suggested to the principal

that instead of being segregated, they would like all students to be able to engage in inquiry studies as the gifted students do and that all learners should be together (inclusion). The students gained support from 17 of 19 parents with a petition and dialogued with the principal about remaining in the classroom all together for the following year without any pull-out services. The principal was reluctant, but agreed to allow for a trial. With these changes came some challenges with three teachers trying to co-plan in a timely manner; but despite the difficulties, Souto-Manning (2009) believed that there were many more benefits than problems. She also noted that she hears from students from those two years showing their appreciation of the positive changes she helped create in their lives, illustrating how critical pedagogy is transformative.

To further illustrate how teachers can use critical literacy in the classroom, Reidel and Draper (2011) describe an effort to engage pre-service Social Studies middle grade teachers in critical literacy practices in order to integrate reading instruction into Social Studies. This involves teaching students to not only understand what they are reading (technical literacy) but also evaluate and challenge it perpetuating what Freire (2005) calls reading the word and reading the world. Traditionally, social studies is usually textbook focused and students memorize facts. To integrate reading instruction, students may be tasked with investigating the author's subjectivity, read texts from multiple perspectives and produce counter texts. Furthermore, students may engage in dialogue, voice personal interests and concerns, and strive for social action. Hall (2005) and Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) support teaching pre-service teachers in content-area literacy courses and encourage teachers to apply literacy specific disciplinary practices. To do this, teachers must model reading from a critical stance using a wide range of texts.



Instead of trying to find a formula or prescribed program to fix issues at schools, staffing schools with competent teachers who want to create and sustain change needs to be a focus. Lane, Lacefield-Parachini & Isken (2003) conducted a study of pre-service student teachers at UCLA, equipped with a foundation of critical literacy pedagogy and placed with educators that were not strong proponents of progressive reform teaching in urban settings. During the study, the student teachers challenged the guiding teachers to use the students' home lives as a resource, and to focus on the students' backgrounds. Also, the student teachers encouraged their guiding teachers to allow students to share and talk more and also used their home life as a resource and focused activities on their backgrounds.

The study concluded that the student teachers became change agents for the cooperating teachers, who learned new ideas and had a renewed excitement about teaching. For example, one teacher, who had been resistant to cooperative work since students had shown that they cannot function properly in groups was able to appreciate how a constructivist approach with interactive units could work in the classroom with authentic dialogue and conversation. This study illustrates how teacher education programs that are focused on critical pedagogy can have a positive effect and impart change on instruction in urban settings when teachers hold fast to their beliefs. Another important learning from this study points to how cooperating teachers or more experience teachers cannot be viewed as "experts" in the school community, but there needs to be room for a bi-directional relationship within the staff to exchange ideas and opinions otherwise known as critical interactive discourse.

Additionally, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) feature a teacher research study by Harper about moving children beyond their “white space” using children’s literature. White space is defined as a white population living in communities that are affluent. This particular school that was part of the study was alienated from diversity and a situation occurred in the school regarding racial stereotyping. Harper’s goal was to address the issue of social injustice and transform her practice in hopes of generating a more democratic culture.

By utilizing reader response journals and literature circles using multiple genres of literature, dynamic discussions unfolded within the group. The novels were *Crash*, *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, *M.C Higgins*, *Devil’s Arithmetic* and *The Giver*. With Rosenblatt’s (1991) transaction theory as a lens, students were seen cultivating different meanings and having differing reactions to the same text. Many students showed curiosity and high interest, while one student in particular wanted distance from the texts and was uncomfortable with the topics discussed while others had curiosity and high interest. The students had to move toward accepting how the story represented their community and some were not ready to do that.

The study provided evidence on how literature that incorporates topics such as racism, death, prejudice and peer pressure, is able to allow students to reflect inward and connect to the curriculum. This is referred to as “mirrors and windows” which is when students see others and see themselves. Harper states “I realized that literature made it possible for us to see the world where the world was not represented among ourselves” (as cited in Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009, p. 251). All-in-all, this study implies that

multicultural literature needs to be used with all students, regardless of their backgrounds and cultures, in an attempt to promote tolerance of others.

Robinson (2013) presents a recent example of using multicultural literature in order to promote critical literacy in the classroom. She conducted an ethnographic study of her third grade class where she permeated her curriculum with multicultural literature for five months in order to promote social awareness and encourage students to appreciate diversity. She believed students needed to interact with texts and each other in order to learn. Students sat in clusters and participated in community building in morning meetings and partner and group work where they were given opportunities to construct and deconstruct concepts. In her study, she wanted to find out what understandings students acquire about themselves when engaged with multicultural literature and what types of classroom experiences facilitate emotional and critical responses from students. Some themes that Robinson discovered were that students realized that they had many cultural identities (gender, race). In addition, the students were able to identify the reasoning behind their perceptions of other cultures. For example, they discussed how their family, community and media influenced them and their beliefs. One student recognized that most famous people they see in the media are white.

Furthermore, Robinson used an article about an African American doctor who was raised in poverty and experienced ridicule but changed his life and became a surgeon. The students participated in a discussion where they showed empathy for the man. They related to the story by dialoging about bullying and also identified the characteristics of the doctor that helped him work through hard times. Most importantly, the students identified that people in poverty are mistreated. This interactive reading of

multicultural literature allowed the students to understand a social phenomenon. Robinson facilitated the conversation between her students by interjecting questions like “how can you relate?” and “what are the messages from the story?” Therefore, multicultural literature allowed the students to have empathy for others and also make connections to their own life. In addition, the literature was engaging for students since it encouraged a deep conversation. It is important to note that Robinson made sure to create a classroom library incorporating a variety of books with authors of many different backgrounds with pictures of the authors on the book boxes. This allowed students to engage with the texts in multiple ways (independent reading and partner reading). It also allowed students to broaden their perspectives of authors.

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In sum, a multicultural curricular is invaluable for students to learn about democratic voices. Davis (2007) asserts that comfort for students is key for honest successful discussion and there should be ample amount of time for students to dialogue. Deborah Meier (2002) found that controversial topics led to students examining the reasons they are offended and expanding knowledge of history and culture (as cited in Davis, 2009). Controversy is also very engaging for students as opposed to passive learning. The use of media such as movie clips, as a tool or internet articles and blogs can create conversations and promote the sharing of ideas. Using these tools, students will develop an understanding of democratic values and strengthen their interpersonal skills. In addition, Davis (2009) argues that teachers do not have to wait until after testing to find space for this type of pedagogy and multicultural curricula can be embedded into the required standards.

## **Transformative Writing**

In addition to reading in order to promote critical literacy skills, students should be encouraged to create their own texts and write about issues that are important to them. Writing counter texts or texts from a different perspective about a problem or writing to address an issue to authority can demonstrate to students how writing can be powerful. Regarding transformative writing practices, Elbow (1973) believes that writing is a way to end up thinking something that you could not have started out thinking (as cited in Wolk, 2003). During the process of writing, students may discover thoughts and feelings they did not recognize before.

Lopez (2011) describes one twelfth grade teacher in Canada who created activism and agency within her Writer's Craft class. By using performance poetry as a tool, the teacher taught multicultural poetry, and encouraged students to analyze the meaning and then create their own understanding by writing their own poems (performance poetry). Academic aspects of the course (reading, writing, speaking) were grounded in a critical literacy activity. In addition, the teacher introduced the poetry of youth, and had students read then dialogue and journal about it, observing specifically the emotions that were elicited from it. The students were able to speak from their point of view and on behalf of those who are marginalized. Specifically, the poems were about urban American and Canadian life, and students were asked to use McIntosh & Style's (1997) "windows and mirrors" activity to respond to questions about how they felt, how they related to discover things about their own identities, and how they are the same as others (as cited in Lopez, 2011).

