The Pennsylvania State University
The Graduate School
Department of Education Policy Studies

RIGOR FOR ALL? THE ENDURING TENSION
BETWEEN STANDARDIZATION AND DIFFERENTIATION
IN THE ERA OF THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

A Dissertation in
Educational Theory and Policy

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

May 2015
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ABSTRACT

This study explores how middle school literacy teachers across a metropolitan district in the South negotiate the tension between standardization and differentiation in the context of a new set of educational standards—the Common Core State Standards. The study explains the policy and organizational factors that shape teachers’ decisions about curriculum and instruction during Common Core implementation, including curricular tracking, a standardized curriculum, state testing, and beliefs about student ability. This district case study of literacy teachers’ decision-making is grounded in three bodies of literature: the literature on the unintended consequences of standards-based reform, the literature on tracking and detracking, and the conceptual literature on sense-making. This study uses qualitative methods to explore three related research questions: (1) How, if at all, did messages about the Common Core State Standards and equity shift from the national level to the district and teacher levels? (2) In the context of Common Core implementation and a standardized, Common Core-aligned curriculum, how are curriculum and instruction similar or different across curricular tracks? (3) In this district context, what factors shape teachers’ decisions about curriculum and instruction (e.g., state and district level policies, teachers’ beliefs)? Findings suggest that the dominant message about how the Common Core will create equity in this district is through instructional practices such as asking text-dependent questions, rather than through structural change. Findings also demonstrate that teachers receive mixed signals about the nature of student ability from Common Core implementation, testing policy, and curricular tracking. These mixed signals influence teachers' decisions about curriculum and instruction in ways that raise key questions about the potential of standards to ensure educational equity when standards are implemented in tracked school environments. These findings suggest that school and district leaders should carefully consider
how the policy and organizational environment can send mixed signals to teachers about the
nature of student ability and how to interpret the “rigor for all” rhetoric of the Common Core.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If this acknowledgements section was a speech at the Academy Awards, I would be yanked off stage well before I finished thanking the many, many people in my life who have contributed to this dissertation and to my academic journey.

To my parents, Mary and Vernon Hodge, thank you for a childhood full of words, art, and imagination. To my mom, Mary Hodge, thank you for showing me what it means to be self-reliant, and instilling for a love of reading in my early life that I am confident led to much of my later school success. To my brother Joseph, thank you for showing me how to dream big, risky dreams.

To Aunt Diane and Richard, THANK YOU for opening your home in “Palmetto County” to me for two extended visits and for chatting up every teacher in your network to help me make connections. I loved getting to spend time with you. You were the linchpin of this project; it would never have been possible without your support.

To my husband Alan—thank you for seeing me as a researcher before I did. Thank you for your willingness to support me financially through graduate school…especially as four years turned into five. Though I joke that I have spent the last five years as a “lady of [moderate] leisure”, Zoe and I do thank you from the bottom of our hearts for all those midday hikes. Thank you for believing in me.

To my fantastic cohort at Penn State, especially to Nnenna Ogbu, Lindsay Schrott, Adrienne Henck, Jen Lane-Myler, and Cat Biddle (whose once-a-week Skype calls have been the saving grace of the last six months), thank you for your friendship. The fifth year really has gotten better!

To Emily Crawford, Tiffanie Lewis, Katie Reed, Sarah Eckert, and Marcy Milhomme: Thank you for serving as my role models and for your willingness to share your proposals, power points, job market materials…whatever the next step in this journey has been, you have always helped me to do it better.

To my friends, especially Calicoe Richir, thank you for keeping in touch with me during such a difficult time in your own life. Our friendship has meant so much to me over the years. To Jennifer Kolin and Julia Lynne, thank you for a lifetime of friendship and foot stomping.

To Susanna Benko, who has gone from a rival, to an acquaintance, to an accountability buddy, to a scholarly partner, and more importantly, a true friend, over the last seven years. Thank you for your constant support as I follow in your footsteps.

To the Lanza family—Charissa, Vanessa, and Fran—(and to Janet, Katie, Melissa, Colleen, and all The Vreeland Store employees!), thank you for your kindness in letting me use The Vreeland Store as my mobile office. I know this probably was not one of the many uses you had in mind.
when you planned your coffee shop-bakery-delis-bar. Thank you especially to Charissa for your friendship.

To my many academic mentors at the University of Virginia, but particularly to Margo Figgins, who helped me understand how the English classroom is the perfect place to read the world. I hope that you would be proud of my work. To Carol Tomlinson, for her message that curriculum for the “gifted” is “good curriculum”—and all students deserve responsive, authentic, rigorous curriculum.

A special thank you to Joe Strzepek, Marion Rust (whose love of twice-told tales surpasses my own), and Tony Petrosky, for writing my letters of recommendation for graduate school and making this day possible.

To the university faculty in Palmetto County who were so generous with their time and connections—thank you! To Barbara, this dissertation would not have been possible without your insight, and I will be forever grateful to you.

My heartfelt gratitude also goes to the Penn State College of Education, the Penn State chapter of Phi Delta Kappa, and the Conference on English Education, for funding my data collection and allowing me to do this work.

To all of the Educational Theory and Policy faculty at Penn State, thank you for creating a culture of collaboration and trust among students and faculty. I had a fantastic graduate school experience because of you.

To Karen Tzilkowski, thank you for the many book recommendations and for your friendship. Thank you too to Trudi Haupt and Sally Kelly for their patience with reimbursement requests, room scheduling, and myriad other questions.

To Gerry LeTendre and Dana Mitra, thank you for your mentoring in publishing, reviewing, and academia in general, and your thoughtful stewardship of the American Journal of Education. I have been honored to be involved in AJE over the last three years.

To Mindy Kornhaber, whose humor and insight have immeasurably shaped this dissertation, thank you for taking me out to lunch, listening to me talk about my personal experience with tracking for over an hour, and then suggesting this topic—the Common Core and tracking truly was the perfect topic for me (I can tell because I am not even sick of it yet!).

To Erica Frankenberg, who serves as a role model to me in both productivity and kindness, thank you for your willingness to write with me and mentor me in any way that I needed.

To Anne Whitney, thank you for helping me never forget what it means to be an ethical teacher and teacher educator. Thank you also for helping me to straddle the worlds of teacher education and policy.

To David Gamson: I cannot express how grateful I am that you saw some raw kernel of potential in my graduate school application exactly five years ago. Thank you for your constant kindness. Thank you for encouraging me and allowing me the space to do my own research from Day 1,
and for always treating me like a colleague, even as I was still learning to be one. Thank you for your careful feedback on MANY drafts of my dissertation proposal, my Spencer applications, and my dissertation chapters. My work is always the better for your insight—I don’t have the words to express how grateful I am to you for your mentoring.

To my colleagues at the Quaker Valley School District, thank you for teaching me a great deal about how to both love and manage squirrelly middle school students, and to Dr. Heidi Ondek, thank you for taking a chance on an inexperienced teacher from out of town with too many master’s degrees. To my students at Quaker Valley, you are the inspiration for this work. You taught me what middle school students can do—anything.

To the teachers in Palmetto County who were gracious enough to trust an outsider, I have tried to honor your trust; I hope I have succeeded.
Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the problem

Over the past five decades, federal policy makers have proposed a variety of solutions to the problem of educational equity. While policy solutions have taken many forms—Title I initiatives, court-ordered desegregation plans, and special education legislation, to name a few—the common goal of these strategies has been to more equitably distribute high-quality educational opportunities. More recently, standards-based reform has been the dominant policy paradigm in American education at both the federal and state levels. Proponents believe that standards-based reform can create educational equity by establishing clear, common expectations for student achievement (e.g. Resnick, 1995; Smith & O’Day, 1991). The most recent version of standards-based reform, the Common Core State Standards, seeks to replace the current patchwork of state standards and assessments with a common set of “fewer, clearer, and higher” standards (Rothman, 2011, 2013). While policy makers are hopeful that the Common Core State Standards have the potential to counter the weakness of previous standards-based reform efforts, this study argues that both research and policy surrounding standards-based reform have overlooked a critical organizational feature of American schooling: curricular tracking.

In theory, tracking is designed to provide students with different learning needs access to rigorous curriculum that is appropriately differentiated by offering different “levels” of coursework (Hallinan, 1994). In practice, tracking often results in students in the higher track experiencing rich, authentic curriculum and high quality instruction, while students in the lower track encounter superficial, inauthentic tasks and low expectations (Oakes, 1985, 1994, 2005;
Page, 1991). Standards-based reforms up to this point have done little to mitigate disparities in curriculum and instruction across tracks. One of the great ironies of the last iteration of standards-based reform, No Child Left Behind, is that the student populations the law was designed to support, including English language learners and students in special education, were often concentrated in lower track classes designed for remediation. In such classes, students frequently experienced a narrowed, or even scripted, curriculum focused on test preparation (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglman, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Koretz, 2008; Watanabe, 2008). Instead, the Common Core State Standards press for all students to have access to rich, rigorous academic content, a concept I refer to as “curriculum equity.” However, schools that track students into different levels of academic content may differentiate the “common” learning opportunities students are supposed to have as a result of standards-based reforms like the Common Core. Thus, the urgent question is how, if at all, the Common Core State Standards can correct the weakness of earlier standards-based reforms and promote the ideal of “curriculum equity”—that all students will experience rich academic content and learning experiences regardless of their academic track.

Given that most secondary schools still practice some form of curricular tracking (Hallinan, 2004; Oakes, 2005), and that forty-five states and the District of Columbia are currently replacing their state standards with the Common Core, this window provides a valuable opportunity to study how districts, schools, and teachers understand and enact standards-based reform across tracks. I study this issue by looking across multiple school contexts in a large, countywide district to see how learning opportunities are distributed across high and low tracks in the context of the Common Core. Since individual classroom teachers are ultimately the arbiters of education policy (e.g. Cohen, 1990; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977), I pay close attention to teachers' perspectives to understand how and why learning opportunities are distributed across tracks. Therefore, I draw on sense-making theories of policy implementation (Coburn, 2001,
2005; Weick, 1993) to gather data on how individual teachers understand and enact the Common Core across tracks in different school types.

The research questions guiding this qualitative study are the following:

(1) How, if at all, did messages about the Common Core State Standards and equity shift from the national level to the district and teacher levels?

(2) In the context of Common Core implementation and a standardized, Common Core-aligned curriculum, how are curriculum and instruction similar or different across tracks?

(3) In this context, what factors shape teachers’ decisions about curriculum and instruction (e.g., state and district level policies, teachers’ beliefs)?

To answer these questions, I interviewed and observed middle school literacy teachers in a purposive, stratified sample of school contexts within “Palmetto County,” a metropolitan district in the South (e.g., I interviewed and observed teachers in low-income schools with high numbers of minority students; mixed-income schools with racially diverse student bodies; and high-income schools with a low numbers of minority students). Using NVivo qualitative data analysis software and Excel matrices, I analyzed data from the following sources:

• Interviews with English/language arts (ELA) and reading teachers, reading and writing coaches, and district administrators (25 total)

• Observations of classroom instruction in ELA and reading across curricular tracks (77 lessons across 11 teachers and six school contexts)

• Observations of district-wide professional development and school-level literacy and/or language arts team meetings (approximately 15 hours)

• Documents related to professional development, curriculum, and instruction at the classroom level (e.g., district-level Common Core professional development materials, district pacing guide, the teacher’s guide to the curriculum, teacher-created and district-created curriculum materials).
Overview of the study

The presentation of this study is divided into eight chapters. In Chapter 2, I provide background on the Common Core State Standards effort and growing resistance to this more recent wave of standards-based reform. I also review the literature on the unintended consequences of standards-based reform and tracking. I use this literature to build an argument that there is a dearth of literature focusing on how curricular tracking influences the implementation of standards-based reform, despite the persistence of tracking as an organizational structure in secondary schooling. I then describe the sense-making conceptual framework, which I use to interpret teachers’ understandings and enactments of policy.

Chapter 3 presents the methods used for this study. In this chapter, I describe my methodological choices and provide rationales for each element of my study design. This study was an embedded district case study of teachers situated in high-income, mixed-income, and low-income school contexts across a metropolitan district. Data collection took place over a six-month period in the fall of 2013. Data included interviews with teachers, coaches, and administrators; observation of classroom instruction; and curriculum and professional development documents.

In Chapters 4 through 7, I present the findings from this study. Chapter 4 analyzes the district’s approach to common Core implementation, tracing the way that messages about the Common Core and equity shifted from the national level to the district level. Then, I describe the Common Core policy messages that teachers expressed, and the extent to which they reflect messages at the national and district levels.

Chapter 5 looks at how equity-related policy messages related to the Common Core combined with other policies in the district related to testing and tracking. At the same time that the Common Core and a rigorous pre-Advanced Placement were being implemented, district policy was to organize students into reading and English/language arts (ELA) classes based on
their state test scores, which reified hierarchical, often deficit, views of student ability. Taken together, I argue that policy signals implying that student ability is hierarchical and fixed outweighed policy signals that ability is mutable and “all students” are capable of high-level work. These policy signals about student ability as hierarchical shape teachers' normative beliefs about students, which in turn guide teachers' decisions about how to modify the standardized, pre-Advanced Placement curriculum for their different groups of students. Further, the presentation of the CCSS as a set of technical changes in instruction did not challenge teachers' normative, often deficit, beliefs about student ability. Ultimately, teachers received mixed signals about student ability and the degree to which “rigor for all” is possible.

Chapter 6 answers the research question, “In the context of a standardized curriculum and a common set of academic standards, how, if at all, do teachers vary their curriculum and instruction across curricular tracks?” To answer this question, I draw on evidence from observations of 77 ELA and reading lessons across 11 middle school teachers working in one low-income, three mixed-income, and two high-income school contexts. Observations were coded for similarities and differences in curriculum and instruction across curricular tracks. Interview data (from all observed teachers as well as ten additional teachers and instructional coaches) was used to triangulate observation data, to provide additional evidence of the broad patterns described below, and to provide a rationale for teachers' instructional choices in their own words. In this chapter, I present the ways that teachers varied texts and tasks, expectations for student work, and their instruction to meet their conception of students’ needs.

Chapter 7 presents two contrasting approaches to classroom instruction across curricular tracks. I profile two middle school teachers within one district, each of whom exemplify one of the following approaches: (1) differentiating curriculum and instruction across tracks and holding different expectations for the quality of student work; and (2) using different curriculum and instruction but having similar expectations for the quality of student work. Finally, I compare and
contrast these two approaches, surfacing the distinct beliefs about student ability underlying each approach.

Chapter 8 relates these findings back to the literature on standards-based reform, tracking, and sense-making. Then, Chapter 8 discusses the implications of these findings for teacher education and the preparation of educational leaders. Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings for future research.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

This district case study of literacy teachers’ decision-making across in curricular tracks in the context of Common Core implementation is grounded in three bodies of literature: the literature on the unintended consequences of standards-based reform, the literature on tracking and detracking, and the conceptual literature on sense-making. In this section, I first discuss the policy context behind the development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Then, I turn to the growing controversy over many aspects of the standards and their implementation, including the relationship between the Common Core and the federal Race to the Top competition. I also discuss particular aspects of the English/Language Arts (ELA) standards that have been contentious in the ELA and literacy communities. Then, I examine each of these three bodies of the literature (standards-based reform, tracking, and sense-making). Finally, I describe how detracking and standards-based reform are equity policies with similar goals, but distinct theories of action.

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1 Sections of this literature review relating to the Common Core and the “instructional shifts” also appear in Emily Hodge and Susanna Benko, “A 'common' vision of instruction? An analysis of English/Language Arts professional development materials related to the Common Core State Standards,” *English Teaching: Practice and Critique,* 2014.
Background of the Common Core State Standards

Standards-based reform policies have gained increasing prominence in the United States over the last 20 years. In 2001, the United State Congress reauthorized the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act with bipartisan support under President George W. Bush. The reauthorized legislation, known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), mandated that each state create a set of standards and measure virtually all students’ progress toward meeting those standards. NCLB also imposed a series of sanctions on schools that did not make “adequate yearly progress” in bringing all of their students up to a standard of proficiency. In the last twelve years, policymakers, researchers, parents, and practitioners have increasingly criticized NCLB for narrowing curriculum (e.g., Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Palmer & Snodgrass Rangel, 2010; Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004), promoting scripted curricula (e.g., Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglman, 2004), and incentivizing cheating on state tests, among other critiques.

Given widespread dissatisfaction with No Child Left Behind in the mid-2000s and the relative success of a multistate effort to create common graduation requirements (the American Diploma Project), groups and individuals who had long pushed for national standards began to see common standards as politically feasible. Former state governors Robert Wise and James Hunt, together with the nonprofit Achieve, served as the primary policy entrepreneurs in convincing a diverse range of stakeholders that a set of national standards was in their best interests, despite the long history of local control over education in the United States (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013a, 2013b; Rothman, 2011). In order to marshal widespread support for the standards from diverse interest groups, policy entrepreneurs drew on different combinations of arguments, depending on what argument they believed would appeal to a particular audience (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013a). For example, when policy entrepreneurs appealed to the United States Chamber of Commerce, they drew on arguments linking higher standards to the
health of the United States economy and increasing workforce quality. In contrast, advocates for the CCSS relied on equity-oriented arguments with the National Council of La Raza (a Latino advocacy organization), who ended up promoting the standards to their members as a way to provide a more equitable education “across zip code” for Latino/a students. To the American Federation of Teachers, the new standards and assessments were framed as a way to support critical thinking and decrease widespread “teaching to the test” under No Child Left Behind (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013b).