As the activity progressed, students felt safer to open up, and the journals served as a safe place to share without being judged. The journals were also great means to illustrate student growth. According to Camangian (2008), safe spaces in the classrooms are critical in order for issues to be truly unpacked (as cited by Lopez, 2011); and students in this class were able to acknowledge their own biases they had and unpack them. For example, in their own poetry, students confronted tough issues, such as bullying and struggles experienced by teenagers. This type of activity was time-consuming and at times emotional, but greatly beneficial. In sum, the teacher in this class found an effective way to be flexible and choose her own strategy and resources while still staying within the state mandates.

In other research, Ciardiello (2010) examined how poetry can be used to illustrate power relations and silence voices; and presents a case where students used writing poetry for civic responsibility. In general, poetry as a tool is powerful since students are able to relate to it. The use of poetry has two goals: to speak to the heart and to the head. When the poetry speaks to the heart, it is more apt to create empathy. In Ciardiello's research, students read about an event where poetry was used to protest social injustices, the topic being Chinese immigrants and the Talking Walls at Angel Island detention center in San Francisco Bay in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ciardiello believes that young people can learn about civic responsibility through the creation of peaceful relations with classmates. Also, as Banks and Banks (1999) discovered, students can be presented with age appropriate cases that involve human rights since young students take a natural interest in fairness. This connects global concepts to students' personal issues (as cited in Ciardiello, 2010).

There were several positive outcomes observed in the research. For instance, students were observed discussing how they choose friends and who they want to play with. Furthermore, the students explored feelings about new students and strangers as well as different interactions they may have with people in different circumstances. In addition, everyday situations regarding fairness and compassion in the school were tapped into. The students learned the valuable lesson that democracy entails trustful talk among strangers and bringing together differences. Even further, the students experienced firsthand that a democratic classroom, friendship is different and is no longer based on personal experiences, but social responsibility.

Implementing this method of teaching, other types of literacy can be used, such as paintings, sculptures and photographs with social justice themes. Merriam (1971) recommends having students create “I” poems to share their unique voice and individuality. Topics such as ethnic exclusion, literacy, language, discrimination, cultural identity, civil rights, and the like could all be used (as cited in Ciardello, 2010). Ciardello’s research further demonstrates how reading and writing enable young citizens to have a democratic voice.

A more recent example of transformative writing is presented by Roberts (2013) who is part of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES). The CES developed a strategy in 2007 called “Chalk talk” where students take part in a silent critical discussion of a phrase or question by writing on the board simultaneously. Since discussion is an important element of instruction, the chalk talk strategy allows all students to provide personal input and knowledge into a discussion. However, the limitations are that there is limited space and discussions cannot be saved for future reference. To address these



issues, an alternative approach is to incorporate GoogleDocs into implementation. GoogleDocs is a free program that allows multiple users to write and edit on a document and saves it electronically in a hard drive for future reference. One particular discussion was about the Supreme Court case Brown vs. Board of Education. Students were challenged to discuss an equal education. By use of the “silent” debate, students felt more comfortable to write feelings since they may have not felt comfortable speaking in class. Students discussed special education and tracking. They were challenged with additional complex questions to discuss new programs and how to fund the programs to change the current educational situation.

Roberts (2013) found that the simple change to the approach to chalk talk allowed his students to further their discussion of controversial issues outside of the classroom and helped to promote critical thinking. There was unlimited space for students to write as opposed to writing on the board in the classroom and poor handwriting was not an issue.

Additionally, other themes that were apparent in Roberts study that are also evident in the additional studies regarding transformative writing are the content of curriculum became more engaging and it increased student participation. Most importantly, students were able to build a tolerance among other individuals as a result of critical discussion in writing. By writing about critical topics, students realize their words can create change in themselves or others.

### **Struggles within Democratic Teaching Frameworks**

Although teaching within a democratic framework is invaluable to students and is feasible to implement with accountability, at times, many teachers do find it challenging

when trying to strike a balance. Plaut and Sharkey (2003) include a narrative by one educator named Hadden who reflects on her time as a teacher, having a passion for critical education yet in an environment with mandates that controlled the curriculum. With beliefs that were grounded in Giroux's critical theory that teachers should question what and how they teach, Hadden found herself transforming her students' lives and gaining support of parents, yet lacking support from administration. For her teacher research project in 1992 for her Master's Degree, she led her fifth and sixth grade class in analyzing the hidden curriculum and omitted information within the Utah State Core Curriculum Guide and the reading text supplied by the school district. In addition, the students analyzed the dress codes, discipline plans, standardized tests in the school, and tracking systems. After analyzing this information, the students submitted proposals for change to the administration.

Hadden also provided her students' freedom to voice their opinions about the curriculum and plan curricular activities on their own (i.e. planning a field trip). In addition, despite the tracking system in place, Hadden submitted all of her students' names to be included in Advanced Placement for the following year. Unfortunately, she encountered disapproval from the system, and lost her job because she was viewed as not being a "team player." Others also viewed her as someone who did not want to conform to mandated curriculum or use standardized tests to drive instruction or track students. That said, Hadden argues that teachers do have room to maneuver within the limitations of curricula, testing and other dictates, however it is within limitations. Unfortunately, critical education that disturbs or breaks down barriers could cause risk for disciplinary action (as cited in Plaut & Sharkey, 2003). Hadden states "it is often the case, as

frequently lamented by critical education theorists, that the gulf between critical theory and classroom practice is enormous” (p. 243).

Lopez (2011) warns that culturally relevant pedagogy is challenging, time-consuming and cannot be reduced to strategies. Teachers must grapple with how to engage the students and look for ways to encourage success and accept some inevitable failures and tensions, because only within classroom practices will teachers find the answers that they need.

An additional challenge for teachers regarding critical literacy is choosing texts. According to Barno (2014), choosing texts to provide multiple viewpoints and to facilitate discussion may be particularly challenging for teachers who are a part of the dominant culture. In order to assist him in choosing authentic and relevant texts for his 2014 study, Barno sought out feedback for authenticity from his students, viewing them as the experts in this respect.

Similarly, some pieces of literature may make students uncomfortable, such as the study by Kelly Harper featured in Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2009) *Inquiry as Stance*. When students are uncomfortable, it puts the teacher in a dilemma with regards to how to move forward. Freire (1998) stated “if we escape conflict, we preserve the status quo” (p. 45) (as cited in Cochran-Smith and Lytle, p 250). At times, Harper downplayed the issues in response to one student, and also offered different reading choices; but nonetheless, she remained committed to the goals of her study and kept offering students the choices to read complex literature with underlying controversial and/or difficult issues.

Hoffman (2000) advises teachers to immerse students in various texts that illicit all different types of emotions and demand for critical reading of the texts. Skills and strategies for reading need to be taught in this type of context. Also, teachers are encouraged to resist doing what compromises their moral values and be creatively noncompliant in the contexts of rigid accountability systems. This includes incorporating multicultural literature that is appropriate for the students in the class and to also provide opportunities for students to create counter texts or write in order to make a change in their current situation. Nevertheless, teachers who have the support from administration or a whole school effort toward democratic school reform, these practices become much easier to implement in the classroom.

## Chapter 5

### Transformative Schools

#### Democratic Schools

During this time of accountability, there are many schools that are taking part in whole school reform by adopting democratic frameworks or developing small charter schools that are mission-driven. Mission-driven schools are in contrast to test-driven schools that have a main goal of improving scores. The educators in these schools view education as an inquiry-based endeavor and view assessment as understanding how a student can apply skills to being a good citizen (Glickman & Peters, 2009). Despite pressure to focus solely on test scores, mission-driven schools attempt to hold fast to democratic ideals.