The Common Core State Standards and Race to the Top

Some scholars studying the CCSS policy adoption process have noted the remarkable speed with which the majority of states adopted the CCSS—adoption occurred over a few months versus the three years or more it normally takes for states to consider and adopt new standards (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013a, 2013b). These scholars credit the unprecedented speed of adoption primarily to the financial incentive called Race to the Top, which the U.S. Department of Education provided to states in the wake of 2008's financial crisis (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013a; 2013b). When many states and districts were facing teacher layoffs due to severe budget cuts, the Obama administration offered a share of $4.35 billion dollars to states through the Race to the Top competition. States were awarded points in the grant process for adopting a specific set of reforms, such as teacher evaluations that included evidence of student growth and a set of “college and career ready standards” (i.e., the CCSS). While some research indicates that Race to the Top was not the only factor predicting states’ adoption of the Common Core (LaVenia, Lang, & Cohen-Vogel, 2015), many states that adopted the Common Core did so just before the Race to the Top deadline. Of the 45 states and the District of Columbia that initially adopted the CCSS, 32 (or 72% of adopting states) adopted the CCSS between June 2010 and August 2010; the
deadline to adopt the CCSS for Race to the Top funds was August 2, 2010 (Achieve, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Growing resistance to the Common Core

As the CCSS have moved from an abstraction to a reality, a large number of parents, teachers, scholars, and policy-makers across the aisle have criticized the CCSS for multiple reasons, taking issue with aspects of the development and adoption process, the standards themselves, and/or their implementation. One prominent critique, generally from Tea Party groups and conservative grassroots groups of parents (e.g., Hoosiers Against the Common Core, a parent group in the state of Indiana), centers on local control. This group perceives the Obama administration's support of the CCSS in Race to the Top as an unconstitutional federal intrusion into state and local control over education.

Another grassroots movement of liberal teachers, parents, and activists has grown vocal in opposition to the CCSS. This second group, with Diane Ravitch as a prominent member, has raised concerns over the textbook companies and others who stand to gain financially from the CCSS effort (Ravitch, 2013), the role of the Gates Foundation in the standards' creation (Schneider, 2013), and the way in which the standards have been implemented in the midst of changing assessment and teacher evaluation policies (Burris, 2013). While some prominent figures from this second group (e.g., Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers) supported the CCSS in theory, its implementation—especially coupled with new teacher evaluation systems—has been the source of a great deal of concern.

A problematic aspect of the CCSS for many is the involvement of private foundations in developing and promoting the CCSS. Political scientist Sarah Reckhow (2013) has noted the growing power of foundations in setting the trajectory of national educational policy, in large
urban districts in particular. Interviews with those involved with the CCSS at the national level widely credit the Gates Foundation with providing funds and overarching coordination to the CCSS policy effort (though other foundations, such as GE and Hewlett, have supported the CCSS as well) (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013a; 2013b). The Gates Foundation has provided more than 200 million dollars to support the CCSS, funding everything from curricular materials and professional development resources, to research into the CCSS, to public relations (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013b). The foundation's effort to control the messaging around the CCSS, providing funds to local Parent-Teacher Associations and national groups, has been met with particular acrimony (Ravitch, 2014; Schneider, 2013).

Both liberals and conservatives (and parents, in general) have voiced a number of critiques related to the content of the standards—as well as how the standards have continued to be linked high-stakes tests that are now harder than ever. Some of the initial critiques of the content of the standards came from conservatives: that the math standards endorse “fuzzy math”, for example, and the literacy standards’ focus on nonfiction de-emphasizes classic American literature. Over time, however, popular critiques of how the math standards have been taken up by curriculum materials and individual teachers have become widely disseminated by comedians Louis C.K. and Stephen Colbert (Brenneman, 2014; McCalmont, 2014).

Both Republican and Democratic state governors and legislatures have responded to these critiques by signaling their reluctance to continue their involvement with the CCSS. Indiana governor Mike Pence was the first to sign a bill repealing the CCSS (Moxley, 2014), followed later in 2014 by South Carolina and Oklahoma. Georgia, Florida, Kansas, Utah, Oklahoma, Alabama, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Alaska have all drawn back from the assessment consortia funded by the U.S. Department of Education to create the next generation of CCSS assessments (Lu, 2014). The New York State Assembly has responded to widespread liberal critiques of CCSS implementation by voting to place a moratorium on the use of CCSS
assessment data for high stakes decisions about teachers and students for two years (Ujifusa, 2014). The assessment landscape has become increasingly fractured as well; more students are now not taking the assessments from the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessment consortia than are (Gewertz & Ujifusa, 2014; Gewertz, 2014).

However, despite the growing resistance to the CCSS, the fractured assessment landscape, and the pauses in implementation in several states, the standards are still being implemented in forty-three states across the nation. An open question in CCSS implementation is how the standards will be translated into classroom practice. The language of the standards document itself seems to indicate that the standards outline a set of instructional goals only; the standards do not articulate what pedagogical approaches will best meet such those goals. As the introduction to the CCSS explains, “the Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 6, italics added). However, many groups—textbook publishers, nonprofits, and literacy experts, among others—have rushed to create professional development resources and curriculum materials to influence “how teachers should teach” to meet the standards. In the next section, I describe some of the contentious aspects related to the implementation of the ELA standards.

“Instructional shifts” in the Common Core State Standards for English/Language Arts

In this dissertation, I explore how middle school English/Language Arts and reading teachers are making sense of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. As such, it is important to examine the prominent messages circulating at the national level about what the CCSS mean for instruction in the literacy classroom. There are a related but distinct set of standards for “Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.” These
standards encourage a focus on discipline-specific forms of literacy (e.g., reading and analyzing primary sources in history). However, my focus here is specifically on how English/Language Arts teachers perceive and take up the English Language Arts standards.

Individuals like Robert Rothman and David Coleman, and groups like Student Achievement Partners and the Hunt Institute, have taken an active role in disseminating the specifics of the Common Core policy message in the ELA standards. These individuals and groups often refer to a set of “shifts” in curriculum and instruction away from what they consider to be common practice in many schools. The three instructional shifts for ELA are: (1) Regular practice with complex text and its academic language; (2) Reading, writing and speaking grounded in evidence from text both literary and informational; (3) Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction and informational texts (EngageNY, 2012; Rothman, 2011, 2013; Student Achievement Partners, 2013). Those associated with the CCSS effort see each “shift” as representing a necessary corrective to what they understand to be current instructional practice. For example, some evidence presented in the CCSS’s Appendix A suggests that the complexity of instructional materials declined throughout the 20th century; therefore, CCSS proponents say that classroom instruction should ask students to interact with complex text.

However, each shift can be seen as pressing on long-standing traditions and research in English education and literacy. The first shift, “Regular practice with complex text and its academic language” has raised issues about the appropriate role of “leveled text” in the elementary classroom in particular. The second shift, “Reading, writing and speaking grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational” has raised a debate about the best way to support reading comprehension, especially the use of pre-reading strategies and the “close reading” instructional strategy. The final area of debate comes from the third shift, “Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction and informational texts”, has raised questions about the appropriate place of narrative reading and writing in the ELA classroom (for a summary of

**Unintended consequences of previous standards-based reforms**

The Common Core is the latest in a long series of standards-based reforms, all of which have been framed as equity-oriented policies. Given that standards-based reforms are supposed to create equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities, it is important to examine how the previous generation of standards-based reforms, in the context of No Child Left Behind's high-stakes accountability policies, has affected curriculum and instruction across different school contexts. Further, Common Core advocates often frame the standards as a corrective to many of the damaging findings described below (e.g., narrowing curriculum and/or teaching to the test). Although there is a significant body of research on standards-based reform in the 1990s, I focus here on research published since 2002 when No Child Left Behind was first implemented, because the Common Core effort deliberately positions itself as a better version of standards-based reforms than NCLB. I do include research from Texas in the 1990s, however, since NCLB was based in large part on Texas education policy.

There has been a substantial body of research in the last ten years demonstrating the negative, unintended consequences of standards-based reform when implemented in the context of high-stakes accountability policies. These consequences often fall hardest on the students these policies are most intended to help: low-income, English language learners, and/or minority students, often located in urban districts. Though the purpose of any standards and accountability system is to influence instructional priorities (Hannaway & Hamilton, 2008), one body of research has shown an excessive narrowing of curriculum and instruction to focus on tested subjects and topics, particularly in urban districts (Berliner, 2011; Crocco & Costigan, 2004;
Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Palmer & Snodgrass Rangel, 2010; Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004). Under Texas accountability policies in the 1990s, districts with large numbers of African American and Latino students formed a curriculum from commercial test prep materials focused on low-level skills (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001), and other research indicates that scripted curricula are more often used in low-income districts (Achinstein et al., 2004). Researchers have found that remedial reading classes, a common strategy for organizing instruction to meet AYP, have low cognitive demand (Valli & Buese, 2007). In addition, accountability's negative consequences can be compounded when the same districts that are penalized for not meeting AYP are often those who have large numbers of students who need additional resources, such as English language learners (Gándara & Rumberger, 2009; Hakuta, 2011).

A school's accountability status (e.g., if the school is a “failing school” or otherwise under pressure to meet AYP) can also encourage teachers to prioritize some students' learning over others. Rather than provide high quality instruction to all students, the consequences attached to passing the test can distort the system, leading teachers and administrators to find ways to “game the system.” For example, some urban administrators in Texas found ways to improve AYP by tinkering with the composition of subgroups and exempted students, or retaining ninth grade students such that they were more likely to drop out and therefore be excluded from the test sample (Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vasquez Heilig, 2008). Another well-known example of how accountability can influence instructional priorities is the finding that teachers in low-performing schools are often encouraged to focus on the “bubble kids,” or the students who are on the cusp of achieving some proficiency benchmark (Booher-Jennings, 2005). Similarly, other research has found that schools are likely to focus more resources on tested grades and subjects (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Neal & Schazenbach, 2010).
Previous research on tracking

Scholars generally acknowledge the origin of tracking in the Progressive Era, as immigration and compulsory school attendance laws led to a larger and more diverse school population (Chapman, 1988; Gould, 1996; Oakes, 1985; Tyack, 1974). Progressive education reformers wanted to adapt curriculum in a way they felt would be useful to students' adult roles, as part of a general effort to fit the school to the child, rather than the child to the school. The challenge in doing this, however, was to determine what children's future roles would be years ahead of time. Lewis Terman's adaptation of Alfred Binet's intelligence test for a mass audience, already field tested during World War I, provided an easy answer (Chapman, 1988).

The structure of tracking has changed somewhat since the Progressive Era. Initially, students tended to be sorted into “academic,” “general,” or “vocational” placements that governed their entire course of study, but today, tracking usually occurs within each subject (although there tends to be a strong correlation between low placement in one subject and low track placement in others) (Lucas, 1999). At the elementary level, tracking today generally takes the form of instructional groups within a relatively heterogeneous class (e.g., reading groups). Beginning in middle school, however, it is more common for students to be tracked into different “levels” of coursework in most academic subjects (e.g., honors, regular, remedial). By high school, the vast majority of schools offer different levels of coursework in at least some subjects (Lucas, 1999). Regardless of the form it takes, tracking has proved a remarkably enduring and resilient organizational structure, practically ubiquitous in American schools.

The tracking literature is clear that there are a host of negative academic and affective consequences for students in lower track classes. Tracking increases the achievement gap between those in the high and low track, depressing achievement for students in the lower track.

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2 It is this kind of organizational structure at the secondary level that I refer to throughout this proposal as “tracking” when I do not specify otherwise.
and enhancing achievement for students in the higher track (Gamoran, 2009). Other researchers have found that teachers hold lower expectations for students in lower track classes (Oakes, 1985; Page, 1991), and that it is often the least experienced teachers assigned to lower track classes (Kelly, 2004). One of the primary factors leading to differences in the level of achievement between high- and low-track students is the difference in curriculum and instruction between tracks (Gamoran, 2004, 2009). Whereas curriculum for those in the advanced levels tends to focus on higher-order skills, taught through a variety of authentic and collaborative learning experiences, curriculum for those in the regular or remedial levels tends to cover a smaller amount of a content while emphasizing lower-order thinking like memorization and comprehension with worksheets and lectures (Oakes, 1985; Page, 1991). In addition to having negative consequences for individual students, tracking also frequently exacerbates social inequalities, by concentrating minority students and English language learners in lower track classes (Mickelson & Everett, 2008; Mickelson, 2001; Welner, 2001)

**Tracking and the secondary literacy classroom**

These patterns hold true for later studies of curriculum and instruction across tracks that look only at secondary English/Language Arts (Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002; Caughlan & Kelly, 2004; Gamoran & Carbonaro, 2002), paralleling Jeannie Oakes's (1985) initial findings. Students in the lower track of ELA still experience fewer reading and writing opportunities, and those opportunities are less challenging (Caughlan & Kelly, 2004; Watanabe, 2008). Their curriculum is less coherent (Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 1994), and there are fewer opportunities to engage in rich discussions with peers (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003) or to work with other students (Watanabe, 2008). In addition, there are fewer enrichment activities, especially in an era of increased test preparation for students in the lower track (Watanabe, 2008).
An analysis of data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) showed that high track students' English classes read and wrote in greater quantity, engaged in more discussion of literature, and had more voice in the classroom than students in lower track classes (Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002). In fact, a student's track placement was a better predictor of the quality of their English instruction than individual characteristics like race or SES, the type of school attended (private, Catholic, or public), or teacher's education and years of experience (Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002). Of course, NELS data was collected from 1988 to 1994, so instructional patterns may have changed since then. However, researchers report similar findings in English classrooms in the last decade (Caughlan & Kelly, 2004; Watanabe, 2008).

Disparities in curriculum and instruction between tracks clearly hamper the achievement of lower-track students. There have been two main policy solutions proposed to increase access and achievement of students often found in the lower-track, and thus provide curriculum equity: detracking and standards-based reform. Next, I will frame the significance of my study by briefly discussing both strategies for curriculum equity.

**Detracking as an equity strategy**

Amy Stuart Wells and Jeannie Oakes (1996) noted the similar goals of both detracking and standards-based reform as early as 1996. Both policy efforts emphasize access to challenging curriculum for “all students.” Despite this similar goal, scholars who study tracking generally promote detracking as the proper strategy for educational equity, rather than standards-based reform, though standards-based reform also emphasizes equitable access to curriculum. Early tracking research, such as Jeannie Oakes's (1985) landmark *Keeping Track* and Reba Page's (1991) ethnography of lower track classrooms, documented the negative academic and affective consequences of tracking, particularly for students in lower track classes. This early research
clearly established a need for reforming the lower track—either by improving the quality of lower track classes or eliminating the track structure entirely. To most tracking scholars, however, creating more flexible tracks or trying to increase the quality of lower track classes perpetuates a damaging hierarchy between groups of students (Wells & Oakes, 1996; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). Therefore, much tracking research promotes detracking by providing existence proofs of successfully detracked schools (Alvarez & Mehan, 2006; Burris, Wiley, Welner, & Murphy, 2008) and detracked classrooms within different disciplines, such as mathematics (Boaler, 2006), English (Freedman, Delp, & Crawford, 2005), and social studies (Hyland, 2006; Rubin, 2007). Another body of tracking research documents the types of resistance detracking reformers often face, again with the goal of overcoming such resistance to create detracked schools (Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997; Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 2005; Wells & Oakes, 1996; Wells & Serna, 1996). Thus, tracking scholars do not frequently examine the consequences of standards-based reform with an eye to how to improve the quality of lower track classes. However, tracking scholars have much to offer the conversation on standards-based reform, particularly to dilemmas like the narrowing of curriculum detailed in the previous section, which often occurs under high-stakes accountability. For example, tracking scholars often study instructional methods like differentiation (e.g., Tomlinson, 2001) or complex instruction (Cohen & Lotan, 2014) designed to engage students at a range of readiness levels in rigorous curriculum.

**Tracking and standards-based reform**

Although these two policies, tracking and standards-based reform, are inextricably linked, they are not frequently studied in combination. The few studies to look at standards-based reform in conversation with tracking have concluded that previous standards-based reforms have been enacted in ways that do not provide lower track students with the same learning
opportunities. Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner (2004) found that teachers in a low-performing, high-poverty district in California interpreted standards in ways that provided a richer curriculum in the higher track. Similarly, Watanabe's (2008) study of standards based reform across tracks in North Carolina found that standards based reforms do little to improve the quality of curriculum and instruction in lower track classes. Watanabe's interviews with teachers suggested that teachers made these decisions because of a “sequential” view of curriculum, in which teachers believed that lower track students had to master basic skills before they could move on to more advanced content (Watanabe, 2008).

**Conceptual framework**

**Sense-making theory**

Much education research has documented the importance of understanding how individual teachers make sense of standards and other educational reforms in ways that mesh with their prior beliefs and experiences, sometimes contradicting the policy's stated intent (Cohen & Ball, 1990; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). For example, David Cohen (1990) portrayed the case of “Mrs. Oublier,” who believed she was enacting California's progressive mathematics reform, but retained many elements of traditional mathematics instruction. My investigation of teachers' decision making in the context of the Common Core relies on a sense-making perspective of the policy implementation process. In contrast to the top-down, technical-rational view of policy implementation, the sense-making perspective acknowledges that local actors like teachers and principals, sometimes called “street-level bureaucrats” (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977), construct their own unique understandings of policy from within their social and individual contexts (Coburn, 2001; Datnow & Park, 2009). The policy messages that are available to teachers may
change as they are interpreted through different state and local contexts, but teachers actively make meaning of the available policy messages through a process of sense-making that takes into account the people around them, their working conditions, and their pre-existing beliefs, values, and experiences (Coburn, 2005; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002), as shown below in Figure 2-1.

Figure 2-1: An individual’s sense-making of a particular policy as located at the intersection of the policy signal, or message, the local context, and an individual's norms and beliefs.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described the background of the Common Core State Standards Initiative, including how many of those involved in the Common Core effort hoped to correct the weaknesses of earlier standards-based reforms with a “fewer, clearer, higher” set of standards and assessments that are both more rigorous and include performance tasks. I also described how many different stakeholder groups from a variety of political backgrounds have become opposed to the Common Core standards and assessments. Then, I made the case for the continued
importance of the organizational structure of tracking in influencing the implementation of educational standards. Despite tracking’s persistence as an element of the “grammar of schooling” (despite the detracking reforms of the 1990s), we know little about how tracking policies relate to teachers’ decisions in the context of standards-based reform. This study investigates this very issue: how, if at all, teachers make sense of a new, supposedly more rigorous standards policy in conjunction with other existing policies—like testing and tracking. Further, this study investigates how policy shapes teachers’ beliefs about student ability, and in turn, how teachers’ views of student ability may influence their decisions about curriculum and instruction for different groups of students.

In the next chapter, I describe the methods I used to understand (1) how, if at all, messages about the Common Core State Standards and equity shifted from the national level to the district and teacher levels; (2) how curriculum and instruction are similar or different across different tracks of middle school literacy courses, and (3) what factors shape teachers’ decisions about curriculum and instruction across tracks.
Chapter 3
Methods

Introduction

This study uses qualitative methods to understand the relationship between the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), curricular tracking, and teacher decision-making in middle school literacy classrooms across a metropolitan Southern district. In this study, I analyze how messages about the Common Core and equity were presented at the district level, and the ways that individual teachers took up those messages in particular policy and organizational contexts. To understand the implications of the CCSS for educational equity across this large, diverse district, I interviewed and observed teachers in a purposive, stratified sample of school contexts (e.g., low-income with a high minority population; mixed-income with a racially diverse student body; and high-income with a low minority population). Using NVivo qualitative data analysis software and Excel matrices, I analyzed data from the following sources:

- Interviews with English/language arts and reading teachers, reading and writing coaches, and district administrators (25 total)
- Observations of classroom instruction in ELA and reading across curricular tracks (77 lessons across 11 teachers and six school contexts)
- Observations of district-wide professional development and school-level literacy and/or language arts team meetings (approximately 15 hours)
- Documents related to professional development, curriculum, and instruction and the district and classroom levels (e.g., district-level Common Core professional
development materials, district pacing guide, the teacher’s guide to the curriculum, teacher-created and district-created curriculum materials).

Researcher positionality statement

This research, in both its design and execution, was influenced by my own background, experiences, and beliefs about teaching and learning. Although I have taken precautions to ensure the validity of my findings, in this section, I discuss those experiences so that the reader may better understand the ways in which my background may intersect with the findings presented in this dissertation.

This dissertation centers on standards-based reform and curricular tracking. Unlike the middle school and undergraduate students that I later taught, standards-based reform did not play a large role in my own school experience. I graduated from a rural Virginia high school in 2001, just before the passage of No Child Left Behind. Virginia had developed state standards and assessments in the mid-1990s (the Standards of Learning), and I have dim memories of taking a few of the assessments. However, I have no memory that passing any of the state tests was a requirement for me to graduate from high school.

Curricular tracking heavily influenced my own learning opportunities as a student, although I was not explicitly aware of it at the time. I grew up in a geographically large but sparsely populated, rural county in Virginia. There were two primary and elementary schools at the time feeding into just one middle school and one high school. Desegregation in this racially diverse county occurred in the early 1970s, around the time that the new high school was built. There were some efforts to support the achievement of minority students in the district, such as the James Farmer Scholars Program, a program similar to Upward Bound named for the civil rights activist and sponsored by the University of Mary Washington. However, for a racially
diverse school, I am sure that white students were overrepresented in many of the advanced classes in which I was enrolled. I experienced pull-out gifted instruction in elementary and middle school (along with what I think was unofficial between-class ability grouping), and I was tracked into honors courses in my rural comprehensive high school. I had a strong sense of being “good” at school and a desire to attain the best possible grades (in my mind, this was getting all A+’s and being valedictorian). My journal entries from that time read like an annoying list of who or what might stand in my way (a transfer student with a .001 higher GPA than me! Not fair! A teacher who categorically refused to give A+’s! Not fair!). I did not think very much about learning opportunities that were or were not present outside of my own courses, though I did have a sense of myself as “college material”.

After high school, I went to the University of Virginia with set of cobbled-together scholarships that added up to a full ride. I thought I wanted to be a teacher because I enjoyed school and saw my own teachers as role models, so I entered the Curry School of Education’s program for English education. My English education professors at UVA and the critical pedagogy to which I was exposed heavily influenced my beliefs about teaching. I thrilled to messages about having students “read the world as well as the word” (a paraphrase of Paulo Freire, whom we also read). I came to see my role as an English teacher as facilitating students’ discussion and thinking around issues of race, class, and gender, the role of the media, and other big ideas in American society through my careful creation of original thematic units incorporating digital tools.

Adding an additional layer to this set of internalized messages about the nature of “good” English education practices, during my last year of teacher training at the University of Virginia, I took a course on “Curriculum for the Gifted” with Carol Ann Tomlinson, a prominent advocate for “differentiation,” or modifying curriculum and instruction to fit students' diverse needs. Carol Tomlinson told us that the principles of curriculum for the gifted—rigorous, authentic tasks based
on engaging, complex texts—are the principles of good curriculum—period. Further, she framed this as an equity issue: all students deserve good curriculum, and it is the students who could benefit the most from such curriculum who rarely experience it.

When I moved to Pittsburgh and began teaching middle school language arts, I forgot this message for a while in the day-to-day survival of a first year teacher. I was sometimes—embarrassingly—complicit in sorting students into different learning experiences. I remember working with other teachers to develop a rationale for how and why students “should” be placed into the two levels of middle schools English that we offered (“advanced” and “regular”). This rationale was based on prior achievement (both grades and test scores), as well as amorphous habits of mind: a willingness to be challenged and a good work ethic. I attended meetings with parents about course placement and sometimes advised them to keep their students in the lower level class based on my assessment of their current performance, emphasizing to them how very difficult the advanced class was.

Jeannie Oakes told me once that she went to graduate school to understand why she felt like a good teacher in her honors classes and a bad teacher in her non-honors classes. I relate to this motivation. In my first two years of teaching, I felt like a constant failure in my “regular-level” English classes. In my first year, I often dreaded the classes labeled “regular”, while I looked forward to the classes labeled “advanced”. In my second year, I had the privilege of constructing my own yearlong, thematic curriculum based on the question, “What does it mean to be American?” Students explored the experience of American immigrants, the legacy of slavery, and theories of social mobility in American society. They analyzed everything from the young adult novel The Outsiders, to articles from The New York Times and National Geographic, to political cartoons and song lyrics. At the end of each unit, students had to take a stand on a question such as, “Is the American Dream fact or fiction?” in a lengthy essay, synthesizing evidence from multiple texts. Gradually, I moved towards more and more consistency in learning
activities between the “regular” and “advanced” classes, recalling my lessons from Carol Tomlinson. I was sometimes frustrated when I tried the same challenging assignments in the “regular” class that I planned for the “advanced” classes, but students resisted, telling me they were “the dumb class.” As I gained experience, I learned how to better anticipate the type and amount of scaffolding that would enable students at a range of ability levels to complete a challenging task, leaving me with an enduring belief that all students should have access to challenging texts and tasks in school. I believe that those tasks should be presented, modified, and supported in such a way that all students can complete them (the product may look different for different students at different times, but in essence, should require the same core knowledge and skills). I do not have a strong negative opinion about flexible ability grouping, but I do believe that the texts and tasks, whenever possible, should be similar or the same across levels of classes. The level of support provided for those tasks should vary. To do otherwise is an issue of equity, holding students back in what P. David Pearson has called the “basic skills conspiracy.” When teachers assume that students can’t do something until they have mastered “the basics,” many regular-level classes spend years reviewing the same stale, superficial kinds of knowledge.

At the national level, Common Core rhetoric parallels the message I embraced from Carol Ann Tomlinson more than six years ago: all students deserve rich, challenging, authentic curriculum and instruction that will adequately prepare them to enter college without remediation. However, I also recognize that many people, myself included, see in the Common Core what they want to see. There is no one “Common Core”; no one vision of “Common Core instruction” (Hodge & Benko, 2014), but I hoped that in this project, I might uncover places where this particular policy was used to support a vision in line with the belief in human potential I articulated above.
Research questions

The research questions guiding this study are the following:

(1) How, if at all, did messages about the Common Core State Standards and equity shift from the national level to the district and teacher levels?

(2) In the context of Common Core implementation and a standardized, Common Core-aligned curriculum, how are curriculum and instruction similar or different across tracks?

(3) In this context, what factors shape teachers’ decisions about curriculum and instruction (e.g., state and district level policies, teachers’ beliefs)?

Embedded single-case study design

This study was designed as an embedded, single-case study (Yin, 2009) of teacher decision-making in a metropolitan school district in the South (i.e., a district case study). Because I was concerned with teacher decision-making, as well as district-level policy related to the Common Core, this is an embedded, rather than a holistic, case study because, following Yin (2009), a holistic case study would focus only on the district’s approach to Common Core implementation. Further, this is a single, rather than a multiple case study. Unlike multiple case studies, where a replication logic predominates, in a single case study, using a sampling logic to select embedded cases is appropriate (Yin, 2009).

What, then, was the unit of analysis? An embedded case study has several “levels”, and therefore, several units of analysis (Yin, 2009, p. 50). First, this study focuses on understanding the district-level approach to Common Core implementation in English/Language Arts and literacy, through analyzing the district’s approach to professional development for literacy teachers. Then, I was attentive to similarities and differences across the three categories of
schools described below (roughly, high-income, mixed-income, and low-income schools). Within each of those three categories are multiple schools; each school served as the next level of embedded units. Within each school, I made every effort to interview multiple teachers so that I could better analyze school-level data. Finally, I collected individual-level data to understand the relationship between teacher-decision making and the various contexts teachers were nested within.

**District selection**

In this study, I selected a district context that would allow me to interview and observe teachers in very different school contexts (e.g., high-income, mixed-income, low-income), while holding district-level curriculum and professional development policies constant. For this reason, I selected a metropolitan district in the South, “Palmetto County” (a pseudonym), with roughly 30,000 teachers, 300 schools, and 200,000 students. Palmetto County has an affluent urban core, low-income inner-ring suburbs, and quickly growing exurbs and enclave communities. In 2012, the demographic composition of Palmetto County Public Schools was 22% African-American; 29% Latino, and 41% White. 54% of PCPS students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. The district has been a national leader in Common Core implementation, making it a “best case” (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for studying the Common Core in the 2013–14 school year, as the CCSS had not yet been fully implemented in all of the CCSS-adopting states.

I selected Palmetto County Public Schools not only because the district has a national reputation for being an early adopter of the Common Core, but also because Palmetto County represents a case of changing strategies for educational equity, from a deliberate desegregation plan to create racial balance, to a focus on choice and standards-based reform to improve the quality of schools that have rapidly resegregated. The state in which Palemetto County resides
has also been a national leader in standards-based reform policies. Under Palmetto County’s court-ordered desegregation plan, the district bused city students to the suburbs and created magnets in center city. The district was declared unitary in 2001, and while it has continued to offer many magnet schools, the district primarily tries to manage racial balance through a school choice program, including expanded magnet offerings, charter schools, and transfers between public schools. Other researchers (not cited to preserve confidentiality of the district) have documented resegregation within the district since it was declared unitary. It is outside the scope of this study, which focuses on teacher decision-making, to evaluate the precise level of between- or within-school segregation in the district, but growing between-school inequality is a key part of the context for this study.

The district is now strongly invested in standards-based reforms linked to the Common Core: the district participated in a Gates-funded initiative to develop Common Core literacy tasks and partnered with the College Board to use the SpringBoard curriculum in English/Language Arts and math in all middle and high schools. SpringBoard is a Common Core-aligned curriculum designed to prepare all students for Advanced Placement classes. Despite recent uncertainty over the future of the PARCC assessment in this state (culminating in the state-level decision to use an alternative Common Core assessment), the district remains highly committed to the Common Core.

I received the district's approval to conduct this study in February 2013, with permission to collect data from August 1, 2013 to December 31, 2014 (and received an extension to collect data until January 31, 2014).
School selection

Given the way that previous standards-based reforms have been implemented differently in low-income, urban and high-income, suburban schools (Achinstein et al., 2004; Diamond & Spillane, 2004), I selected three groups of potential middle school research sites within this district using both an extreme and typical case logic: (1) the four schools with the highest minority enrollment and lowest socioeconomic status, (2) the four schools with the highest white enrollment and highest socioeconomic status, and (3) the three schools whose racial and socioeconomic make-up was representative of the district as a whole. I hoped that selecting schools in these three different categories would allow me to observe similarities and differences across school type (e.g., high-income, mixed-income, and low-income schools). Further, I reasoned, even if my data did not result in strong claims about differences across school type, at least I would gain a full perspective on Common Core implementation throughout the district by interviewing and observing teachers within a purposive, stratified sample of schools.

To identify these schools, and narrow the sample of middle schools from the more than 50 middle schools across the district to a more feasible number, I first excluded any charter schools because they would not necessarily receive the same district-level professional development related to the Common Core, which I wanted to be a consistent variable among my sites. I also excluded the few K–8 schools, and two, single-gender magnet schools. This still left me with more than 40 schools. Then, I used 2011 school-level racial demographic data from this state’s Department of Education (at the time, the most recent that was available) and 2010 data on free- and reduced-price lunch from the NCES Common Core of Data (at the time, also the most recent data that was available), to sort schools by the percentage of minority enrollment and the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch. I hoped that at least two schools
within each of these three categories would agree to participate, allowing me to compare schools both within and across categories.

Below, is a table with the demographic information of my initial list of potential research sites (school names are pseudonyms):

Table 3-1: Potential research sites in Palmetto County Public Schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Minority Enrollment (&gt;80%) and Low-SES (&gt;85% FRPL)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Name</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monument MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry MS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High White Enrollment (&gt;74%) and High-SES (&lt;20% FRPL)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Name</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flagstaff MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeSoto MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Oak MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas MS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racially and SES-Proportionate Schools (within 10% +/- PCPS demographics)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Name</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmetto County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Line MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patton MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter MS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the achievement and demographic data that I examined from the district’s middle schools, I also used the Office of Civil Rights data from 2009 (the most recent data available at the time) as a rough measure of how racially proportionate a school's curricular
tracking might be, by comparing the demographics of students enrolled in algebra in either seventh or eighth grade to the demographics of the school as a whole. I also looked at the change in school demographics between 2001 and 2010, noting which schools gained or lost a large number of African American, Latino, and white students. Taking into account these two additional sources of information, I also selected five additional middle schools as potential research sites—schools that I thought might serve as interesting counterpoints to other schools in the initial sample. Specifically, I examined the state test scores from 2011 (data from state department of education) as a measure of achievement, broken down by school and by race.

As these five counterpoint schools, I selected the following:

- Harris Middle School, a magnet school in the center city with high minority enrollment and high minority achievement (in other words, an “unsuccessful” middle school from the point of view of attracting white students, but a “successful” example of a high-performing urban school serving minority students). This is also one of the few middle schools in the county serving a significant population of Asian students. (21% Asian, 30% African American, 17% Latino, 30% white; 45% FRPL)

- Miller Middle School, a magnet school in the center city with high white enrollment and high achievement across racial groups (in other words, a “successful” magnet school in the original sense of the word, one draws in white students from the outlying suburbs). (57% African American, 24% Latino, 15% white; 78% FRPL)

- Green Middle School, the only magnet school in the county located in a suburban area. This school has lower overall state test scores than the racially diverse magnet school in the urban area, despite higher white enrollment. (8% African American, 25% Latino, 64% white; 29% FRPL).
• Harper Middle School, an inner-ring suburban school with dramatic increase in minority enrollment over the last twenty years (37% minority enrollment in 1990 to 78% in 2010). (55% African American, 22% Latino, 20% white; 82% FRPL)

• Fielding Middle School, a racially and socioeconomically diverse school located only one mile from Flagstaff Middle School, one of the most high status public middle schools in the county. (13% African American, 25% Latino, 60% white, 43% FRPL)

In total, I asked the Palmetto County School District for approval to conduct research in 16 middle school contexts (out of more than fifty public middle schools in the district).

As part of my school section process, I also measured the statistical correlation between the percentage of minority students in each middle school and the percentage of students in the school eligible for free and reduced price lunch. There was a .87 correlation (Pearson’s R), which is why, while I used both racial and SES demographic data to choose school contexts, I sometimes refer to these three groups of schools as low-income, mixed-income, and high-income schools.

Participants

Although Common Core State Standards exist for mathematics, English/Language Arts, and literacy across the content areas, I initially chose to investigate English/Language Arts teachers’ responses to the standards because of the relative flexibility of English curriculum across tracks when compared to many schools' tightly sequenced math programs. In other words, while there is a healthy body of research on detracked math classrooms (e.g., Boaler & Staples, 2008; Boaler, 2006), language arts is often perceived to be easier to “detrack” than the traditional math sequence of pre-algebra, algebra, etc.
I focus on middle school teachers in particular because middle school often combines the disciplinary norms of high school with the child-centered, developmental norms of elementary school, as well as career exploration (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), making middle school an ideal location to explore the potential tension in the CCSS between “college and career readiness”. In addition, detracking has historically been part of “middle school philosophy” (Loveless, 1999), making middle schools an important location to investigate curriculum and instruction across tracks under standards-based reform.