As already previously discussed, research indicates that diverse students are not achieving the success in schools that they should be achieving. Classrooms are becoming more diverse and the numbers of students in classrooms are growing, therefore there is more and more of a need for culturally relevant pedagogy; and even further there is a growing need for increased engagement for all learners which means smaller class sizes. In order to assist teachers and schools in completing such complex tasks, examples need to be provided (Lopez, 2011).

Engel (2008) describes a democratic school community like that of Dewey's Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, which not only studies government processes but actively engages students in the school community. That is, the school emulated a cooperative society on a small scale. Engel further states that this type of activity for students helps enlighten the students about politics and teaches them to use

politics to help make informed decisions. It also helps the students in learning how to connect with their equals. Democratic behaviors involve dialogue, discussion and debate, which are essential tools for students to learn. Using this learning approach, students are given power for shared governance, which involves risk. The curriculum was centered around the students' interests and occupations. Students learned about different social activities (i.e. occupations) and planned and reflected on them. History was taught in a non-linear way that attempted to provide insight for each particular occupation of the student and aimed at the student's developmental level. In sum, history was incorporated into the student's actions. For example, students learned about sheering of sheep and spinning of wool when the occupation was the production of clothing. All in all, Dewey emphasized cooperation of socially-minded individuals over competition.

Furthermore, Watson (2011) studied an alternative school in order to explore how it created an appropriate learning environment for marginalized students. This study illuminated the need for current educational practices at all schools to shift focus on the success of all students in a small setting. Watson (2011) conducted an ethnographic study in 2008 at Sunnydale Enrichment Institute (SEI) in Indiana with 70 students at the alternative school. Students had issues with family support, teen pregnancy, drugs, behavioral issues and troubles with the law. Their academic struggles were due to family, economic and social pressures. The curriculum at SEI was unique since it was flexible with objectives and instructional choices. Teachers worked with each student to align their learning to the state standards in a reflective planning process which gave ownership to the students. The choices included learning packets and booklets, technology projects such as websites or PowerPoints, seminars or computer-based instructional tutorials. The

teachers observed how dialogue and choice helped to alleviate behavioral issues. The intimate environment also provided students with motivation and engagement. One student pointed out that being able to work and talk with friends helped change her create a more positive perspective of school. The freedom to talk facilitated more healthy relationships as well. Students were challenged to answer questions about their work like why it is important and meaningful to their life. Despite many of the positive aspects, students did yearn for a more inclusive environment and felt isolated from the traditional students where they could feel more understood. Watson (2011) challenges grouping policies in many districts that are made for solely instructional convenience.

In another study, Quinn and Ethridge (2006) explored the success of an “A-rated” public charter school in Florida, interviewing professional educators who were involved in founding the school in 1999. The school has been successful at obtaining high standardized test scores, yet not teaching to the test or focusing on standards or narrow goals. Indeed, the school encourages creativity and critical thinking with a focus on inquiry. In addition, the school builds a culture of autonomy and respects children by creating a child-centered curriculum. It commits itself to doing what is wise for children. The customs of the school include regular morning meetings where curriculum is negotiated and planned with student input, field studies and service opportunities. Nonetheless, the researchers state that this is not a prescription for success. Rather, it can be used as an example to create conversations in other schools regarding practices that may be wise to use in that particular setting depending on student needs and interests.

At inception, the founders of the school spent much time developing a plan that focused on the children. Teachers and administrators have a deep commitment, and have

respect for all learners and a partnership with families. There is also a sense of trust and value between the administrators and teachers. For example, administrators make the standards clear, but give the teachers autonomy to make decisions about how to meet the standards. In addition to fostering autonomy of teachers, the teachers relay autonomy to their students by allowing students to negotiate and plan learning. Students take part in field studies where they visit locations, actively engage with the environment, and relate the learning to curricular objectives (i.e. visiting the library, the beach, restaurant, hospital, or retirement community). Moreover, at this school, family is seen as the most important influence in a student's success, and so family is involve in discussions. All-in-all, the school maintains pedagogy based on the children rather than the tests. Students also have service related activities in order to apply learning in a meaningful context. The school strives to connect learning with service.

Kugelmass (2000) describes a school (Betsy Miller School) committed to progressive reform, diversity and inclusion in the face of state standards and high-stakes testing. Due to a school closing, 200 non-English speaking students merged with 200 white students from a middle-class professional community. In 1987, a new principal took over who eliminated pull-outs for special education students and ESL students. New teachers were hired, the teachers having a shared belief about constructivist teaching, inclusion, collaboration and teacher and student empowerment. The teachers attended race relations workshops and investigated their own cultural biases. Assessments included self-assessments and running records (observation of student work). The school piloted a Narrative Assessment Process, based on Carini (1986) which included written accounts of student work, strengths and potential. It also included goal setting with



children and parents. Nonetheless, a new superintendent in 1996 challenged the practices in the school since their average scores were poor (due to all students being included). The teachers who were aware of the history and who were firm in their progressive beliefs and constructivist approaches, resisted and publicly demonstrated. With debates in staff meetings, the teachers compromised and obtained a three-year waiver to modify the assessments to accommodate performance standards. During this time, the teachers infused the standards into the assessment along with interest, ability and development. The teachers also integrated direct instruction of phonemic awareness and guided reading into their programs with success.

As a result of this, the teachers were able to maintain their progressive ideals about curriculum and assessment by making refinements to their narrative accounts of students. The implications from this account of Betsy Miller School are that teachers need to develop an understanding of the political nature of school reform, collectively negotiate, and compromise in order to keep from disciplinary action or the loss of a job.

Ted Sizer, the founder of Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), contends that traditional designs of K-12 education are ineffective. Sizer (1999) asserts you cannot teach students well if you do not know them well, supporting personalized learning in small learning communities. With class sizes small, teachers are able to know students well and focus on what is essential. This allows more time to talk to students and connect with them developing an understanding of their background and family life.

In further criticism of traditional schools, Sizer found that students who pass tests may not actually be intellectually challenged. He also noticed that most high schools were lecture-oriented without much time for students to talk and subjects were not

interrelated. Furthermore, students in traditional schools are not taught material in depth and not provided with time to conduct long-term analytic work. He argues against covering large amounts of material that will not be retained long-term.

He created CES which is based on guided principles. The nine principles include learning to use one's mind well, less is more, goals apply to all students, demonstration of mastery, teacher as a coach, democracy, equity, and a whole school commitment. The CES value creative thinking and sustained work of students, not measured by standardized assessments.

Sizer (2005) encourages new designs of school, although they may be risky. In support of charter schools, Ted Sizer clarifies that charter schools can only be effective if they create a new mold and they do not reflect the current system where students are mindlessly made to prepare for tests. He also describes that although charter schools have more autonomy, there are still high expectations and are heavily regulated.

He describes how the Massachusetts system of performance review conducted rigorous inspections of one charter school Francis W. Parker. The inspection consists of reviewing student work, shadow students and teachers, observe classes and talk with staff, students and parents. Test scores are a piece of the review but not at the center. There are annual focused visits with full scale inspections every five years. Graduation is based on student exhibitions where students portray details of their learning. This is a project-based learning experience and assessment. During this exhibition process, the CES principles are evident since instruction is personalized and the student becomes a worker.

A major focus of CES is quality teachers that are well-trained. Teachers work together in order to develop the school's unique program. Time for teachers to collaborate and discuss the nine principles is a priority in Essential schools. All teachers

have similar beliefs about learning and engage in professional development that allows them to learn from one another and improve practices. Teachers also serve as advisors to students to promote their emotional and social growth in addition to academic growth. Thus, CES promotes close relationships between teachers and between teachers and students.