I focus on eighth grade teachers in particular because I hope to understand teacher decision-making about curriculum, and eighth grade teachers often serve as department chairs or informal curriculum leaders in middle schools. Though I did interview and observe some sixth and seventh grade teachers, I primarily focused on eighth grade teachers to increase the possibility of observing different teachers working through similar units (either at the same school or different schools). As my data collection continued, I soon realized how critical middle school reading teachers, as well as reading and writing coaches, were to understanding the story of Common Core implementation in the district.

Every middle school in the district has a reading coach, while only schools that are targeted for improvement because of low state test scores have writing coaches. In addition to the school-based writing coaches in low-performing schools, who saw their jobs primarily as coaching eighth grade students to pass the eighth grade state writing test, there is also a district-level writing coach who works with the teachers and coaches in low-performing schools around writing instruction.

These coaches are critical parts of the district leadership apparatus and information infrastructure through which the district communicates with its teachers. For example, the district administrator for middle school language arts holds district-wide, daylong, professional development meetings once a month for each school’s subject area leader in reading and language
arts, and for all of the reading and writing coaches in the district. Then, subject area leaders and coaches convey the information from the district administration to teachers within their schools. In addition, the district’s required sequence of Common Core trainings was the same for both language arts and reading teachers (e.g., both were asked to go to the trainings on text complexity and text-dependent questions).

The other reason for expanding my sample beyond English/language arts teachers to reading teachers and coaches was that I soon realized how many students were enrolled in state-mandated reading classes. In this state, a reading course is required for all sixth grade students (students are sorted into multiple “levels” of reading based on fifth grade state test scores), but in seventh and eighth grades, students generally take a reading class only if they did not pass the state reading test the year before. In some schools, this was a sizeable portion of students, making reading teachers an essential part of understanding students’ literacy experiences and the district’s approach to Common Core implementation in language arts and literacy.

In addition to interviewing reading teachers and coaches, I also interviewed the district administrator responsible for middle school language arts and the district writing coach to better understand district-level Common Core implementation.

**Procedures for district approval and participant recruitment**

Because the district is so large, they have a well-specified procedure for researchers to follow and an employee dedicated to handling research requests. My research request, which was one of the last to be approved in the 2012–13 school year was number 419, demonstrating the large number of research proposals operating in a given year. Though I did not know this when I submitted the research request, researchers are not allowed in schools after January 31 as a matter of course, as the first state tests begin in February (the state writing test) and continue through
May. The district’s rationale for not letting researchers into schools during the spring semester is that district administrators do not want anyone or anything distracting teachers and students from testing or preparing for testing.

**School-level approval**

After securing district approval, I contacted school principals in August 2013 to secure their permission to contact teachers (recruitment script included in Appendix C). In several cases—especially (but not exclusively) in low-income school contexts—principals allowed me to contact their reading and/or writing coaches, or the Language Arts subject area leader, but explicitly forbade me from contacting their English/Language Arts teachers.

In the end, I was able to interview at least one literacy teacher or coach in 10 of the 16 potential research sites. I received approval from two of the schools I had selected as “counterpoint” schools, and did not receive approval from three of the schools in my initial group of eleven schools (one school in each category declined to participate). Because the demographics of the two counterpoint schools were already very close to the schools included in the mixed-income and low-income groups, respectively, I included Fielding Middle School as one of my mixed-income schools, and Harper Middle School as one of my low-income schools.

Table 3-2: Demographics of final school sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>% African-American</th>
<th>% Latino</th>
<th>% White</th>
<th>% FRPL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Washington MS</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott MS</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monument MS</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harper MS</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
High White Enrollment (>74%) and High-SES (<20% FRPL)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>% African-American</th>
<th>% Latino</th>
<th>% White</th>
<th>% FRPL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flagstaff MS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeSoto MS</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Oak MS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Racially and SES-Proportionate Schools (within 15% +/- PCPS demographics)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>% African-American</th>
<th>% Latino</th>
<th>% White</th>
<th>% FRPL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Palmetto County</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Line MS</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fielding MS</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patton MS</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Securing teacher approval

After securing principal approval, I reached out to teachers via email for an initial interview (recruitment script in Appendix C). After the interview, I followed up with teachers to ask if they would be willing to have me observe them for a period of several days. Often, interviews and observations with other teachers in the same school followed naturally from the first one, as I met additional teachers while observing the first teacher. Many teachers put me in touch with other teachers in their networks; sometimes, these teachers taught at schools that were not on my list of district-approved school contexts. In these situations, I conducted informal interviews with teachers at a location outside of their schools. I wrote a memo after these interviews to record my memory of what teachers told me, and I used this data to gain additional insight into the district context, but I did not transcribe and analyze data from these teachers.
Data and data collection procedures

Interviews

Initial interviews with teachers were often in their classrooms during their planning period, limiting most interviews to about 40 minutes. I first explained the purpose of my study, the confidentiality protections, and asked teachers to sign the consent form and for their permission to audio-record the interview (all teachers agreed to have their interviews recorded). I began the interviews by asking teachers about their backgrounds and how they ended up teaching at this particular school. This question often helped me to build rapport with teachers when I could find some commonality between our experiences (because I was a middle school language arts teacher before graduate school, it was usually easy to find common experiences). I also asked teachers to describe their daily schedules. Then, I asked teachers to tell me more about the SpringBoard curriculum and the extent to which they had decision-making power about their curriculum and instruction. I asked teachers what kind of information had been getting out to them about the Common Core, and how, if at all, they saw the Common Core as related to what they did in the classroom. In my pilot study in New Jersey, I had found that teachers were concerned about the relationship between the Common Core and their new teacher evaluations, so I also usually asked teachers about their evaluations and if they saw their evaluations as linked to the Common Core (Palmetto County teachers generally did not). I asked teachers to tell me about how, if at all, they modified their curriculum and instruction for the different classes that they taught. Finally, I asked teachers to describe the community the school served to get a better sense of the school and community context. (The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix A).
Observations

At the end of the interview, I asked teachers if they would feel comfortable with me coming to observe their classes for a couple of days (the consent form, included in Appendix B, said observations would last between three and five days). District policy requires affirmative consent from every student’s parents in order to audio- or video-record classroom instruction. Because this would have imposed an undue burden on teachers, I elected to use ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) to record the classroom environment and classroom instruction. In the field notes, I recorded the set up of the classroom (desk arrangements, classroom decorations). I also recorded the subject, the “level” or track, class size, made a rough estimate of student demographics, and recorded the learning objective on the board, agenda for the day, and elements of instruction (bellringer, various instructional activities). To the best of my ability, I also transcribed much of what the teacher said during his or her instruction, and how students responded.

I observed teachers for a period of one to three days. Clearly, this study was not a long-term ethnographic study of classroom instruction; instead, the classroom observations were intended to triangulate interview data, to give additional insight into how teachers’ instruction varied across curricular tracks, and to give a fuller sense of the school and classroom environment than would have been possible with interviews alone. I observed teachers for full days whenever possible, rather than just for one honors and regular-level class, to help ascertain whether or not the changes they made across curricular tracks were purposefully related to the “level” or track (i.e., do teachers modify their instruction in consistent and predictable ways as they teach more than one “honors” class and more than one “regular” class?)
Because teachers knew that I was interested in Common Core implementation, they frequently handed me large binders of the Common Core professional development materials they had received and saved from district-level Common Core trainings for me to peruse. They also frequently showed me many of their teacher-created materials. I took photos of many of these materials. Teachers also frequently showed me samples of student work to give me a sense of students’ writing. I sometimes took a few general notes on these materials, but I did not take photos of student work, consistent with my institutional IRB and the district-level IRB. One teacher gave me an extra copy of the teachers’ edition of the SpringBoard curriculum for eighth grade, which was invaluable in better understanding teachers’ instructional choices (many of the teachers I observed were eighth grade ELA teachers). Teachers also gave me many materials related to preparing for the state writing test, as well as copies of the handouts they used in their classroom instruction while I was there.
Data

The chart below provides a graphic representation of how my interview and observation data broke down between the three categories of schools. In total, I interviewed twenty-five people involved with middle school literacy in Palmetto County Public Schools: 15 ELA teachers, three reading teachers, two reading coaches, two writing coaches, a dropout prevention specialist/literacy coach, a district writing coach, and a district administrator responsible for middle school language arts. In the graphic below, the color “red” indicates the teachers that I observed: I observed 11 of the classroom teachers’ instruction for a period of between one and three days to get a general sense of their instruction and their classroom environment. This information is also documented in Appendix D, where I detail all of interview and observation data by school and participant pseudonyms.
The purpose of this study is to determine (1) how teachers make sense of the Common Core State Standards, and (2) what forces shape teachers’ decision-making about curriculum and instruction. This purpose shaped my approach to coding my data. Because this study uses an existing theoretical framework (sense-making [Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002; Weick, 1993]), rather than seeking to develop a new theory through a grounded theory approach, I began coding my interviews with a set of broad, deductive codes based on the sense-making conceptual framework. I generally did not code line-by-line, but rather in chunks of a few sentences to a paragraph related to a particular topic.

Consistent with the sense-making framework, I coded interview transcripts for policy messages teachers expressed about what the Common Core is; anything teachers said that pointed to their individual norms and beliefs; and factors related to their district-level and school-level environments. Although I began with a set of these three broad, deductive categories based on the sense-making framework ([1] CCSS Policy Messages; [2] Individual Norms and Beliefs; [3] Environment), the codes nested within these three categories were generally emergent, inductive categories.

For example, when coding the interviews for the policy messages teachers expressed related to the Common Core (broad, deductive coding category #1), I read interviews with an eye
to any places that teachers mentioned the Common Core standards (code: CCSS Policy Messages, with 14 subcodes, including three subcodes related to the Common Core and Equity), related trainings (code: CCSS trainings), and Common Core assessments (code: Common Core assessment). I also marked and categorized any other instances where teachers mentioned the Common Core, including resistance to the Common Core (code: CCSS resistance) and the connections between the SpringBoard curriculum and the CCSS (code: SpringBoard-CCSS links).

When looking for evidence of teachers’ norms and beliefs, I looked for statements where teachers talked about why they became teachers and their beliefs about ELA instruction (code: Teachers’ beliefs about ELA), their opinions on various policies at work in the district, and the language that teachers used when describing students themselves, especially when teachers talked about student ability and motivation (codes: Teachers’ language related to ability; Teachers’ perceptions of student motivation). When coding for each teacher’s school- and district-level environment, I created codes for the tracked school structure (code: Tracking [descriptions of]), other district policies like teacher evaluation (code: Teacher evaluation), and the testing environment (code: Influence of testing), for example. Finally, because I was also concerned with the ways in which sense-making and beliefs might be expressed in teachers’ decisions about curriculum and instruction across curricular tracks, I also coded teachers’ descriptions of curriculum and instruction across curricular tracks using the code “Classroom-level Curriculum and Instruction”. Some sample codes in this category were “SpringBoard curriculum” (with a number of subcodes), “expectations across tracks”, “instruction—regular class”, and “instruction—honors class”). (Additional information and the entire hierarchical code tree from my interview data can be found in Appendix E.)

I also labeled each transcript with a set of descriptive codes to facilitate the process of identifying patterns across participants (e.g., I coded each interview transcript with the
participant’s role (e.g. teacher, coach), the grade and subject taught, as well as the category of school the participant worked within).

**Observations**

In my classroom observations, I was primarily concerned with understanding how, if at all, curriculum and instruction across curricular tracks varied in a selection of literacy classrooms across Palmetto County. For this reason, I coded classroom observations for similarities and differences in curriculum and instruction across tracks. To facilitate this comparison across 77 lessons (representing 11 teachers and six schools), I created a matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) using Excel. I read through my field notes for each lesson, and transferred the following details from each lesson to the matrix: teacher, school, subject, grade level, date of observation, level of curricular track, lesson objective (written on the board), warm-up/bellwork, the text and task used in the lesson, grading/expectations, classroom management, class size, student demographics, whether the lesson was overall student- or teacher-centered, scaffolding, summary of classroom instruction, rationale for differences in instruction (if teachers mentioned their rationale), ability-related language, and a final column for other observations. I created a row for each lesson to ensure that I was not glossing over any differences across classes.

**Documents**

As of this writing, most of the findings represented in this study rely on interview and observation data. Whereas I directly coded interview transcripts and the summary of my field notes that I entered in the Excel matrix, I have not yet coded many of the myriad documents from Palmetto County (with the exception of the district-level CCSS professional development
documents. To understand the district’s messages about the Common Core, I did a content analysis of the power point presentations used in the CCSS trainings for ELA teachers: in this analysis, I calculated the percentage of slides had an equity-related message versus the percentage of slides that had technical-related messages. I discuss the content and the messages of these district training presentations in Chapter 4.

When writing about teachers’ classroom instruction, I compared teachers’ words, actions, and classroom-level documents that teachers gave me as I observed to the teacher’s edition of the SpringBoard curriculum. This comparison helped me to understand where teachers were following the SpringBoard curriculum and where they were departing from it. In other words, I used the classroom-level documents to triangulate my other data sources.

Validity

I used several strategies to increase the validity of my findings. First, I was careful to triangulate my findings across multiple sources and types of data (Maxwell, 2005). For example, when observing teachers’ classroom instruction, I compared their instruction to the teacher’s edition of the textbook. In many cases, I was able to observe different teachers teaching the same lessons in the SpringBoard curriculum.

My purposive school sampling strategy was also a key part of the validity of this study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). At most schools, I interviewed multiple teachers, and observed teachers across multiple high-income and mixed-income schools. Note, however, that my sample of teachers in low-income schools within Palmetto County was small and primarily composed of instructional coaches, as principals were already feeling the burden of multiple initiatives in their schools and were reluctant to burden classroom teachers with any other obligations. I observed multiple teachers’ instruction in one low-income school, but did not observe any instruction
across multiple low-income schools. This strategy—gathering data from multiple teachers within multiple schools within each category—helped to ensure that I had a full perspective of middle school literacy teachers and middle school literacy instruction across Palmetto County, heightening the validity of this study as a district case study. In addition, this sampling strategy helped to increase the validity of my findings within each school type (e.g., high-income, mixed-income, low-income).

Another strategy to increase the validity of my findings was that, to the degree possible, I had sustained engagement in school sites (Maxwell, 2005). I spent the better part of a week in three different schools (one high-income, one mixed-income, and one low-income). Full day observations of most teachers allowed me to ensure that teachers’ instructional decisions correlated with the “level” or instructional track, and I had the opportunity to ask teachers informally about their choices at lunch, at the end of the day, and at other unstructured moments.

Finally, in my analysis, I was attentive to “negative cases” and “discrepant evidence” (Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). For instance, though many teachers used the numerical language of the state test to describe students (further discussed in Chapter 5), not all did. Further, those who talked about students as 1s and 2s sometimes also displayed a seemingly contradictory, mutable view of student ability through their instructional choices. These fine-grained distinctions are included in my coding.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I described the rationale behind each of my methodical choices. To answer my three research questions, I conducted a qualitative, embedded district case study focusing on middle school literacy. I also described the sampling procedure I used to select a range of diverse research sites in this large district, the nature of the data I collected, my
procedures for collecting and recording data within those sites, and the process I used to analyze that data. In the next chapter, the first of four findings chapters, I describe how the messages about the Common Core and equity shifted from the national level to the district level in the district’s approach to CCSS professional development. Then, I describe the CCSS messages that teachers reported to me.
Chapter 4

Shifting Messages about the Common Core and Equity

Introduction

In this chapter, I answer the research question, “How, if at all, did messages about the Common Core and equity shift from the national level to the district and teacher levels across a diverse metropolitan district in the South?” I first briefly describe the policy context of PCPS, including the major policies at work in the district that do not directly relate to the Common Core, such as the district’s teacher evaluation plan, the state’s school grading system, and their desegregation history. Then, I describe the state and district context around the Common Core, including the Common Core resistance that swept the state during the data collection period in 2013. Next, I consider how messages about the CCSS and equity were framed at the national level, establishing not only that high-level CCSS policy entrepreneurs saw equity as a central goal of the CCSS, but that policy entrepreneurs saw a particular kind of equity as a goal, one centered around access to college preparatory knowledge and skills (Kornhaber, Griffith, & Tyler, 2014). Then, I describe the CCSS messages presented to literacy teachers at the district level to understand the extent to which the standards were presented as an equity-oriented reform in Palmetto County Public Schools.  

3 CCSS trainings at the district level—drawing heavily on materials from an intermediary organization—primarily framed the CCSS as a technical reform, 

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3 Note: Though state testing policy and other policies certainly affect PCPS, messages about CCSS implementation from the state level were not present in the PCPS policy context. PCPS, as one of the nation’s large, metropolitan districts, is closely tied to intermediary organizations like the Aspen Institute and groups such as the Council of Great City Schools, and PCPS Common Core trainings were based on intermediary organization’s materials, not state resources. Therefore, this chapter traces Common Core messages from the national level to the district level, as filtered through an intermediary organization.
or a series of practices that teachers should do. Explicit references to equity were limited, but generally focused on how certain instructional practices (e.g., exposing “all students” to complex texts) would create greater equity.

Then, I summarize the CCSS policy messages that did reach teachers: generally, the ELA and reading teachers in my sample viewed the CCSS as a smaller number of standards with a clear progression from year to year. Corresponding with their professional development, teachers did see text complexity and asking students to respond to text-dependent questions in writing and in discussion as key pieces of the CCSS, but not as particularly linked to equity. The figure below summarizes the prominent policy messages about the CCSS at each level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Set equally high expectations “across zip code”</td>
<td>• Fewer, clearer, higher</td>
<td>• Fewer standards that clearly build from year to year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide equal opportunity to learn knowledge and skills necessary for college success</td>
<td>• Asking text-dependent questions</td>
<td>• Text-dependent questions in discussion and writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reading complex texts</td>
<td>• Reading complex texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Equity as a byproduct of instructional practice</td>
<td>• Incomplete messages about equity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Kornhaber, Griffith, & Tyler, 2014; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013a)

Figure 4-1: Shift in messages about the Common Core and equity from the national- to the district- and teacher-levels.
General policy context in Palmetto County Public Schools

In this dissertation, I focus on the policies most relevant to the tension between standardization and differentiation: the Common Core, the standardized SpringBoard curriculum, state testing, and curricular tracking, but it is important to note that Palmetto County Public Schools, like many other large districts, is implementing many different policy initiatives at any given time. For example, in the 2013–14 school year, PCPS was also in its third year of implementing a highly publicized teacher evaluation program, relying on a combination of value-added scores, administrator observations, and observations from specially trained “peers.” As I will describe later in this chapter, district administrators perceived teacher evaluation as complementary to Common Core implementation; teachers did not perceive the two initiatives as linked.

Another important policy in the Palmetto County School District context is the state formula that determines a school’s letter grade, from A to F. State letter grades determine which schools are targeted for a district-wide school improvement program, as well as, of course, playing a role in public perception of school quality and housing values in different neighborhoods (Figlio & Lucas, 2004). At the time of data collection, school grades for elementary and middle schools were calculated based on the percentage of students passing the state test in reading and mathematics (grades 3-10), writing (grades 4, 8, and 10), and science (grades 5, 8, and 11); the learning gains all students made as measured by their performance on the state test; the learning gains made by students who were in in the lowest 25% of the distribution the previous year, as measured by the state test. Of the 900 points available to middle schools, 400 come from the percentage of satisfactory state test scores, and 400 come from a
weighted percentage of the number of students making state test score gains. The remaining 100 points are a “bonus” awarded to schools that have “accelerated” students into high school coursework (especially high school mathematics); points are awarded for those students have successfully passed the state end-of-course test.

Finally, a key piece of the PCPS policy context is their desegregation history, which mirrors the national trends of court-ordered desegregation, subsequent resegregation, and a turn away from deliberate student assignment policies in favor of choice and standards. PCPS was under court order from 1971 until 2001—under the initial plan, the district changed many of the former African American schools into what the district called sixth or seventh grade centers, where white students would be bused for two of their middle school years. Meanwhile, black students would be bused into outlying, predominantly white communities for all of their school careers except sixth and seventh grade. At that time, students were assigned in such a way as to create a racial balance of 80% white enrollment and 20% minority enrollment. As suburban developments expanded ever outward from the center city in Palmetto County in the 1980s, new schools were generally built in those suburban areas, and new (white) residents to Palmetto County vociferously argued against the district’s practice of reassigning their children to a new school every few years, as well as the influx of African American students from neighborhoods closer to the center city.

Reflecting national trends in desegregation policy, Palmetto County began shifting from mandatory desegregation to voluntary desegregation in the early 1990s. PCPS opened a number of magnet schools, reformatted the sixth and seventh grade centers into middle schools, and linked elementary schools with one middle school and one high school that students would no longer be reassigned to schools almost every year, cutting the number of students being bused by 40%. The demographics of Palmetto County continued to shift over the 1990s; in 2001—the year the district was declared unitary—with district was 51 percent white, 23 percent African-
American, and 20 percent Latino. The U.S Court of Appeals, consistent with many other unitary rulings in the 1990s and 2000s, noted the changing demographics of the district, but felt that those demographic shifts are not linked to any deliberate policies, beyond the control of the school district, and therefore not the school district’s responsibility to remedy.

Since 2001, PCPS has doubled down on voluntary school choice as its only between-school equity strategy. Under the most recent district-wide choice program, started in 2003, students may select from schools with themed magnet programs, schools with career and technical education programs, a cyber school, many charter schools, and any public school that has extra seats. However, while some magnet schools are still located in historically African American and Latino neighborhoods, some of the new, themed magnet schools are now located in the suburbs and draw only a relatively homogeneous student population from the surrounding area. Meanwhile, other research has documented a rise in the number of schools with 90% minority enrollment that the voluntary choice program has done little to counterbalance.

In addition to the voluntary choice program, PCPS has sought equity through improving the quality of the instructional experience in general, rather than through student assignment plans. One part of PCPS’s strategy for instructional improvement is a heavy on state test scores to identify achievement gaps and closely monitor the achievement of schools, subgroups, and individual students. During my data collection, I observed multiple department meetings spent looking at data from assessments given throughout the year to predict students’ performance on the state test. Another key part of PCPS’s strategy for equity through instructional improvement is the use of the College Board’s SpringBoard curriculum across the vast majority of middle and high school English/Language Arts and mathematics courses; SpringBoard promotional materials describe the program as exposing all students to the knowledge and skills necessary for advanced placement coursework. The guidelines for entrance to advanced placement coursework are not well specified, however. The most recent PCPS parent handbook (2014) advises parents of
students interested in the AP program to contact the school guidance counselor to learn more. The College Board and PCPS itself promote their use of the PSAT test, administered to all 9th, 10th, and 11th grade students, as a tool through which students with “AP potential” can be identified and encouraged to consider an honors-level and/or AP class. In fact, the screening tool itself is called “AP Potential”, and tells students that they have a certain percentage change of succeeding in an AP course. A 2012 report from The College Board credits the district’s 60% increase in the number of AP tests taken between 2008 and 2011 directly to the district’s use of the PSAT “to identify students with academic aptitude that may have been overlooked for a variety of reasons.” To summarize, PCPS relies on voluntary choice, standards and accountability, and a standardized curriculum as its primary equity strategies.

Common Core resistance at the state and local level

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the Palmetto County School District is a racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse metropolitan district located in a Southern state. Palmetto County has a reputation as a national leader in Common Core implementation. The state itself has been known in the past for its embrace of standards-based reforms, including adopting the Common Core in 2010. The state did not ask districts to fully transition to the Common Core until the 2014–15 school year (the first year of Common Core assessments) over Palmetto County had already been implementing the standards for two full years by the time of my data collection, part of why I chose PCPS as a research site. However, during the data collection period (August 2013–January 2014), Common Core resistance swept the state (as in many states across the

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4 The “expectancy tables” are based on correlations the College Board has calculated between PSAT scores and different AP tests and are publicly available here: http://www.collegeboard.com/counselors/app/expectancy.html.
country), and the state department of education held a series of public hearings on the Common Core across the state.

I attended the hearing held in Palmetto County, held at a local community college. The auditorium was packed with Palmetto County teachers and parents, as well as teachers, parents, and concerned citizens who had traveled several hours to attend the forum. The state commissioner of education and her deputy sat patiently on stage, taking notes and listening to each speaker over a four-hour period. Those who wanted to speak were asked to take a numbered index card; the last speaker called was number 149.

Speakers were generally clearly either for or against the Common Core, and seemed roughly split into equal groups. (These conclusions are drawn from my notes as well as from a state report where the comments from the public hearing were tallied and summarized to guide any changes that the state department of education might consider meeting. As I listened to the hearing, I paraphrased and, in many cases, quoted each comment.) Early in the hearing, the PCPS superintendent spoke on behalf of the standards. In addition, the majority of teachers and coaches from PCPS who spoke at the hearing supported the Common Core State Standards, although teachers also sometimes recommended that the consequences for teachers’ evaluations and school grades be temporarily suspended with the move to Common Core assessments.

For example, a long-time PCPS employee who had spent more than 20 years as a teacher, coach, and reading supervisor in the district told the commissioner of education that she feels “fortunate” to work in PCPS, “where they have been progressive to implement CCSS early.” She has “witnessed teachers’ increased ability to create higher level questions, students’ ability to answer them, and students’ ability to create them themselves. No,” she says, “the CCSS is not a curriculum, but guides the creation and implementation of curriculums. I see students developing deeper read into the text; students who have gone from superficial reading where students skimmed and answered the questions to a deeper read where students are moving into the
multiple reads, but expanding answers with support and textual evidence, and read multiple texts at a time and synthesize.” She ends her comments in tears, describing how she feels the CCSS has affected her experience as a parent. Her daughter was classified as a struggling reading; however, since the CCSS, it has “changed my child to no longer be a struggling reader. She comes home eager to read, discussing what she is reading at a higher level; she is now in advanced honors classes and making straight As [applause]. It is hard for me to have a struggling reader as a reading coach, and the CCSS have changed the life of her child [applause].” Other PCPS teachers pointed out that a consistent set of standards would help students in the military; Palmetto County has a large military base.

On the other hand, concerned citizens and parents spoke out against the relationship they perceived between the Common Core and a loss of student data privacy, curriculum concerns (one speaker mentioned “pornographic literature” like Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, while several others talked about the “new math” in the CCSS), and perceived federal overreach. A resident of a neighboring county protested the use of military families to justify the Common Core. She said, “I don't speak the jargon. I’m a product of an Air Force family plus a career in air force, and there is no disadvantage to being a military raised child [major applause]. Those children get broad exposure to history. Forget CCSS, come do what they are doing in [nearby city] [applause].” The speaker goes onto to claim that the standards are a vehicle for federal control over education and a loss of student privacy, saying,

> You bet this is political. Every bit of it is political [applause]. Funneling [students] into paths that the federal govt. thinks are right for them. They will be funneled into predetermined paths. Once you take that federal money you are hooked on it. We're bought and paid for. They've established that we are purchasable, and they've sent millions of dollars down here to do it. Socialized education is coming down the pike, and
CCSS is the vehicle ['yes!' from the audience], and NSA-like data collection that is already going on with our students [applause].

Several speakers later, a white PCPS parent echoes these claims and says that she hopes the Republican state governor is listening to her because she represents his base of supporters-

“The Common Core are not grassroots or state driven, which [the previous state standards] were. [State] is not eligible for Race to the Top unless we adopted [the standards]; federal law prohibits the department of education from prescribing curriculum from the 10th amendment [she goes on to quote it], but it does appear that the federal government found a way to expand into our state responsibility provided to us by our state constitution. So please help me as a [state] resident, a taxpayer, and a citizen with two school-age children; help me understand how the CCSS helps. Where I can turn over intrusive data collection concerning my child, [or if the CCSS] promote a teaching of beliefs or ideology that my husband and I disagree with? [applause] I support raising standards in education, in the power of knowledge. I majored in education in college, and I am actively engaged in my children's school and individual learning. The CCSS was created by private, DC-based groups, promoted by federal DC government. The CCSS takes away my choice—whether I choose public, private, charter, home school, standardized tests will all cover CCSS; the SAT, the ACT. It's not ok [applause]; such an overreach of federal government into our state-given rights.”

She ends her comment talking about the state governor: “I'm his base. Like, I am the base of [the governor]. I hope he understands that there are a lot of people that are concerned with the federal overreach. That's huge [applause].”

After the series of public hearings, the name of the standards was changed to include the name of the state, deleting the words “Common Core” from the name of standards entirely. The standards’ content was also slightly changed in response to the public hearings and the public
comment period: the standards now specify the teaching of cursive, the inclusion of calculus as an option for advanced math, and other minor wording changes (there were no significant changes to the middle school ELA standards). Backlash against the Common Core also spilled over to the Common Core assessments, resulting in the state loosening ties with one of the assessment consortia and putting out a call in 2013 for state testing bids. The state ended up choosing the American Institutes of Research to develop the state test, rather than going through either the PARCC or Smarter Balance assessment consortia.

Common Core State Standards rhetoric and equity at the national level

Improving both the quality and equality of educational opportunities has been a common rationale for the newest iteration of standards-based reform, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). During the early stages of the creation of the CCSS, equity was a key part of the rationale for the CCSS at the national level—though equity was frequently paired with an economic rationale. When Kornhaber, Griffith, and Tyler (2014) conducted interviews with CCSS policy entrepreneurs to identify the theory of action undergirding the CCSS, interviews revealed that CCSS policy entrepreneurs view equity as a critical component of the CCSS. Policy entrepreneurs' primary view of equity was what Kornhaber and colleagues call an “equal conception of equity,” or an idea of equity as providing “equal educational resources”.

The authors also make the observation that the equal conception of equity parallels the “opportunity to learn” concept popularized during the 1990s standards movement. Ostensibly, given equal “opportunity to learn” the knowledge and skills valued by the dominant culture for social

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5 Kornhaber et al. (2014) point out that this conception of equity is similar to Coleman's (1968) notion of “equality of educational opportunity” and Jencks's (1988) term “democratic equality” (p. 5).
mobility, differences (McDonnell, 1995; Schmidt & Maier, 2009) in student outcomes should be the result of varying ability and motivation levels, rather than differential exposure to the content necessary for advancement.

The “equal conception of equity” that policy entrepreneurs saw as prominent in the CCSS included how they believed the CCSS would set equally high expectations for all students, as well as “tell the truth” about the rigor necessary for college success (Kornhaber et al., 2014). Policy entrepreneurs felt that common standards would also lead to more equitable access to high-quality curricular resources that could be easily shared across states and districts via technology. Finally, at least one policy entrepreneur claimed that aspects of the standards themselves could help provide more equitable educational opportunity. This individual pointed to the “text dependent” nature of the Common Core English/Language Arts and Literacy standards as another key piece of equity because they ask students to draw on textual evidence in their reading and writing rather than rely on differential amounts of background knowledge. The policy entrepreneur said, “by grounding the Common Core in instruction on those standards in the texts itself … you neutralize the effect of family background variables in ways that have not been done before. It doesn’t mean that it eliminates it. Conceptually it creates a more level playing field” (as quoted in Kornhaber et al., 2014, p. 15).

Though equity was a prominent part of policy entrepreneurs' rationale for the creation of the CCSS, equity was a less prominent part of the public rationale as policy entrepreneurs ginned up support for the standards and worked with states during the adoption process. McDonnell and Weatherford (2013a, 2013b) note that policy entrepreneurs varied their argument depending on their audience, highlighting the economic benefits of higher standards with business groups and highlighting the equity rationale of evenly distributed higher standards with civil rights groups. Though resistance to many aspects of the standards and their implementation has grown over the last year, McDonnell and Weatherford (2013a, 2013b) note the unprecedented support for the
CCSS as the standards were created and adopted during 2009-2010—support across business, civil rights, government, and labor groups, as well as across party lines.

**CCSS policy messages and equity in Palmetto County Public Schools**

**The role of intermediary organizations in CCSS implementation in PCPS**

After forty-five states and the District of Columbia initially adopted the CCSS (largely in early to mid-2010 before the August 1, 2010 deadline imposed by Race to the Top [Achieve, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.]), the responsibility of determining what these new standards meant for curriculum and instruction fell to states, districts, and intermediary organizations closely associated with the Common Core effort. Groups like Achieve, the PARCC and Smarter Balance assessment consortia, the Aspen Institute, and Achieve the Core (founded by the CCSS lead authors) all began to craft materials aimed at interpreting the CCSS for district leaders, administrators, and teachers.

With the support of the Gates Foundation, the Aspen Institute developed a series of professional development presentations with detailed facilitator's guides for schools and districts to use to help their teachers understand the Common Core standards themselves and the “instructional shifts” which the CCSS authors claim the standards demand (shifts away from what they claim to be current instructional practice). Though other organizations have developed curriculum (e.g., lessons or units) that are said to be “Common Core-aligned,” the Aspen Institute has been the primary nonprofit organization to develop professional development materials to teach teachers about the meaning of the CCSS. The Aspen Institute has also played a notable role in conveying the meaning of the CCSS to local actors through their Urban District Leadership Network (UDLN). The Aspen Institute has supported urban district superintendents since 2000
(The Charles A. Dana Center, 2015), but formed the UDLN in 2010 in collaboration with the Charles Dana Center at University of Texas-Austin and Agile Mind (a company offering science and math curricula) (The Aspen Institute, 2015). The UDLN includes the Chief Academic Officers and literacy and math leaders from each member district, and has focused heavily on supporting Common Core implementation. The primary goal of the UDLN is to “leverage” the network “to help districts learn from each other and to explore joint solutions to commonly held problems and challenges...[using] robust strategies and tools that individual districts could not develop on their own” (The Aspen Institute & The Charles A. Dana Center, n.d., p. 1). Under the umbrella of the UDLN, the superintendents of the member districts meet regularly as part of the Urban Districts Superintendents Network, as do the Chief Academic Officers for each district, and district-wide math and literacy leaders. Retreats for the UDLN include staff from the Aspen Institute's program for Education and Society, but also have included representatives from a number of other intermediary organizations (Achieve, the Aspen Institute, and Student Achievement Partners), both assessment consortia, companies (Agile Mind, Inc.), foundations (the Raikes Foundation and the Gates Foundation), the charter school network New Visions for Public Schools, Chief Academic Officers from other districts outside the UDLN, and academic researchers (including Jennifer O'Day from the American Institutes of Research and Meredith Honig from the University of Washington). The two goals of the UDLN's work related to the Common Core were (1) to “build the capacity of a strongly aligned set of urban district leadership networks focused on ensuring that all students are college or work ready upon graduation,” and (2) to “develop, adapt, and pilot essential tools for implementation of the CCSS and strategies for their use” (The Aspen Institute & The Charles A. Dana Center, n.d., p. 1).

Palmetto County Public Schools was a pilot sites for these “essential tools for implementation of the CCSS,” which took the form of the Aspen-created professional development materials, as well as Aspen Institute support in implementing the Gates-funded
Literacy Design Collaborative units. The Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) is a CCSS curriculum development effort spearheaded by UCLA's National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing and WestEd in order to produce a series of “plug-and-play template tasks” for use across the content areas. These fill-in-the-blank templates were designed to remind teachers—especially content area teachers—that students “should” be drawing on textual evidence in their writing. For example, one template task reads, “[Insert optional question] After reading (literature or informational texts), write (an essay, report, or substitute) in which you describe (content). Support your discussion with evidence from the text(s)” (Literacy Design Collaborative, 2015, italics original). Teams of curriculum specialists and teachers across Aspen's Urban District Leadership Network later developed thematic units to go along with similar text-dependent writing tasks. In PCPS (one of the LDC pilot sites), a team of reading specialists developed curricular units for use in sixth grade reading classes as well as in content area classes. For example, one LDC unit developed in PCPS for a sixth grade advanced reading class asks students to perform the following task: “After researching nonfiction books, photo journals, and articles on contemporary child labor, write an article for a children's magazine that defines and explains child labor practices and how children around the world are impacted.”