The CES opened up to elementary schools and currently 20% of CES schools include elementary grades. The network of schools support one another in an effort called the National Elementary School Networks in order to dialogue and collaborate. The CES addresses the issue of families struggling to help their children learn due to financial and societal stresses.

Cushman (2010) describes numerous Essential Schools at the Elementary level in her article *What Makes Elementary Schools 'Essential?'* One particular school called Earth School in New York City, centers the curriculum on what is in the local area (i.e. subways, seaport, natives who settled in the area). The schools' curriculum focuses not only on reading but writing, speaking and listening and allowing students to think out problems and express themselves through art. Students practice reading and writing within projects. For example, one class built a classroom subway model with blocks collaboratively. In addition, students took part in building a garden and also protest social issues by writing to City Hall. Discussion is at the heart of the instructional day as children problem solve and listen to others' ideas. As opposed to lectures, drills, and worksheets, students take part in small group work and debates.

Cushman goes further to describe a CES public school in Milwaukee which addresses the issue of poverty on their students. The child is approached in context with

his or her situation and is viewed as a learner in the community. In order to promote deeper relationships with students, teachers “loop” or remain with the same class for two consecutive years. All students are included in instruction and students’ first language is incorporated into reading and writing instruction. Assessment is child-centered, for example the Primary Language Record, a detailed documentation of growing literacy, is utilized. Parents are encouraged to not perceive standardized test scores as everything a child knows and should view it only as a piece of a bigger picture.

In another portrait of an essential school, Cushman describes Oakland Park Elementary School in Fort Lauderdale which restructured the school into family units so that the classes were mixed-age. Teachers meet frequently with family units and grade-level groups to examine and discuss the Coalition principles and share ideas such as puppet shows or photo journals. In addition, the school provides opportunities for parents to take part in instruction after school to learn English.

However, during a time of accountability, Glickman and Peters (2009) report how CES schools are influenced by the pressures of NCLB and teachers working in these schools need support to continue to sustain a democratic vision. In these schools, there are requirements to comply with high-stakes accountability measures. There are important considerations for schools that are attempting to take part in the Coalition. They warn that many schools with a “small school” vision do not realize there is more to consider besides size. More specifically, time needs to be spent considering the core principles and practices, scheduling, assessment and hiring of staff within a supportive environment of colleagues. In deciding on all of these said issues, the staff needs to have

equal and collective authority in decisions. Additionally, CES schools need to be part of a broader network in order to expand on and learn from other examples.

Similarly, Hirsch (2007) studied the effects of NLCB on essential schools while working as a humanities teacher at an Essential school in Arizona. Before her dissertation, she observed how the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) was introduced as the standardized graduation test and students were required to pass the reading, writing and math tests in order to graduate. Due to these tests, the school had to reduce the amount of graduation exhibitions in order to better prepare students for tests. In addition, NCLB had forced the frameworks to change from heterogeneous grouping of reading instruction to pull-out models where students received remediated instruction which was not connected to the curriculum. However, one positive response noted by Hirsch from NCLB was that the school hired more ELL-endorsed teachers so that more people were working with the ELL population and money was not solely going to resources. Despite this, the pressure to focus on test scores was evident and counter-productive.

As a result, Hirsch focused her dissertation on a mixed method study to examine how 184 Coalition high school teachers and administrators from 46 schools in 21 states perceived the NCLB Act and its impact on their performance based assessment systems, course offerings, curriculum, instruction and staff development. The study found a slight shift in priorities in student groupings, a reduction of performance assessments and aligning the assessments to standards as well as a big shift in course offerings in order to focus more on test preparation. Staff development also became focused on testing. The high-minority schools showed the most hostility toward testing illustrating how schools

with minority students are the most negatively affected. Hirsch contends that schools and educators in CES need to be conscious of the balance of real teaching and test preparation. She suggests inviting lawmakers and community members to the exhibitions along with media so that it could better inform policymakers about the importance of alternative assessment.

To better demonstrate how the exhibitions are pertinent for students, Hirsch describes a vignette of two students' success that is not measured with a test. Marisol is a student who came from Mexico, unable to speak English while Julie was born and raised in a wealthy family, however had a physical facial deformity which affected her ability to sustain quality friendships. Since Marisol left behind her horse in Mexico and dreamed to own a horse and ride in Arizona. She decided to study the food and nutrition of horses and wanted to learn about becoming a trainer or veterinarian. Julie underwent jaw surgery and wanted to chronicle her medical and emotional experience and created a video to educate future patients whom she also counseled as part of her project.

Both students had to write research papers in addition which was a rigorous process with many drafts. It is important to note that both students were emotionally attached to their projects, which kept them motivated and engaged in their work. A lot of time goes into coaching students to better their papers and one-on-one conferencing allows teachers to customize instruction and feedback to students. However, both students had to retake the standardized tests necessary to graduate but their level of learning and demonstration of knowledge from their exhibitions was immense and more compelling than a test score. In addition, their projects were able to have a positive impact on community members.

Similar to Ted Sizer, Darling-Hammond (2008) calls for the restructuring and reorganization of schools to become more equitable, more than solely implementing critical literacy practices. In addition, she contends that the federal government should expand on providing grants for small schools. Specifically schools that focus on assuring there is an abundant amount of classroom-based staff in order to keep class sizes small. In her article *Creating Excellent and Equitable Schools*, Darling-Hammond discusses five examples of schools in the San Francisco area with low-income and minority students that increased graduation rates and over 80% of students attend college after graduation.

Students within the school are challenged to create projects, take part in internships in areas such as architecture, construction or engineering. One example of a project students created was a model of an ecologically friendly zoo, organizing resources and developing a design orally and in writing. The students understand what they are learning and receive feedback to revise. In addition, students are expected to connect with community groups in the area to take part in helping others and contributing to change. Students are taught how to effectively communicate and engage in discussions about civics and social justice.

The characteristics that contributed to the schools' success were intensive professional development for teachers and a small learning environment. Teachers meet regularly for several hours a week to examine student progress and create coherent curriculum. Additionally, teachers take part in coaching where they are able to learn from one another. Allowing teachers to make decisions and become mentors to one another, teacher morale is high. Since there are not a large number of students attending, adults

and students can develop strong relationships that are long-term. The schools have committees that offer counseling and academic support to students as well as develop relations with families.

The themes that build the foundation of a democratic school include a firm belief in their school's pedagogy, trust in teachers' knowledge and expertise, and doing what is wise for children. Another common theme that resonates from these studies is collaboration among the teachers and administration. Teachers who have support to implement democratic teaching strategies will have greater success. That said, educators in democratic schools need ongoing professional development and resources. Most importantly, the research on democratic schools illustrates how tests are not the sole focus of educators. It is possible for a democratic and critical education to improve test scores without having to "teach to the test."

### **Democratic Literacy Programs and Organizations**

Currently there are many programs that aim to enhance the social and emotional growth of students in order to help classrooms enhance the social processes that lead to greater academic learning. These interventions focus on democratic principles in order to make learning more culturally responsive and student-centered. While these programs are not a curriculum, instead they provide schools and educators a more progressive approach to teaching and learning.

Although teachers may find difficulties when balancing democracy with accountability, there are resources that teachers may pull from for assistance. Mullen and Johnson (2006) call for professional behaviors that help blend the obligations of democracy and accountability. Democratic leaders and schools cannot believe that ethnic



and minority parents do not promote literacy at home. Initiatives like Schools Reaching Out strive to broaden what is meant by parental involvement and replace the deficit theory about urban parents by emphasizing family values and cultural differences as strengths. Data must be collected in ways that do not exclude human connection in the classroom and intellectual passion. There needs to be room for risk, as opposed to seeking a fail-safe measure of instruction based on empirical evidence. Democratic leaders need to take the lead in gathering evidence within the context of the school. Furthermore, collaborative partnerships need to be forged with government representatives and professional education organizations to facilitate accountability efforts.