All urban districts in the Aspen Institute's network were encouraged to use the LDC units and Aspen Institute CCSS professional development materials. In PCPS, the district developed their own “orientation to the Common Core” presentation, but the district used two of the three available Aspen Institute units for English/Language Arts and reading teachers' professional development related to the Common Core: one training on text complexity and one training on text-dependent questions.
Common Core policy messages presented to all teachers in Palmetto County

PCPS hosted a series of CCSS trainings with three stated goals: to communicate consistent information across their 30,000-odd person teaching force, to demonstrate how Common Core implementation would help teachers improve on the student engagement part of their evaluations, and to build deep understanding about what the Common Core means, rather than a shallow focus on how to comply with a new set of standards.

The first training, “Understanding the CCSS,” was required for all teachers in the district, and it presented basic information about the standards as well as a rationale, the “compelling why” as a district administrator put it, for the standards' adoption. This initial presentation framed the CCSS as a solution to the problem of many entering college students needing remediation, as well as the projected demands of the labor market, in which the majority of students will need some level of post-secondary training. The presentation briefly invoked the fear of falling behind other countries in postsecondary attainment, informing teachers that “Competing countries are catching up to—and even outpacing—the U.S. in the educational attainment of their new generation of adults” (Orientation powerpoint, slide 14). Equity was not a prominent part of the rationale for the Common Core presented to teachers in this first district-level training. The need for consistency in the content and pace of learning across states was mentioned twice (slide 15, 21) and “consistent expectations across zip code” (slide 21) was mentioned once, but without explaining what was meant by zip code or what students specifically were in need of “consistent expectations.”

The district orientation presentation also explained the benefits of the CCSS for teachers as well as students, explaining that the CCSS would help teachers get higher marks on their evaluations (teachers had been scoring low on the student engagement piece of the peer and administrator observations that count for 60% of their annual evaluations, with the other 40%
coming from quantitative data points). Because many teachers struggled with using questioning and discussion techniques, a component of the part of “student engagement” domain in their observation rubric, CCSS trainings were used as a way to address improving questioning techniques and student engagement, therefore supporting both the CCSS and teacher evaluations. District administrators hoped to help teachers understand the connections between concurrent policies so that they would see them as mutually supportive and interdependent (rather than part of an overall policy overload/burnout). Though the district saw almost all of its policies as supporting student achievement, district administrators focused particularly on creating an explicit connection between the teacher evaluation policy and Common Core implementation.

To summarize the CCSS messages at the district level, the CCSS was framed as improving workforce readiness, improving teachers' evaluation scores, and somewhat as a way to ensure consistent content across states. The CCSS effort’s claim that the way to ensure consistent expectations across zip code was mentioned once, but not unpacked.

**Common Core policy messages presented to literacy teachers**

After the initial CCSS overview that teachers in all content areas completed, literacy teachers completed the “Deepening the Implementation: Advanced Rigorous Curriculum Design Workshop.” In this training, ELA and reading teachers did an exercise in which they looked at how each of the standards changed from year to year in terms of what they asked students to accomplish to be “college and career ready” by 12th grade.⁶

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⁶ Note: P. David Pearson (2013) categorizes five ways that the standards change from kindergarten through twelfth grade: by decreasing support, raising cognitive demand, asking students to engage with an increasing number of concepts at the same time, make connections between an increasing number of entities, discuss related concepts rather than singular entities (often in a discipline-specific way), and draw on more evidence in an increasingly sophisticated way. The way that the standards build over time was based on professional consensus because there is not a research base in ELA on learning progressions (p. 4).
The last piece of the district's CCSS implementation strategy was a better understanding of the deep, conceptual ideas behind the “instructional shifts” the CCSS standards are said to demand. As a district administrator said in an Alliance for Excellent Education webinar, “Compliance is not the goal but rather than building of deep foundations of understanding to support the CCSS implementation.” However, though some of the training materials focused on building conceptual understanding about the dimensions of text complexity or how to modify questions in a basal reader to rely on textual evidence, the content-specific trainings on text complexity and text-dependent questions all focused on how to implement the CCSS as a technical set of instructional practices—what to do rather than what to believe. The professional development did not address how to implement these practices with a broad range of learners, or address teachers’ own beliefs about student ability—beliefs that ultimately countered the idea that all students can access advanced content.

To address the “instructional shifts”, teachers attended two trainings that used materials developed by the Aspen Institute (PCPS staff served as facilitators after being trained using the Aspen Institute facilitators' guides). Equity-oriented messages appeared to some degree in both ELA/literacy trainings: the first on text complexity and the second on text-dependent questions. However, where equity-oriented messages did exist in these materials, the focus was on how particular aspects of instruction said to be linked to the CCSS would create greater equity, rather than how the standards themselves are intended to create system-wide equity.

**Messages about text complexity**

In the Aspen Institute-created presentation on text complexity used in PCPS professional development, there is a strong equity-oriented message related to “all students” being exposed to
complex text. (I did not attend this training; teachers saved the materials from the training and gave them to me.) The presentation on text complexity lists four objectives for the sessions:

- Review the major elements of text complexity in the context of the CCSS.
- Learn how to employ a structured process for evaluating text complexity and choosing complex texts for instruction.
- Understand the importance of implementing the new balance between literary and informational texts demanded by the CCSS.
- Understand the importance of providing access to all learners, regardless of ability, to complex texts and rich instruction aligned to them (slide 2, Aspen Institute, 2012, bolding in original).

While the first three objectives represent neutral, technical changes in instruction or understanding a rationale for those changes, the fourth objective is explicitly equity-oriented:

“Understand the importance of providing access to all learners, regardless of ability, to complex texts and rich instruction aligned to them.” Of the 37 slides in the presentation, seven are focused on this final equity-oriented objective, or 19% of the presentation. Slide 33 in particular explains “Why Sharing Complex Texts Matters” for equity, explaining that complex texts “for all” is a way to make up for fewer literacy experiences in the home, compounded when students lack the “opportunity” to engage with complex texts in school due to reading remediation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why Sharing Complex Texts Matters</th>
<th>Some students</th>
<th>Other students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• had lots of books available to them at home and had caregivers who read to them in their early years with great regularity.</td>
<td>• were isolated from texts before arriving at the schoolhouse door.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• had teachers who augmented textbooks with adequately complex reading.</td>
<td>• were classified as unable to succeed within the regular curriculum and hence given materials pitched at a much lower level.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• became eager and independent readers because they learned how to read well in their first years of their schooling.</td>
<td>• became identified as struggling readers because they were never given the opportunity to grapple with adequately complex texts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This slide does not mention any specific student populations (though it does imply a number of causal linkages about the source of reading difficulties and their proper remedy), though the presentation does specifically refer to “ELs” (English language learners) as a group that must be exposed to complex texts (slide 36).

The presentation's rhetoric about how equal access to complex text creates a more equitable learning environment echoes high-level policy entrepreneurs' view of text complexity in the ELA standards as related to students' “opportunity to learn.” For example, ELA CCSS lead author David Coleman has gone on record about his belief in text complexity as an equity issue, saying to a group of New York administrators,

One of the greatest threats to a wide range of students being able to read sufficiently complex text with confidence is we keep them out of the game. Far too early and far too often we reduce text complexity for these students rather than giving them the scaffolding they need to embrace and practice that complexity...I am saying in a clear voice, the core of instruction, core classroom time becomes the shared encounter of sufficiently difficult text. The proper role for leveled material can be an intensive support for students …but remember that time might also be used for them to have more time with that sufficiently complex work. (Coleman, 2011, p. 13–14)

Here, Coleman claims that struggling readers must be exposed to complex text in order to improve their reading skills and as a matter of equity. Giving students only “leveled text” (text that matches a students' assessed reading level in terms of its vocabulary and syntax) is framed as “keeping students out of the game,” or as denying students the opportunity to comprehend more
sophisticated text. This message was prominent in the text complexity training provided to PCPS ELA and reading teachers.

**Messages about text-dependent questions**

The other required training for ELA and reading teachers dealt with text-dependent questions. This presentation did not contain any explicit equity-oriented messages. Instead, the text-dependent questions presentation focused on the following objectives:

- Learn about the reading strategy called “close reading” as a means of teaching complex text.
- Examine the **characteristics** of text-dependent questions.
- Learn how to employ a **structured process** to create text-dependent questions at the word/phrase, sentence, and paragraph/passage levels.
- Understand the **connections between** effective close reading and the CCSS Anchor Reading Standards.
- Learn how to employ a **structured process** to evaluate and revise existing reading comprehension questions in current curriculum (bolding in original).

This training led teachers through a close reading of an excerpt from *Alice in Wonderland*, had them create close reading questions for Martin Luther King's “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”, and then asked teachers to “rehabilitate” questions from a basal reader into text-dependent questions. Whereas the text complexity training focused on the importance of complex texts for equity, the training on text-dependent questions did not make any explicit connections to equity.

Both David Coleman and the Aspen Institute authors of a “close reading primer” (Brown & Kappes, 2012) have sometimes made claims that asking text-dependent questions creates equal opportunity for students to respond since they are using textual evidence rather than varying amounts of background knowledge. Both Coleman (2011) and the close reading primer (Brown & Kappes, 2012) initially forbade the use of common reading strategies such as making text-to-self
connections. After public controversy over close reading and a sound rebuttal about the role of background knowledge in reading from the International Reading Association's Catherine Snow (Snow & O'Connor, 2013), the Aspen Institute authors modified their “close reading primer” to focus less on “close reading” as the primary strategy teachers should use, but as one of a number of reading strategies. These messages, however, about close reading and equity did not make their way into the training on text-dependent questions.

To summarize, then, the professional development teachers received on text complexity and text dependent questions made limited reference to equity. Where the materials focused on equity, they claimed that equity would come from teachers' technical changes in instruction.

Policy messages that teachers expressed related to the Common Core

It is not surprising that ELA and reading teachers did not generally see the CCSS as an equity-oriented reform since that was not generally the way it was presented or explained to them; the policy messages teachers reported related to the Common Core were primarily technical in nature. In fact, across 25 interviews, and 115 instances of the code “CCSS Policy Message,” only 14 of those coded interview excerpts related to equity. However, there was still surprisingly little coherence in teachers' views about what the CCSS is—I developed 31 different coding categories to describe the components of the CCSS that teachers described. Here, I summarize views about the CCSS held by at least six of my participants (of 25 total participants). While six participants represents only 24% of the total participants, no more than 10 participants (40%) expressed any single Common Core message.
**Fewer, clearer, higher**

Seven teachers mentioned that the CCSS trainings showed them how each of the individual English/Language Arts standards builds from year to year. These teachers generally felt positive about what they considered to be a fewer number of standards with a higher expectation of complexity. For example, Diane Walker, a veteran teacher in a high-income school, expressed,

> The [previous state standards] are long; there’s a big long list of them where you could never possibly remember the code numbers that go with them, where the Common Core is more compressed and it’s more detailed on significant skills that kids need to have, that they’re going to have across the country.

Other teachers made similar observations about the standards' “vertical alignment” (Amy Spencer) and how “adding one word...up[s] the game” (Deborah Wright), as the standards progress from grade to grade. Having a fewer number of standards gradually increasing in difficulty from year to year was a frequently mentioned favorable aspect of the CCSS, as in this representative quote from Diane Groves, the subject area leader for ELA in a mixed-income middle school:

> “They (the CCSS) are more focused. There’s nothing bad about Common Core. And the way that they’re scaffolded is good, because it really ties in a simple way—they’re the same 10 core objectives, but they’re simpler in a kindergarten class, and then they become progressively more engaging by the time you get to the twelfth grade. The first one might be the exact same domain, but all the way up through each grade level there’s different aspects, different emphasis, like that.”
Overall, this message seems consistent with the “fewer, clearer, higher” (Rothman, 2013) message about the CCSS at the national level—literacy teachers in PCPS perceived the standards formed as a leaner and more coherent set of expectations.

**Text complexity**

Despite the emphasis on text complexity from the district level (one entire training session), only four teachers mentioned text complexity as a part of the CCSS when asked a general question like, “What kind of information has been getting out to you about what the Common Core is?” This may be a function of an overly general prompt, or perhaps text complexity was less stressed at the secondary level than at the elementary level. Two of these four teachers referred to the text complexity in passing: one mentioned that a primary aim of the CCSS “is that all the kids are gonna be able to read complex texts and all that stuff” (Jessica King), while another simply mentioned that one of their trainings had been on text complexity. The other two teachers went into more detail about how to evaluate text complexity; both (Lisa Cooper, John Maxwell) described how a seemingly simple text could become complex if it required a great deal of background knowledge and/or was coupled with a sophisticated task. Across the four teachers who mentioned text complexity, there was no direct mention of text complexity as it related to equity (the fourth objective of the text complexity training). The message about text complexity and equity that was emphasized in one of the trainings did not seem to come through clearly to teachers.
Text-dependent discussion and writing

The most commonly named component of the Common Core (10 teachers) was having students respond to text-dependent questions and pushing students to use textual evidence when answering those questions in both discussion and writing. For example, Sarah Henderson, a mid-career teacher (17 years) in an affluent suburban school, remarked favorably on the CCSS's focus on textual evidence from her perspective as a district parent as well as a teacher, saying,

I have a fifth grader and I have a second grader, so the fifth grader has not been brought up in Common Core. The second grader has...and I’m impressed. The second grader, even in first grade she came home and she had to do a little Venn diagram of two characters she read in a book. She was reading Junie B. [Jones], and she’s like, “What else is there about Junie B.?” I’m like, “How old was she? Isn’t she six or seven?” She’s like, “Mom, you cannot guess. You have to find the text evidence.” (Sarah Henderson)

Most of these ten teachers seemed positive or neutral about having students draw on more textual evidence in their writing; a few saw it as a necessary corrective to years spent asking students to write about their personal experiences for the state writing test (and/or telling students to was ok to lie about their personal experiences for the sake of adding images and detail to their test essays). However, one writing coach in a low-income school expressed concern that the balance may swing too far from students writing about their own lives in their own voices:

The problem is, are we teaching these kids starting in third grade that their own voice doesn’t matter, [that] it’s just what the author says? Where does teaching kids [about] their own histories and cultures and values and stuff, where does that come in? That’s what we’re sacrificing on the altar of Common Core, at least that’s what it feels like as a writing coach.
Overall, a focus on text-dependent questions as part of the CCSS came through clearly to literacy teachers in PCPS.

**Common Core policy messages related to equity**

Messages from teachers about the CCSS as an equity-oriented policy were much less common (14 total coded instances out of 116 coded instances of CCSS policy messages), and these messages were expressed by a fewer number of teachers (two or three teachers expressed each of the equity-related sentiments below). These messages included the idea that PARCC-style writing tasks asking students to draw on textual evidence were more fair to low-income students than the kinds of writing tasks sometimes asked by the state writing test, in which students have to draw on their personal experience and background knowledge. A few teachers also saw the CCSS as part of a greater effort to provide a consistent, and thus more equitable, educational experience across states for students who frequently move across state lines. Several teachers also saw links between the SpringBoard ELA curriculum and the CCSS, seeing both as supporting a larger effort to make college more accessible.

*Text-dependent writing creates a “level playing field”*

Of the 14 equity-related messages, two teachers specifically mentioned how the change to a PARCC style of writing assignment created a more “level playing field”. One writing coach and one middle school teacher (a former writing coach), both working in low-income school contexts, each brought up a prior fourth grade state test narrative writing prompt asking students to describe a camel ride. This prompt, both teachers felt, gave an advantage to students more
background knowledge, who were better able to visualize the details appropriate in a story about riding a camel. In the words of Lisa Cooper,

A: ...I remember a fourth grade prompt a few years ago was to tell a story about the time that you rode on the back of a camel. I’m like, “First of all, how many of our kids even know what a camel is? Do we even know that camels are in the desert? They’re not native to the U.S.

Q: [laughs] What? And they have to use their imagination?

A: Yes, but they had to still have some background knowledge, and for assessments like that, kids are not supposed to have background knowledge. Whereas with Common Core writing, it’s text-based, so no matter what the kids—what option the kids decide to take with the prompt, if they’re given an option, if it’s argumentative, for instance, they’re able to go back to the text and find that evidence.

Here, the teachers echo David Coleman’s claim about “close reading”—that asking text-dependent questions “levels the playing field” when students are not required to draw on background knowledge but can instead find the answers in the text—but instead, apply this logic to the questions on the state writing test.

A consistent learning experience as equitable

While not a common message, two teachers also expressed the idea that part of the way the CCSS can create equity is through a greater consistency in what students learn. One teacher
used the language of equity ("evens out the playing field") to talk about how the CCSS enable a consistent, and therefore, comparable evaluation of student performance across states:

I like the idea of Common Core, because I think it evens out the playing field. I’m tired of hearing this state isn’t good at this, but this state’s good at this. If we’re all teaching our own thing, how do we measure what each state is good at? (Sarah Henderson)

Another teacher described the benefits of a standardized, consistent curriculum for transient students within the district. Then, this teacher argues that the CCSS provides similar benefit: consistent education across states. He said,

A good thing about SpringBoard is that it began—I think one of the most important things about the Common Core is the congruence of education. Now we know what kids are learning in eighth grade in the entire county. So when a kid comes, and we have a large transient population, kids move from school to school, I can send he or she with their workbook, the teacher can see where they’re at, and we’re picking up right where we left off. And even nationally, with the Common Core, imagine that all the states had it. I’m a big fan of the Common Core, and I think that congruence of education has been missing historically. (Garrett Stevens)

These teachers emphasized the consistent education that the CCSS—and the SpringBoard curriculum—enable across schools within the district, as well as across states.

Common Core and SpringBoard promote equitable college readiness

Multiple teachers perceived SpringBoard and the CCSS as promoting similar approaches to instruction (8 teachers perceived a mutually reinforcing relationship between what the CCSS
asked students to do and what SpringBoard already asked). As Jessica King puts it below, she does not see the CCSS as representing a change from her current practice, because what the CCSS asks is so similar to what SpringBoard asks students to do:

But SpringBoard meshes so well with Common Core, for us there hasn’t even been a major shift, I don’t feel like. Except for being more concerned with finding evidence and commenting. That’s a little bit bigger. But even before, SpringBoard always asked, “Write a quick-write response. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Thomas More’s Utopia? How do you know? Use evidence.” So it was always doing that. It’s the social studies, those teacher who really are feeling it.

While about a third of the teachers I interviewed perceived the content of SpringBoard and the CCSS as similar, only a few saw these initiatives as a way to create equality of opportunity “across zip code,” or across unequal school contexts. One teacher did use the equity across zip code argument, normally associated with the CCSS, to talk about SpringBoard instead. Here, Sarah Henderson (in an affluent, exurban school) describes SpringBoard as a way to have a better quality education for students in the inner city:

Why shouldn’t a school in [the name of the inner city], why shouldn’t that eighth grade have the same expectation as my eighth grader? They should. You might have to accommodate, do a little bit more teaching. There’s gonna be more gaps, probably. But why not have the expectations, because they’re gonna rise to expectations, in my opinion.

(Sarah Henderson)

From administrators’ perspectives, the ultimate goal of these initiatives was for college to be a choice for all students. In SpringBoard promotional materials, the superintendent declared, “I expect all students who graduate from high schools in [Palmetto County] to be college ready. I do
not expect all students to necessarily go on to college, but it is my vision that all will have that choice... When I spoke with a district administrator, she applied the same logic of equity across zip code and college readiness to the CCSS, echoing the superintendent's language about college as a choice for all of the district’s students:

I think that—I think it’s [the CCSS is] wonderful, the idea about it’s an equalizer. It doesn’t matter the zip code, you would get the same instruction as someone from a more affluent neighborhood. For that, I think that that’s needed, and I think that’s a huge benefit to our students who may not—if there weren’t these initiatives supporting it, I don’t know that you would see the transformation that has started in our district and that hopefully will still come without these other pieces in place to support it, such as the teacher evaluation and things like SpringBoard. I don’t know that we would have changed it. I think that this [the CCSS] to some extent guarantees that your child will receive instruction that will prepare them for college. I was fortunate enough to be able to take AP classes. And now in our district we have enrolled in open AP classes to such a larger demographic of students and on top of quadrupling the number of students in AP in the past five years, we’ve also increased the percentage of students receiving a passing score. That’s nice, too. It’s not the typical kid now. There isn’t necessarily a typical kid for AP. It’s bringing everybody—“Here’s the door. You can choose to step through the door, not step through the door, decide this isn’t for you now,” but at least giving them the opportunity to make that decision. (Anna Carpenter, district administrator, italics added)

In contrast to administrators' view of “college for all“, some teachers took a less optimistic (or more realistic, depending on one's point of view) view of the idea of college as a choice. Sarah Henderson, a teacher in an affluent school who pointed out (above) that...
SpringBoard gives greater opportunity to inner-city students, also provides an example of the mixed signals teachers receive about student ability. While Sarah Henderson expressed the belief that students in the inner city will “rise to expectations,” she also expressed a sense of realism about the students in her lower track class. Sarah Henderson describes how when annotating a text, she asked her lower track class,

“How else can this help you? Let’s say I don’t go to college. What other jobs can I do?”

And they [students in the lower track class] brought up mechanic. “OK. What could we do with mechanic? Half of it’s on the computer now, so you’d have to make sure you really understand...So do I want to have my kids prepared if they choose the college life? Absolutely. But let’s be real...” (Sarah Henderson)

While this quote can be construed as invoking career readiness to help students see the relevance of what they are doing in school, at the same time, it can also be construed as an instance when a teacher does not challenge students’ ideas about what kind of careers are possible for them.

Middle school literacy teachers in Palmetto County often perceived the Common Core and SpringBoard to endorse similar instructional approaches. However, while district administrators saw both the Common Core and SpringBoard as important equity initiatives, teachers generally did not.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I described the way the messages about the Common Core shifted from the national level to the district level through the district’s use of Aspen Institute professional development materials. Then, I discussed the messages that teachers expressed about what they understood the Common Core to be, and how these were closely related to the district training
they received. Teachers primarily viewed the Common Core as an instructional reform, with limited implications for increasing educational equity. Next, I describe the other policies at work in Palmetto County at the same time because these concurrent policies, such as the standardized SpringBoard curriculum and curricular tracking, interacted with Common Core implementation.
Chapter 5

Testing, Tracking, and Teachers’ Descriptions of Students

Introduction

In addition to the policy messages in the environment related to the Common Core (mostly technical), there are a number of other policies operating in the PCPS context. In the previous sections, I have outlined how messages about the CCSS as an equity-oriented reform were present at the national level and the district level, as well as describing the policy messages that teachers actually expressed related to the Common Core. Now, I describe the other policies at work in the district that relate to the overarching tension between standardization and differentiation, including a standardized curriculum, curricular tracking, and state testing. I demonstrate in this chapter that, taken together, there are a number of contradictory policy signals at work in PCPS about student ability and how teachers “should” treat students in classroom instruction—namely, the tension between standardization and differentiation. On the one hand, the theory of action of some policies, like the Common Core and the use of the pre-Advanced Placement curriculum “SpringBoard,” is that students should experience equally rigorous curriculum and instruction, and be held to equally high expectations in service of college and career readiness. On the other hand, the theory of action inherent in curricular tracking is that students have different needs that can best be met in homogeneous groups; therefore, students’ learning experiences and expectations “should” be different. A summary of these policies can be found on the next page. Finally, I describe how teachers’ language when describing students reflects these mixed signals about the nature of student ability and “appropriate” curriculum and instruction for different groups of students.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reform Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Year Adopted</th>
<th>Level of Decision (State, District, etc.)</th>
<th>Theory of Action as Presented in Palmetto County School District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Common Core State Standards</td>
<td>Common K-12 standards and English/Language Arts, literacy across the content areas, and mathematics, spearheaded by National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers; minor changes and name change in 2013 in response to popular protests and public hearings (note: no changes to 6-8 ELA standards)</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>State (Note: district enthusiastic and early adopter)</td>
<td>Consistent learning opportunities and expectations across zip code Better curriculum resources and professional development through cross-state collaboration (District CCSS training materials, 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SpringBoard</td>
<td>Curriculum developed by the College Board, used in English/Language Arts and mathematics classes in grades 6-12</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Consistent learning opportunities and expectations across district (SpringBoard promotional materials, 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Grouping</td>
<td>Students are grouped for instruction based on state test score (Research for Action report on LDC implementation, 2013)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Provides a way for teachers to use flexible pacing and modify SpringBoard to meet the needs of their students (interview with writing coach; interview with district administrator for ELA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Testing</td>
<td>Annual state testing in reading and math for grades 3-11;</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>State (and federal, since testing)</td>
<td>Annual testing provides valid, valuable information about student performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Curriculum policies

SpringBoard for all ELA classes in grades six through twelve

The district-mandated curriculum for math and ELA in grades six through twelve (excluding AP coursework and IB magnet schools) is a pre-Advanced Placement curriculum called SpringBoard. Published by the College Board, SpringBoard's explicit intention is to expose all students to the knowledge and skills necessary for advanced placement (and by extension, first year college coursework, since advanced placements courses are ostensibly aligned to typical first year college coursework). In the words of PCPS superintendent, the theory of action behind SpringBoard is to ensure that the curricular experiences leading to college readiness are evenly distributed. In SpringBoard promotional materials, the superintendent says, “I expect all students who graduate from high schools in [Palmetto County] to be college ready. I do not expect all students to necessarily go on to college, but it is my vision that all will have that choice.”

Several teachers expressed skepticism about the motives underlying the superintendent's decision to use the SpringBoard curriculum (e.g., the superintendent's bonus is partially based on the number of students taking AP coursework). Even so, the district's explicit theory of action behind using the SpringBoard curriculum with all levels of English/Language Arts students (three official levels: honors advanced, advanced, and [considered at the same level]
regular/inclusion/ESL) is to expose all of the district's students to the knowledge and skills necessary for college coursework.

SpringBoard has been used in the district since 2008–2009 school year, as part of a college readiness initiative pre-dating the adoption of the Common Core (though the superintendent is widely considered to read the tea leaves of national policy and get out in front of new policy initiatives. The Gates Foundation, which also supported the Common Core among many other educational initiatives, financed the SpringBoard pilot program in four high schools during 2007–2008. The next year, SpringBoard expanded to the rest of the middle and high schools in the district. PCPS is considered a “SpringBoard success story” in College Board promotional materials, with a more than 100% increase in the number of AP classes taken and a 57% increase in passing Advanced Placement test scores between 2006 and 2010.

SpringBoard is also generally used with students who have identified disabilities. The district offers an inclusion class for students with identified disabilities to ensure that students are included in the regular curriculum. This class, which is co-taught with a special education teacher, uses the SpringBoard curriculum as well. Like the equity rhetoric surrounding the Common Core, offering an inclusion class that uses a pre-AP curriculum sends a signal of access and inclusion to advanced content for students that may typically be thought of as not ready for advanced content. The district pacing guide allows teachers to take extra days to finish each SpringBoard unit in the inclusion class, but requires schools and teachers to use the same curriculum.

Authentic curricula for remedial reading classes

To meet students' perceived instructional needs and help them pass the state reading test, the district enrolls students in different combinations of reading and ELA classes, depending on
their test scores. Students who score a 1 or 2 (of 5) on the state reading test are required by the state to take a remedial reading course. Students in PCPS who score in the lowest range on the state reading test are placed in a double-block of reading instruction in lieu of the ELA course using SpringBoard. However, PCPS has made an unusual choice for its remedial reading course: a modified version of the Literacy Design Collaborative modules, called LDC-A (standing for Literacy Design Collaborative-Accelerated). These units are thematically organized; students read a variety of texts related to a question or theme and then compose a written response, drawing on textual evidence to answer a question. On a day that I observed one of these classes, students were reading a short article on the space race with the goal of identifying reasons why the United States entered the space race (which was the question they needed to answer in the culminating writing assignment). This assignment is very similar to the kinds of text-based writing assignments that SpringBoard asks students to do, and clearly relates to the Common Core's focus on informational reading and writing using textual evidence. The other two remedial reading curricula the district offers are also a far cry from many scientifically based scripted reading programs. Instead, the curricula (Issues 21 and Expert 21, published by Scholastic) have students read clusters of texts on a topic, and then using textual evidence to craft a written product. Jeffrey Wilhelm, a well-known English educator, was involved in the creation of both curricula. Tasks mimic those of SpringBoard and the LDC modules, for example:

• “After reading articles and examining data on the impact of sustainable fishing, write a news report that examines the causes of overfishing and explains the impact on the environment. What implications are there for consumers, environmentalists, and fishermen?”

• “Did the digital era help or hurt society? After reading [texts on the digital era], write an argumentative essay that addresses the question and supports your position with evidence from the text. Be sure to acknowledge competing views.”
Students that have been assessed as in need of reading remediation are exposed to many complex, text-dependent writing tasks like these. Asking students in all of these different classes to engage with complex writing tasks implies a belief that students are capable of answering such a question in writing—regardless of their score on the state reading test. Earlier tracking research has pointed out that students in “lower level” courses are often asked to repeatedly practice easier work because teachers believe that knowledge proceeds sequentially (Watanabe, 2008), and that students must master A and B before moving on to C. Here, students are asked to engage with “C” (e.g., writing an essay) while “A” and “B” (e.g., marking a text to find evidence, constructing an argument) are skills that are still being learned.

Testing policies

Because No Child Left Behind asks states to report the percentage of students in each school whom states tests classified as advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic, the majority of states use these categories as the reporting categories for their state tests. This southern state has chosen to go one step beyond those four reporting categories to score its state tests for reading, math, and science into five numerical “levels”. Tests are constructed to measure a selection of the state standards; test standards are grouped into four reporting categories (in reading, these categories are vocabulary, reading application, literary analysis: fiction and nonfiction, and informational text and research process). Tests are given a raw score based on the number of items correct within each reporting category and the difficulty of those items. Then, the raw score is converted to a developmental scale score that gives a sense of how students are
progressing in each category from year to year; finally, developmental scale scores are split into five ranges and matched to each of the five achievement levels.7

The state writing test is similarly graded on an ordinal scale of 1 to 6, though it is evaluated in a different manner than the multiple-choice state reading test. Two raters give each student's essay a score from 1 to 6 based on a holistic rubric evaluating an essay's focus, organization, support, and conventions. The two raters' scores are averaged together to give students an overall numerical score. A score of 3.5 was considered passing in 2014 (there has been some waffling between 4 and 3 as a passing score over the last few years). The results of state writing test are used in calculating schools' A–F grades, but do not influence students' promotion or course placement.

**Instructional grouping policies**

In ELA and in reading, students in Palmetto County Public Schools are organized for instruction into a number of different permutations, with students' state test scores as primary criterion to determine their academic grouping. The Stanford 10 test (a nationally normed test) is used as a secondary grouping tool, with students scoring at certain percentages in the national distribution slotted for different “levels” of courses. (See Figure 5-2 below for a diagram illustrating how students are grouped into level of reading and ELA.)

Instructional grouping in the district is the result of both state and district policy. State law requires reading remediation for students in who do not pass the state reading test (students scoring at a level 1 or 2 out of 5). To group students for reading, finer-grained grouping decisions are made based on both state test scores and students' percentile score in a norm-referenced

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7 The state used to provide scale scores as well as developmental scale scores. Scale scores ranged from 100 to 500 and roughly tracked the five achievements levels (e.g., a scale score of 100–258 was considered a “Level 1” in 2008); Now, the state only provides developmental scale scores and the achievement level 1–5 associated with a student's developmental score.
reading test. In sixth grade, a reading class is mandatory for all students, so the district offers five levels of reading classes to try to meet students' instructional needs (though sixth grade grouping trajectories are not shown in this Figure 5-2). In the seventh and eighth grades, there are three levels of reading classes in which students are enrolled if they have not yet passed the state reading test; exact placement depends on students' scale score.

In ELA, district policy is to group students into the following classes: honors advanced, advanced, regular, an inclusion class, and ESOL (for English language learners). According to district administrators and coaches, this grouping strategy is intended to help teachers vary their instruction and the pacing of that instruction to meet each group's needs (the curriculum remains constant across these levels; all ELA classes use the SpringBoard curriculum, while the three levels of reading classes in the seventh and eighth grade use different curricula with texts at different reading levels and varying amounts of scaffolding).
State Test Score in Reading and Norm-referenced Test (NRT) Percentile | Track Placement
---|---
State test of "low 1"; NRT 1-15% | LDC-A curriculum in double block of reading and ELA

State test score of "high 1–low 2"; NRT 16-32% | Reading class: Issues 21 curriculum

State test score of "high 2"; NRT 33-49% | ELA level: regular or inclusion (depending on scheduling)

State test score of 3, 4, or 5; NRT 45-99% | Reading class: optional, would use LDC curriculum

ELA level: advanced honors

Figure 5-2: Seventh and eighth grade student grouping in reading and ELA.
How teachers’ language reflects mixed signals about student ability

Despite the policies in the district sending messages indicating that “all students” can meet high expectations and should experience rigorous curriculum, interviews with teachers and coaches across the district revealed that these policies speak to teachers in contradictory ways. As teachers described their daily schedules, the way they taught their different classes, and their beliefs about who “should” be enrolled in their different classes, they used hierarchical language to express normative beliefs of students' abilities as distributed along a bell curve. Across all 25 interviews, there were 123 references to student ability. Eighty-three of these references (across 21 of the interviews) demonstrated a fixed, hierarchical view of student ability; only six of the total instances of ability-related language (from 3 of the interviewees) displayed a mutable view of student ability. Even these three teachers, however, who expressed a belief that all students can learn, however, still talked about students as hierarchical groups —demonstrating the powerful effect that school organization has on shaping teachers' views of students. Below, I describe the ability-related language that teachers to describe students in our interviews.

Ability as mutable

A few district reading and writing coaches, all of whom worked in schools with the highest number of students in the district, expressed a mutable view of student ability. For example, Rebecca Lawrence, a writing coach who worked with multiple low-income schools, said,
People always told me that the kids’ scores on the [state test], they were kind of born good writers or they weren’t, and there wasn’t much that I could do about it. Even though the teachers had great lessons and did all this, they had an idea in their heads that there wasn’t really that much you could do. You could only grow a child in writing, to a certain extent, and then the rest is up to their ability level...So I agree that there’s obviously people who are born with certain ability levels and certain people who aren’t, but I also knew that a lot of my students, it wasn’t ability level, again, it was drive. It was again the want-to-learn that was holding them back, or the confidence that they could do it that was holding them back. So I developed different ways to help them learn how to write.