In order to demonstrate the need for democratic literacy programs, Sari, Sari and Otunc (2008) argue that prejudices, negative attitudes and discipline problems are the direct effect of democratic values not being sufficiently taught in schools. The researchers studied elementary students in Turkey regarding their devotion to democratic values and ability to problem solve conflicts and create solutions. Using a Devotion to Democratic Values Scale (DDVS) and a Conflict Resolution Ability Scale (CRAS), 257 fourth through seventh graders were studied. According to research (National Council for Social Studies [NCSS], 1984; Kinnier, Kernes & Dautheribes, 2000; Meyer, 1990; Öhrn, 2001; Selvi, 2006), necessary values for a democratic society include independence, freedom, self-respect, friendship, helpfulness, cooperation, equality, secrecy, honesty, responsibility, justice, diversity and tolerance, respect of environment and law, and conflict resolution using peaceful methods (as cited in Sari et. al, 2008). The study concluded that students' levels of democratic values were highly correlated with their

ability to create solutions to problems. Also, it was found that students' participation in organized programs to gain these qualities was correlated with the qualities in students; therefore implying democratic programs are effective at helping students gain democratic qualities. This study validates the need for implementation of democratic programs within schools in order to positively impact students.

Hoffman (2000) advises teachers to connect with professional organizations since democracy will be fought for on the grassroots level and not on the governmental level. To support this notion, Hoffman notes the International Reading Association (IRA) has become involved in Reading Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) in an effort in Eastern Europe and former Soviet countries to transform from authoritarian to democratic way of living. In 2000, RWCT was developed in Kosovo. RWCT is a modern teaching philosophy based on constructivism where students build knowledge through research, and students deduce consequences and seek relevant sources of information to solve problems. Interactive methods help transform students from being passive recipients of knowledge to active learners. Learning environments are collaborative and teachers provide tools and resources to students to help them test their ideas (Karanezi 2014).

Furthermore, Wile (2000) describes the RWCT which strives to help educators change their teaching methods in reading and writing in order to facilitate democratic behaviors in students. Based on the belief of Goodlad (1994) who stated that teachers are "moral stewards" of democracy, Wile (2000) discusses how schools can carry out this mission. The curriculum is more than just teaching about civil societies and how democratic government works. It works to provide the working knowledge and skills individuals need to become active participants in a democratic society. For example,

students are explicitly taught communication skills, literal and inferential comprehension, vocabulary development, grammar and composition. Literature is juxtaposed with newspapers and non-fiction pieces in order to explore diverse opinions. Students must question validity of sources and monitor their own learning. Furthermore, the framework is meant to encourage students to make personal connections between their reading and writing and prior experiences. They learn how to listen to ideas and reflect within thoughtful discussions. Instead of recitation experiences, students take part in debates. In sum, students are taught about the connection between literacy skills and empowerment.

Additionally, Wile (2000) acknowledges that this deep exploration of content is unrealistic to teachers who feel pressure to cover a wide curriculum and prepare students for tests. He provides solutions to balance this task and states that in order to implement a democratic curriculum, advocates of content and advocates of process must learn to “dance together”. He asserts that students will master surface content when they are engaged in activities that promote in-depth learning and critical thinking. In other words, teachers promote process in the context of content learning. In addition, national and international comparisons of schools indicate students are better able to memorize content than applying and evaluating information. These higher-level skills will help students achieve on high-stakes proficiency tests. Also, teachers that allow students to work collaboratively and take responsibility for their learning, find that students expand their knowledge base. Lastly, Wile (2000) points out how innovative teaching techniques entails risk and teachers need administrative support, training and a commitment from the staff as a whole.

Another resource is Rethinking Schools which is a non-profit organization with

an emphasis on school reform that addresses issues like basal readers, standardized testing and textbook-dominated curriculum. The organization also publishes educational materials with a focus on social justice. In the face of a discouraging future, the program is steadfast in its beliefs about education and supports grassroots efforts to enhance learning for children. Rethinking Schools writes about issues of race, and funding as well as some current issues taking place in urban schools. The organization envisions schools as a place where diverse members of society come together to learn to talk, play and work collectively.

Even further, the National Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP) developed by Lucy Calkins is an example of a program that strives to embrace reading and writing workshops across New York City, offering conferences and studies for literacy coaches at a national and international level. The core beliefs and values of TCRWP are based on Dewey and his belief that education is fundamental for social progress. The program embraces change (i.e. CCSS) while still holding fast to their commitment to purposeful literacy instruction with aims that go beyond state testing. The instruction in the program emphasizes student choice of topics and interaction with a book club, extensive reading (i.e. 40 minutes of independent reading per day), and instruction with texts that students can read with 95% accuracy with a focus on increasing text complexity. Furthermore, the project explores how to use data effectively; and helped create a web-based assessment system and build an alliance with Danielson's Framework for Teaching (Teachers College, 2014).

In a project called the Illinois Project for Democratic Accountability, Stitzlein, Feinber, Green & Miron (2007) seek to amplify the voices of teachers and add to the

understanding of what student achievement is. The researchers provide insight for educators who are seeking ways to mediate the conflict between accountability pressure and a critical education for students. The research focuses on Evergreen Elementary, a school that is heavily diverse, yet not identified as “in need of improvement.” The school follows a progressive philosophy of education with an emphasis on active learning, process learning, life-long learning, and developing socially responsible students. In addition, the school does not use report cards with letter or percentage grades, but narrative accounts of performance. This method emphasizes growth over achievement.

The project included case studies (or composite portraits) of three educators from Evergreen Elementary School during the 2004-2005 school year. These three educators balance the recent focus on statistical achievement with important and alternative approaches to assessing students. That is, the educators make pedagogical decisions on an on-going basis and based on a complete student profile. In addition, the educators use mini-assessments and teacher-developed assessment alternatives along with a structured approach to teaching reading. Different aspects are observed and assessed, including discussion, story-telling, analyzing appearances, problem-solving scenarios, and close observation of students while working. In addition, the educators note parental involvement and other details of a child’s situation in the assessment which would not be picked up by standardized tests. With these details taken into account, lessons are tailored to meet student needs. In addition, student social skills are emphasized in the classroom and assessed (ability to keep friendships over time, create diverse friendships, and ability to traverse situations with adults). With this method of assessment, tests scores were not devalued by teachers, but instead employed into a broader definition of educational

success. As opposed to assessing using multiple-choice formats, written, oral and visual work was the priority. Writing assessment was focused on the growth over time with numerous pieces, rather than an emphasis of the one piece on the state test. Lastly, many teachers felt that mass distributed curricula and accountability practices that do not take into account the local context of the school jeopardizes the continued success of schools like Evergreen.

One example of transformative learning currently taking place in a number of charter schools in the United States is called Deeper Learning. Deeper Learning was introduced by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in 2010. The foundation supplies grants to support schools that will help to solve social and environmental issues. The goals of the foundation are to reduce poverty, improve education for students in California and elsewhere, expanding field of philanthropy and support vibrant performing arts in the communities of students. While there are many programs within the Hewlett Foundation, the education program is one that is committed to improve education reform and increase economic opportunity and civic engagement of students. It promotes students having a growth mindset, which means abilities can be developed and are not static. Deeper Learning is a set of outcomes of interrelated competences. The core competencies of Deeper Learning include rigorous academic content, developing critical thinking and problem-solving, working collaboratively, effective communication (written and oral), learning how to learn, and maintaining an academic interest (Hewlett Foundation, 2010).

There are several characteristics of Deeper Learning schools that set them apart from traditional schools. One particular network of schools is called Envision Education

located in San Francisco, California. The school promotes a family atmosphere with high standards. Students take part in deep discussion of topics and metacognitive learning. There are advisory meetings where students and teachers come together after class to sit and discuss issues. In addition, the school utilizes performance assessment. More specifically, students must take part in a long-term project and present a College Success Portfolio Defense to a panel of three teachers and one student. As part of this portfolio, students must write an in depth cover letter stating their purpose and articulate details of his or her research. The students must pass this requirement in order to graduate. The expectations for the portfolio defense are students provide artifacts and evidence of their learning and growth in an hour long professional presentation. Teachers collaborate with a check-list and take part in heightened discussion to determine if the student passes (Teaching Channel, 2014). Other characteristics of Deeper Learning schools that make them transformative are the personalization of the learning. Teachers have high expectations, build a rapport with students, and provide needed support to allow them to engage in Deeper Learning.

Conley (2013) describes how Deeper Learning informs teaching methods and learning strategies to help students achieve the performance expectations of the CCSS. Deeper Learning assists students in being able to master content knowledge, develop cognitive strategies and build on learning behaviors. Students work collaboratively and take part in authentic projects with research, writing and discussion. The Deeper Learning skills and the CCSS have many relationships and the Deeper Learning competencies allow students to master the CCSS.

An additional recent approach to teaching student democratic principles is the Responsive Classroom approach. With Responsive Classroom, schools can address the issue of discipline and student engagement in learning in order to help students build productive social skills. As a result of better social skills, students are able to grow cognitively. This is due to students' ability to cooperate, take responsibility and assert themselves, which leads to greater learning.

In addition, Responsive Classroom aims to develop deeper relationships with students and their families. The strategies are morning meeting, logical consequences, guided discovery, academic choice, classroom organization, and family communication. Morning meeting allow the community of learners to set a positive tone for the day and address any social issues within the classroom or school. Responsive Classroom provides consulting and workshops for teachers along with videos and resources. In order for the program to be successful, it needs to be a whole school effort so that the strategies and principles are expected outside of the classroom as well (Responsive Classroom, 2014).

In a 2007 exploratory study on the social and academic impact of the Responsive Classroom approach, Rimm-Kaufman and Chiu (2007) gathered qualitative data over two years from numerous schools using the approach. The researchers used questionnaires with teachers, parents and students and collected standardized testing data in order to determine if there were changes among children's behavior and academics. Three schools using school-wide implementation were compared to schools that were not using the approach. The researchers concluded from the teacher questionnaires that the teachers' who used more Responsive Classroom practices had children with higher scores in reading and writing. In addition, teachers perceived students to have strong abilities to



assert themselves and use prosocial behavior or get along well with others. However, when analyzing student achievement outcomes, there was only a small variance in reading for classrooms using the approach.

In addition, Buxton, Kayumova, and Alleksaht-Snider (2013) discuss a project created to implement democratic teaching practices within three middle schools called Language-Rich Inquiry Science with English Language Learners (LISELL). The project is aimed at helping teachers build instructional and assessment strategies that assist English Language Learners in developing the language of scientific investigation “where all students could read, write, talk, think about, and act on scientific issues they found engaging and meaningful” (p. 7). The instructional practices focus on projects and process instead of solely outcomes. With hands-on activities, students create hypotheses, observe, look for evidence, and explain relationships using academic language in context. The researchers used Gee’s (1999) theory of Discourse which states that language consists of big-D Discourses and little-d Discourses. Little-d Discourse refers to generally accepted ways people use language; and, big-D Discourse extends beyond basic language and refers to the ways that people interact, value and establish “right” ways of using language. The researchers explain that the accountability discourse (big-D) establishes the norms in the science classroom, and the little-d Discourse refers to academic language.

Despite the accountability discourse being a factor, the researchers observed how the competing discourses in the school hybridized over time. For example, teachers discussed in professional development how the materials and resources could fit within the structural constraints of accountability. One teacher discussed how he still needed to

post goals, standards and essential questions despite it being unintelligible to students, and also to provide hands-on experiences that engage learners and provide explicit focus on language development in science through writing. The teachers noted how the continuing professional development was key in helping them implement the LISELL practices since they could discuss with one another what worked and what did not work, in order to make changes in instruction. In addition, the teachers developed a deeper understanding of how language arts and science can become interlaced.

Additionally, Davis (2007) discusses Marri's (2005) Classroom-Based Multicultural Democratic Education Framework (CMDE) that assists teachers in gaining an understanding in all students' racial and cultural backgrounds, providing literature based on the backgrounds and cooperative learning for students. One example of how teachers can gain more insight into students' identities is asking student-centered questions during a "Do Now" activity before discussing topics such as the Holocaust by asking "To whom do you have the most allegiance?" and from there "Why do we have more allegiance to certain people versus others?" Another example given was when teaching the American Revolution, students can reflect in an essay by writing from the point of view of themselves in the time period of the same culture, race, religion or gender. This type of exercise allows students to understand their identity in the context of history.

With regards to democratic programs, "teacher education and professional development are key points of entry to teach strategies for helping teachers engage students critically with texts" (Davis, 2007, p. 619). Teachers in programs that learn about critical literacy and are assisted in implementing it in the classroom are found to be

enthusiastic and resilient despite the conditions controlled, the scripted curriculum and the mandates for specific teaching methods. Within the programs discussed, democratic instruction is evident since voice is given to the students and child-centered inquiry is the focus. By providing opportunities for students to develop prosocial behavior, academic discourse that builds on their primary discourse, students are better prepared to be a productive member of society. In addition, students are challenged to think about issues within the broader community and provided opportunity to provide evidence of his or her learning outside of a test.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Implications for Literacy Professionals and Future Research**

As stated in chapter 1, the objective of this study was to review, examine and analyze research related to accountability including high-stakes testing, teacher evaluations, standards, school reform efforts, and alternative assessments. In addition to this analysis, numerous other studies were reviewed investigating how teachers and schools are negotiating the accountability measures in schools; and even further, research was reviewed and analyzed pertaining to democratic school reform and critical literacy practices. Based on this extensive study into the stated areas, there are numerous implications and conclusions to be drawn in order to help better understand and improve the current situation in schools. After analyzing the studies, it is evident that there are changes that can be made on the classroom-level and on the school-level to better the current situation.

The main conclusion drawn from the research that was reviewed is that teachers need to appreciate their obligation to cohere with federal mandates; however, how the teachers interpret, discuss, and implement the federal mandates in the classroom should be based on their knowledge of quality literacy instruction and their ethical responsibility to students (Aronson & Anderson, 2013; Quinn & Ethridge, 2006; Glickman, 1998; Eisenbach, 2012; Johnson, 2005; Davis, 2009; Castro, 2010; Au, 2010). Not only do teachers have an obligation to accountability, but also teachers have a moral obligation to students to assure students are being engaged in the most effective literacy framework in the classroom.

Fortunately, aspects of accountability measures could be beneficial to teachers. Such benefits may include providing clearer expectations and providing a universal measurement of achievement that could potentially improve the process of pinpointing student needs. Further, research has found that teachers are more apt to collaborate and work to establish common goals for students when there is external pressure (Glickman, 1998; Weathers, 2011; Griffith et al, 2002; Perry, 2000). Hence, a teacher's greatest resource during this period of accountability pressure is colleagues and administration so that collaboration could take place.

Likewise, effective school reform requires bottom-up decision-making, which requires ample teacher collaboration and input into a variety of school and classroom judgments. Based on various studies, it is important for the principal and administrators to empower teachers and allow for collaboration and time to negotiate standards, decide on instructional means, and decide on school-level changes (Hansen, 1993; Tacheny, 1999; Ingersoll, Honig, 2004; Johnston and Hedemann, 1997; McMary, 1994; Davis, 2009; Au, 2010). When teachers are given voice and input, they will be more committed to the school's goals, and will be more likely to implement the strategies in the classroom.

In addition to empowering educators, the administration needs to create a positive and open relationship with the educators. This type of open relationship is critical because principals must be able to assist educators in their school framing issues and develop agreed upon solutions, while trying to create coherence to national standards (Honig, 2004; Mintrop, 2012, Coburn 2006; Au, 2010).

Thus, while standards and external demands may be a necessary component for a school's success, the capacity of teachers to contribute to the interpretation and implementation of the standards must carry the same weight. As such, a whole-school effort and collaboration from all teachers and staff cannot be emphasized enough. Some examples of how collaboration can be accomplished include establishing common goals, instructional frameworks and assessments across all grade-levels (Hansen, 1993; Tacheny, 1999; Honig, 2004; Johnston and Hedemann, 1997; McMary, 1994; Davis, 2009; Au, 2010; Fisher & Frey, 2007).

Another aspect of teacher empowerment allows for flexibility and innovation so that teachers can make decisions based on what is best for their particular students. This flexibility means that teachers do not have to engage in practices such as teaching “bubble” students or teaching to the test, which are practices usually encouraged in test driven schools (Aronson & Anderson, 2013; Quinn & Ethridge, 2006; Glickman, 1998; Eisenbach, 2012; Johnson, 2005; Davis, 2009; Gorlewski, 2013; Castro, 2010; Au, 2010). Teachers should be aware of how much this pressure is affecting their instruction, and be given the flexibility to use more student-specific strategies. In order for change to occur, fundamental changes in the classroom need to change by all individuals within a school. For example, instead of spending more time with students on test preparation or implementing a scripted curriculum, teachers ask the questions about what the issues are with learning and instruction and how they can be changed collectively.

Open communication between administration and teachers is also important to create effective teacher evaluations. From research and analysis, it is evident that that teacher effectiveness is crucial for student achievement. Creating an effective teacher

evaluation system requires input from all stakeholders as opposed to only the input of key policy makers and/or administrators. For example, input from the evaluator about areas for improvement in teacher practice could be ways to address the evaluation process to assure that it is a valid indicator of teacher performance. In addition, teacher input is needed. Studies confirm that the value-added system is flawed (Newton et al., 2010; Florida Times Union, 2012; Sawchuk, 2014; Weingarten, 2010; Marshall, 2013; Long, 2011), therefore in order to address this issue, teachers should become involved in ways to advocate for a better evaluation system. As such, grassroots movements and teacher unions are important organizations for teachers to be a part of in order to have a voice in development of the evaluation system.

From the research, it is evident that the value-added system is faulty. However, the new systems of teacher evaluation (Danielson and Marzano) lend themselves to constructivist approaches to teaching and teacher development, which are two important components for transformative literacy practice. Furthermore, keeping focused on the important components of effective literacy instruction would alleviate the stress of trying to meet a long list of benchmarks on evaluations (Harris & Sass, 2014; Schmoker, 2012; Weingarten, 2010; Florida Times Union, 2012; Sawchuk, 2014; Russ & Scheff, 2014; Ahmed-Ullah, 2011; Megan, 2012; Rockoff, 2004).

Once an effective teacher evaluation is developed, open dialogue between the administration and teachers during the evaluation process is also important. When it comes to teacher evaluations, the common themes that were apparent throughout the various studies were collaboration with the principal and other colleagues regarding the issues. Teachers should openly dialogue with administration in order to receive more

productive feedback from evaluations (Marshall, 2013; Kimball and Milanowki, 2009). In addition, teachers should be well-informed and mindful about what the percentage that test scores are linked to their evaluation.

If a majority of a teacher's evaluation is based on skills to be an effective teacher, and not on test scores, then the teacher will be more empowered to utilize and emphasize alternative assessment in his/her classroom. Numerous research findings regarding high-stakes tests validate the use of alternative assessment in the classroom and that alternative assessment should be the basis of a majority of classroom decisions. This is due to the fact that formative assessment is more valid and specific with information about student learning. That is, alternative assessment is much more helpful in pinpointing students' strengths and weaknesses than information provided by standardized assessments (Alternative Assessment, 2003; Falk, Ort and Moir, 2007; Black and William, 1998). In addition, assessment becomes seamless with instruction since observations of student learning allow teachers to determine his or her next steps in instruction.

Another benefit of alternative assessment is that it is comprehensive, lending itself to being a more culturally responsive approach to gaining information about students. The in-depth information gained from the use of alternative assessment allows teachers to consider all of their students' differing cultures and backgrounds. In addition, alternative assessment is interactive and allows for student input. Therefore, students will take more of an active role and become more engaged in their own learning (Black and William, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 2014; Alternative Assessment, 2003; Falk, Ort and Moir, 2007; Pyle and Deluca, 2013; Olele, 2012; Myran and Clayton, 2011; Stahl and Dougherty, 2013; Hargreaves and Earl, 2002; Kelly and Brandes, 2008).



Despite the vast amount of benefits that are derived from alternative assessments, it is difficult to implement alternative assessments over a large-scale because of the top-down pressure for test scores to be the main determiner of success; and, alternative assessments do not align with this theory because alternative assessments are not always quantitative in nature (Pyle and Deluca, 2013; Falk, Ort, and Moirs, 2007). Nonetheless, educators should not lose sight of the importance that formative assessment has in the classroom, and it should drive instructional decision-making, namely specific decisions about students. Formative assessment should also be used as the main source of evidence to communicate student growth to parents. High-stakes tests are neither capable of uncovering the strengths and weaknesses of students nor showcasing other strong skills a student may have artistically or interpersonally. In addition to alternative assessment, teachers can advocate for other methods of assessment to indicate student achievement, in order to try to bring a solution to the issue of assessment.

For example, another method of assessment that educators can advocate for is technology-based assessments. Fortunately, technology-based assessments bring promise for educators, as this type of assessment offers an authentic assessment that matches classroom literacy tasks and provides data about students that is timely and useful for decision-making. Using technology-based assessments teachers will gain information about students' abilities to problem-solve and apply reading strategies, which is not otherwise possible when using paper-based standardized tasks (Dougherty-Stahl and Schweid, 2013; Castelhana, 2013; PARCC, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2014; Pellegrino and Quellmalz, 2011). In addition, technology-based assessments will align with the CCSS, which necessitates students to read and interact with more complex texts

(Dougherty-Stahl and Schweid, 2013; Pellegrino and Quellmalz, 2011). Moreover, technology is engaging for students and could provide opportunity for innovative data analysis (Pellegrino and Quellmalz, 2011; PARCC, 2014).

Conversely, the PARCC and SBAC are new assessments and there is little research regarding the effectiveness to accurately assess student achievement of the standards (Lane, 2013; Herman & Linn, 2013). Therefore, if these standards are applied, classroom-based assessments should be applied in equal force in the classroom. This includes observations, anecdotal notes, rubrics, and projects (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Alternative Assessment, 2003; Falk, Ort and Moir, 2007; Black and William, 1998; Pyle and Deluca, 2013; Olele, 2012; Myran and Clayton, 2011; Stahl and Dougherty, 2013; Hargreaves and Earl, 2002; Kelly and Brandes, 2008).

Since PARCC and SBAC are new assessments, it is yet to be determined whether these assessments will promote teachers to adapt their instruction to match the test, which is known as “teaching to the test.” Despite these uncertainties though, the teachers’ abilities to fully understand these assessments in order to use the data effectively depends on the training that they receive. This implies that schools need to provide teachers with opportunities for ongoing professional development to utilize TBA to its full potential. Although the innovative testing systems bring promise, there are ways teachers can advocate for fair testing and a changed system such as joining advocacy groups (Hoffman, Assaf & Paris, 2001; Janisch et al., 2007; Jones, D., 2014).

Student-centered assessment practices, such as rubrics, exhibits, or long-term projects, advance critical literacy practices. This is because these assessments allow the teacher to create a more democratic learning environment, which gives students more

voice in the classroom, and thereby engages the students in their own learning. In many graduate programs, teachers are learning about critical literacy practices and how to broaden students' perspectives of the politics involved in schools affecting choices of texts, tests and school frameworks (Aronson & Anderson, 2013).

Without a doubt, critical literacy is well aligned with the notion of democratic teaching. Cranton and Wright (2008) describe a transformative educator as one who constructs personal meaning through experiences and discussion with others. That is, transformative educators filter their experiences through others, and spot distortions, prejudices and stereotypes in their own perspectives. Transformative educators take the necessary time in the classroom, teaching students through a gradual process of change. Using this process, transformative educators create a sense of safety for learners and develop trust by talking frequently with students and educating the "whole" person. This process is productive and rewarding, but takes time, patience, risk, trial and error in order to pursue in the classroom effectively.

Within the studies, it was apparent that teachers who taught in alternative settings had an easier time teaching with transformative instructional frameworks (North, 2009; Sizer, 2005), however, it is still possible to include critical literacy within the constraints of NCLB and other accountability mandates. Teachers who become empowered with this knowledge of critical literacy have the obligation of bringing these practices to the classroom and ensuring that the school values match his or her personal values about teaching and learning. These teachers also possess the ability to lead colleagues in transforming literacy practices by way of on-going professional development, coaching,

study groups and open dialogue. If teachers take on this obligation seriously, effective reform will soon follow in many classrooms throughout the country.

Although undemocratic practices are apparent in initiatives such as the CCSS initiative (Barno, 2014; Noddings, 2009), teachers should have a clear understanding that the critical skills within the CCSS are not critical literacy skills. More specifically, critical literacy skills require students to make an efferent response to texts, where they use texts to understand their own situations better. Concepts of critical literacy skills are not incorporated in CCSS; nevertheless, there are ways that teachers can incorporate critical literacy skills into their instruction. For example, teachers can still choose multicultural texts of many perspectives, encourage students to write in order to make changes, and adapt the CCSS in order to remain student-centered with instruction.

Critical literacy is important to incorporate into instruction because it allows for the opportunities to move students beyond basic literacy skills by truly engaging the students and offering opportunities to take ownership of their education with projects and community-based learning. To that point, teachers should incorporate time for students to engage with multicultural literature (North, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ciaridello, 2010), dialogue about issues that are important to them within their local community and personal lives, and allow students to become involved in creating change. In addition, students can use writing as a means to express their personal emotions and feelings about social injustices. The act of writing is a valuable tool because it often helps students elicit and organize thoughts in a coherent manner before sharing with others in hopes to promote change (Lopez, 2011; Ciaridello, 2010; Buxton et al., 2013; Roberts, 2013). These types of critical literacy activities create a democratic

classroom, and better prepare students to become productive and contributing citizens in society, which all further perpetuate Dewey's ideals (Freire, 2005; Johnson & Rosario-Ramos, 2012; Lee, 2011; Wolk, 2003; Johnston & Costello, 2005; Glass, 2000; Bottery, 1990; Lopez, 2011; O'Quinn, 2006; Shannon, 1993 Jones, Webb & Newmann, 2000; North, 2009; Sari et al., 2008; Engel, 2008).

When implementing critical literacy into the classroom, educators need to provide a culturally responsive pedagogy (Au, 2009) by valuing the backgrounds and literacies of diverse students, and matching the diverse students' primary discourse with the discourse of the classroom more closely. Instead of viewing students as having deficits, teachers should focus their efforts on getting to know students and their families and what they can contribute. Indeed, teachers should focus instruction on students' strengths (Souto-Manning, 2009; Nieto, 2003; Mullen & Johnson, 2003; Davis, 2007; Jones et. al, 2000; Roger et al, 2000).

To promote critical literacy, teachers should organize together and forge partnerships with governmental representatives in order to create a more democratic accountability framework for schools (Mullen & Johnson, 2006; Wile, 2000; Davis, 2007; Sari, Sari et al., 2008; Hoffman, 2000). In fact, teachers can actually apply the principles of critical literacy in order to promote a reform to critical literacy, by using critical literacy tools such as writing to elicit and organize thoughts in a coherent manner before sharing with others in hopes to promote the reform.

Furthermore, teachers should take advantage of the success of other schools when advocating for critical literacy. That is, teachers should use previous research studies of other schools that have implemented critical literacy as evidence to prove that critical

literacy is effective. Democratic teaching frameworks adopted by schools show potential to help raise achievement in schools and motivate and engage students in learning. Democratic organizations such as RWCT, Rethinking Schools, TCRWP or Deeper Learning advocate for student-centered learning and support teachers in this endeavor (Mullen & Johnson, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007; Hewlett Foundation, 2010). Small schools and charter schools utilizing democratic principles also show promise to truly closing the achievement gap and engaging diverse students in learning (Sizer 1999/2005; Darling-Hammond, 2008; Glickman & Peters, 2009; Cushman, 2010; Hirsch, 2007).

Generally speaking, teachers may not have direct control on whether policy makers stress high-stakes testing and accountability; however, it is possible for teachers to implement strategies discussed throughout this research analysis to attain an educational environment where transformative literacy instruction, standards, alternative assessment and school reform all co-exist. In essence, teachers do indeed have flexibility to engage students in a constructivist approach to learning, negotiating curriculum in the classroom while using innovative approaches to meet standards (Plaut & Sharkey, 2003; Gorlewski, 2013; Wray et al., 2000; Davis, 2009; Castro, 2010; Au, 2010). In other words, teachers should cohere to federal mandates, but should interpret, discuss, and implement the federal mandates in the classroom based on their knowledge of quality literacy instruction and their ethical responsibility to students. Using such an approach will likely satisfy a teacher's moral obligation to assure students are being engaged in the most effective literacy framework in the classroom.

More specifically, instructional strategies and literacy frameworks should be incorporated that have the students' best interests in mind and that are student-centered. Additionally, assessment needs to match the students' strengths, interests, goals and developmental level. This may mean not solely focusing on students closest to proficiency or viewing certain students as having a deficit. It also may mean adjusting the power relationship in the classroom and allowing more students the freedom to make choices and dialogue. These types of changes and frameworks may require more planning and preparation on the part of the teachers, and will inevitably be more time-consuming. However, the results will be invaluable, as it changes the lives of the students for the better. Thus, there is a need for collaboration in order to help support teachers making changes to their instructional frameworks and approaches. As teachers are involved in trial and error, debriefing and coaching may facilitate conversations that lead to better practices. No matter how reform may gain support or is mandated on schools, results can only be accomplished by the changed behaviors of all classroom professionals collectively.

After completing this research review, it is evident that there are additional implications that should be examined in future research. More specifically, additional questions for future research include: What impacts have the PARCC and SBAC had on instruction, teacher attitudes, technology use in the classroom, and student learning? How have rigid accountability measures affected teacher turnover? How have high-stakes tests affected students' emotional and interpersonal growth? How have accountability measures affected specific courses offered in schools? How do critical literacy practices improve student achievement on high-stakes tests?

What are the long-term effects on students who attend small democratic schools?



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