Here, Rebecca Lawrence attributes students' writing skills to a lack of confidence that they will be successful, which manifests as a lack of motivation; she then goes on to discuss how she created a successful process for scaffolding a structured state writing test essay. Another writing coach in a low-income school, Christina Greene, echoes Rebecca Lawrence's belief that students' lack of confidence can easily be perceived as a lack of motivation. Christina Greene believes that another contributing factor to what looks like a lack of motivation is that students have internalized a stigma about their school as “ghetto”. She tries to combat this as part of her approach to motivating them to do well on the state writing test:

My biggest thing I tell them...is to tell them to break the stereotype. Just because they come from a certain school, a lot of people may think certain things, but they have the ability to show people that it’s not what they think...You prove them wrong and show them that just because you’re from a certain area, just because you’re whatever, doesn’t mean that you are placed in a box.
Amy Spencer, a literacy coach and dropout prevention specialist at a low-income school, also talked about students' track placement as an additional barrier to students' success. Amy Spencer described a social studies lesson that she had modeled for a new teacher, in which students acted out the Boston Massacre to talk about how the representation of historical events, propaganda, and point of view, Amy Spencer addresses student ability directly:

I told the kids, “This lesson that you just did is the same lesson I used to do with the honors kids in my other [high-income suburban] school. Is this an honors class?” And they went, “Oh, no, no. We’re regular.” I said, “That can’t be true, because what you just did is an honors lesson. What does that mean?” “That we’re smart.” “Mm-hmm.”

Amy Spencer tries to help students “uncover their brilliance”, as she puts it, through connecting with students and clearly communicating respect and care for them. However, it is worth noting that in all three of these cases, teachers still referred to students as “lower level” and “higher level” throughout our interview, and that despite talking about ways to increase student motivation, teachers would sometimes slip into talking about an “intrinsic lack of motivation,” which implies a deficit view of students' abilities. It is also worth noting that none of these instances where teachers discussed mutable views of student ability were in relation to the Common Core.

Ability as hierarchical

“Low level kids”

One way that school organization shaped teachers' language about student ability was in giving them a vocabulary to talk about groups of students in rank order. The adjectives “high”
and “low” were frequently used to describe groups of students, students’ reading levels, or students’ general abilities (30 instances across 14 teachers). For example, a reading coach at a high-income school who clarified that it was “the higher group, the level 2” (Rachel Smith) who were writing college essays. An ELA teacher at mixed-income County Line Middle School told me that her sixth period is “my lowest out of all my classes” (Cassandra Berry), with “one repeater” who is “very very low”.

In addition to using the language of low and high to describe the ability of groups and individual students, teachers and coaches frequently (15 instances across seven teachers) described groups of students in terms of their course placements, using terms like “honors kids”, “gifted kids” and “advanced kids” in opposition to “regular kids”, “low level kids”, and/or “ESE kids” (ESE is an acronym students with IEPs). Megan Bailey, an ELA teacher at mixed-income Fielding Middle School described her concerns about moving to the CCSS writing assessment because “I was pretty good at getting them into that formulaic writing, the low-level kids, at least getting them to where they would write a passing essay.” Garrett Stevens, a veteran teacher in a diverse, mixed income school, told me about how he supplements vocabulary instruction for students in the honors class because “These are high-level, advanced honors kids. I need to give them more.” Deborah Wright, who had moved from a low-income school to high-income Live Oak Middle School in the heart of the city, talked about how she felt she had to modify SpringBoard for her former students at the low-income school because “SpringBoard...It’s at a very rigorous level, it’s College Board. So for these low, low-level kids, they cannot get it. So I would take the information from it and oftentimes I would use the stuff in there, but I would also create something different that I felt was easier for them to understand.”

These conversations often moved seamlessly between descriptions of students as “low” and “high” or students as a certain “kind of kid” and the instructional variations that teachers made to meet their conceptions of students’ needs. Though the instructional variations across
tracks are analyzed in more detail in the next chapter, these quotes give a taste for how teachers are construing student ability and making instructional decisions based on those conceptions of ability. These quotes also give a sense of teachers' deep, taken-for-granted images of what “honors” or “regular” students' abilities are.

“True honors”

Extending the idea of how school organization signaled that certain “kinds of kids” are qualitatively differently, teachers expressed strong opinions about the relative ability level of their groups of students and which students were “true honors” students. As I asked teachers to describe their daily schedules, seven teachers described some of their classes as “true honors” or “not true honors.” For example, a teacher in a low-income school said, “My fourth period is probably my only class that’s very true to—like this advanced honors, there’s a few gifted kids in there. My sixth period is advanced honors, too, and it is not at all—there’s kids in there who are ELL [English Language Learners], one who is getting an F, struggles, barely speaks English, and she’s in advanced honors language arts.” This is an example of how teachers have a mental image about what a “true honors” class looks like, and a “true honors” class “should” be composed of students who are academically successfully and fluent in English. Another low-income teacher (Lisa Cooper) said that when thinking about how to use SpringBoard across her different classes, she would “maybe use additional text, or maybe have some enrichment activities [in the advanced honors class], because this is a little bit too easy for the kids to do. So I think [SpringBoard is] geared more for the mainstream regular child as far as the rigor and for the truly advanced and honors kids, you need to up it up a little bit.”

A final example comes from Jessica King in a high-income school, who was disappointed in how her students’ handled the lesson that she planned for the day of her peer observation. She
picked this particular honors-level class because she thought that they had the highest number of “high-level readers”, and therefore, would ensure that her observation went well. When she felt like the lesson did not go smoothly, she wondered, “OK, maybe I was wrong. Maybe sixth period really doesn’t have high-level readers. Maybe I mixed up the classes.” When she checked the students' scores, however, she said, “Yeah. I was right... I have a bunch of 5s and 4s, but there was a couple of 2s, maybe two or three, a couple 3s, and then you’ve got 4s and 5s. You don’t have a solid—I was telling you [about the state where I used to teach], when they say gifted, they meant gifted.” Jessica King goes on to say that if she did have a “true honors class”, she thinks that “this literature circle thing that I did and that synthesis [activity], it probably would have turned out really well, because the higher-level, the concepts thinking-wise would have worked.”

In each of these examples, teachers express a sense of student ability as hierarchical, but also express particular ideas about what an honors student is and should be: namely, students with high state test scores, who speak English well, and are intrinsically motivated. Honors classes “should be” students who are “really smart” (Cassandra Berry), and “truly your advanced” (Sarah Henderson). Teachers sometimes recognized a connection between students’ past histories and current placements, saying that students in the higher levels were students “who were read to when they were young” and therefore are not “behind the eight ball” (Sarah Henderson). Another teacher explained that students’ assignment to the regular-level (non-inclusion) class “is not because of any learning disabilities, it’s just because they’re low or they come from a train wreck of a family, education hasn’t been supported, they missed something along the way and they haven’t caught up, they’ve given up. Whatever. There’s tons of reasons.” Despite recognizing that background and environment contribute to varying levels of performance and therefore to the ways in which students are grouped, teachers saw the groups of students as qualitatively different (e.g., some classes were composed of “true honors” students and some were not) with different instructional needs.
Students personified as “Level 1s, Level 2s, Level 3s, Level 4s and Level 5s”

Teachers also commonly used the scoring categories from the state reading test to not just describe students (i.e., “Level 1 readers”), but frequently (14 teachers) personified those categories (describing students as “Level 1s” or just “1s”). Teachers frequently used the state test scoring categories to describe the composition of the classes in their daily schedules. In addition to describing classes as “true honors”, teachers would frequently describe their daily schedules in terms of which classes were “their Level 1s and 2s” or their “Level 3s and 4s.” For example, at high-income DeSoto Middle School, Jessica King described her schedule in the following way:

Teacher: ...I start out with period one, and they are my lower class. They’re considered an advanced language arts class, however, they’re like the 1s and 2s, so it would be more like—

Researcher: On the [state test]?

Teacher: Yup, according to [state test] scores. And then I go and jump up to an advanced honors class after them, which is language arts as well. They’re better writers, better readers. They’re my 3s, 4s, a couple of 5s in that class on [the state test]...Then I go to fourth period, which is again an advanced language arts, and these are not as low as the first period, but again, they’re like the 2s and maybe some 3s, maybe a couple 1s in there.

In this excerpt, note not just the constant hierarchical language: “lower”, “better”, “not as low”, but how the scores have become personified by adding the definite article “the” in front of “1s” and “2”, or “my 3s and 4s”, connoting that these students belong to the teacher, and that these students are their scores in some way.

This language where students are discussed as state test scores did not only happen when adults were talking to each other, however, but carried through to at least one lesson that observed
where a teacher at mixed-income Fielding Middle School, John Maxwell, discussed students as state test scores while addressing his eighth grade students. This lesson (in mid-December) was designed to start preparing students for the state writing test at the end of February. In the lesson, John Maxwell asked students to look at sample essays the state had released to illustrate what kind of student writing receives of a score of “1” or “2,” etc. all the way up to the top score of “6.” In the lesson, there was a constant conflation of students who had written the essays with the number that essay had been scored. The refrain all day was, “Let's look at a 2 [i.e., an essay that received a score of 2]. What are 2s doing better then 1s?” Obviously, the essay did not “do anything better” than another essay, so the conflation here was between the student who wrote the essay, and the score it received. A similar example occurred later in the lesson when students looked at an example of an essay receiving a score of 3. John Maxwell said to the (honors) class, “So you can see they [the students who wrote the example essays receiving a score of 3] have a little idea of how to write....small and minute...but they do know how to write better than those 1st and 2s.” Similar language occurred the entire day in all classes, where essay scores were constantly personified and conflated with the students who wrote the essay. While this language of 1s, 2s, 3s, 4s, and 5s provides convenient shorthand for teachers to describe the scores of groups of students, this language can also connote a clear hierarchy that potentially depersonalizes students.

Conclusion

In interviews, teachers often used the language of the state test to describe students and their abilities. I argue that tracking policies, designed as a way to meet students' needs, have reified the categories used to score the state test. Together, testing policy and school organization imply views of student ability as hierarchical, which ends up sending a contradictory signal to the
equity-oriented messages in some of the Common Core rhetoric. Even the way that scheduling is
done from year to year (relying on the previous year's state test scores to build the initial master
schedule) implies that there is little change in state test scores from year to year, and little
movement in the level of the courses that students are enrolled in.

Of course, the great tension here—and the source of all of the mixed signals teachers
receive—is the tension between the press for college for all, and AP coursework “for all” that is
inherent in both SpringBoard and the Common Core, and the numerical testing categories that are
used to sort students into different levels of coursework. The urgent question, then, is how
instruction varies across these different groups, and the extent to which instruction meets
students' needs or limits their access to certain skills and knowledge.
Chapter 6

Teachers’ Decisions About Curriculum and Instruction Across Curricular Tracks

Introduction

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

—“Harrison Bergeron,” by Kurt Vonnegut

In Kurt Vonnegut's classic short story “Harrison Bergeron,” the “Handicapper General” of this futuristic society assures equality using a process similar to weighing jockeys before a horse race. Just as the lighter jockeys are “handicapped” to ensure that each horse carries an equal amount of weight (thus ensuring that the race is fair), the Handicapper General assesses individuals' talents and mitigates them to ensure an equal level of mediocrity across the population. For example, the Handicapper General mandates masks for those who are prettier than others, weights for those who are thinner than others, and in-ear buzzers for those of above-average intelligence to prevent them from thinking too much. This helps to ensure that, in 2081, “everybody was finally equal.”
In high-income, exurban DeSoto Middle School in Palmetto County Public Schools, teachers sometimes use Vonnegut's text to supplement Lois Lowry's classic young adult dystopia, *The Giver*. In *The Giver*, which is a required part of the eighth grade SpringBoard curriculum, protagonist Jonas lives in a futuristic society in which the residents prize what they call “Sameness”. “Sameness” means that the needs of the community are prized over the needs of the individual: occupations are chosen for residents based on their aptitudes; spouses are chosen based on personality matches; emotions like love are controlled through a once-daily pill. Students in DeSoto Middle School discuss the parallels between the “Sameness” that Jonas's society values and Vonnegut's story of equality through standardization.

Next year, all eighth grade students in Palmetto County will read “Harrison Bergeron,” as it has just been added to the revised version of the required Springboard curriculum published by The College Board to prepare students for Advanced Placement coursework. However, those students are spread across three “levels” of English/Language Arts (ELA). Will teachers discuss the story the same way? Will they ask students to write about the text(s) in the same way? Will the tone and atmosphere of the classrooms be similar or different across tracks?

Both *The Giver* and “Harrison Bergeron”—and the Common Core State Standards—raise pointed questions about the meaning of equity and equality, and how equity can best be achieved. Do we ensure equal outcomes or equal opportunity when we treat students the same? Or, can we better ensure equal outcomes or equal opportunity when we treat students differently? What “should” we hold constant, and what should vary? How can districts, schools, and teachers organize instruction to best meet students' individual needs? Does “standardization” mean treating students the same or having the same outcome? Does “differentiation” mean treating students differently or having different expectations?

This chapter engages with those larger questions by analyzing the ways that middle school literacy teachers in this study modified aspects of their curriculum and instruction across
curricular tracks. In other words, this chapter answers the research question: “In the context of a standardized curriculum and a common set of academic standards, how, if at all, do teachers vary their curriculum and instruction across curricular tracks?” To answer this question, I draw on evidence from observations of 77 ELA and reading lessons across 11 middle school teachers working in one low-income, three mixed-income, and two high-income school contexts.

Observations were coded for similarities and differences in curriculum and instruction across curricular tracks. Interview data (from all observed teachers as well as ten additional teachers and coaches) was used to triangulate observation data, to provide additional evidence of the broad patterns described below, and to provide a rationale for teachers' instructional choices in their own words.

In the sections below, I first describe the differences in curriculum and instruction across tracks that were explicitly encouraged at the district level. Then, I describe overall trends in how teachers varied their curriculum and instruction across curricular tracks. In brief, teachers modified the texts and tasks in the SpringBoard; their instruction around those texts and tasks; their expectations for the quality of student work; and modified their instruction to be more teacher-centered. A taxonomy of the ways that teachers modified curriculum and instruction can be found in Appendix F.

**Standardization and differentiation at the district level**

At the district level, SpringBoard is the required curriculum for all tracks/levels of English/Language Arts (ELA) in middle school. There are also a small number of seventh and eighth grade students (the students who score a “low 1” on the state reading test) who are enrolled

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8 Again, the term “curricular tracks” in this study is defined as the class-by-class instructional groupings in English/Language Arts mandated by Palmetto County Public Schools, in which students with similar state test scores are placed in the same “level” of English/Language Arts: honors advanced, advanced, regular, or inclusion.
in a two-class-period block of reading and ELA who do not use the SpringBoard curriculum. Instead, these classes use the LDC-A curriculum, a modified version of the Literacy Design Collaborative units, which (much like SpringBoard) emphasize reading a variety of thematically grouped texts and drawing on textual evidence to compose a written response to a question about those texts (for example, after reading a variety of texts about the Space Race, draw on textual evidence to explain why the United State entered the Space Race).

While the vast majority of secondary students use SpringBoard in their ELA classes (e.g., a standardized curriculum), the district acknowledges that students may not all proceed through the SpringBoard activities at the same rate (e.g., a differentiated pace). District staff see students' course placements—instructional groupings determined primarily through students' state test scores—as a way to differentiate the pace that students proceed through SpringBoard. As explained to me by a district reading coach, the primary difference between the levels of ELA is in SpringBoard pacing: “There’s not a lot of difference [between the levels of language arts],” Monica Duncan explains. “The only difference is the pacing...so there’s three pacings for language arts: there’s an advanced and honors pacing, there’s a regular pacing, and then there’s [inclusion class] pacing.” This pacing was a change made after the first year of SpringBoard implementation, in which teachers were asked to do each day's SpringBoard activity with total fidelity with all of their classes. Multiple teachers told me that this was a widely acknowledged “disaster”, and felt that the district responded appropriately by acknowledging that their different groups of students would require different pacing. For example, the district pacing chart suggests that honors classes move through the first unit in 50 days, advanced classes in 55 days, and regular/ELL/ESE classes in 60 days (the last grouping reflect three different kinds of ELA classes: “regular” level is a class with students scoring in the 1–2 range on the state test, ELL is a class of English Language Learners, and ESE is a special education inclusion class).
Since the curriculum is the same across all levels of ELA, other than pacing, what is different according to the district? Monica Duncan, the reading coach, explains that while the curriculum is the same, that “...of course what the teacher does in the classroom to provide the additional support is what’s different. That’s not directed to them, just the [pacing] calendar is [dictated to teachers], to say, 'This is what you need to complete by the end of the year.' How you do it is left up to you and your coach, maybe, or SAL [Subject Area Leader] or whatever.” However, I found in my observations that while the level of support was sometimes different across the classes, there were also changes that teachers made to the SpringBoard texts, the SpringBoard tasks, their expectations around the quality of work that students in different classes would be able to produce, as well as their instruction around the SpringBoard texts and tasks. In addition, teachers’ instruction became noticeably more teacher-centered in lower track classes, as many self-consciously adopted a tightly controlled classroom management style in the lower track class as a strategy to prevent student misbehavior. It is also important to note that the district now encourages teachers to make SpringBoard “their own,” and to make changes to SpringBoard in ways that teachers feel meet the needs of their students (within limits).

How teachers in Palmetto County modify curriculum and instruction across curricular tracks

Modifying texts

One way that teachers modify SpringBoard to match their assessment of what different groups of students need is by making choices about which SpringBoard texts to use with different groups of students. Multiple teachers expressed the feeling that some of the texts in SpringBoard are unrealistic for students in the lower track to comprehend. Diane Groves felt that the excerpt
from Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* was too difficult for students in the lower track, with its long, convoluted sentences and sophisticated vocabulary. Similarly, John Maxwell felt that even beyond the convoluted syntax, that comprehending the *Utopia* excerpt required a level of background knowledge that all of his students—but particularly his “lowest readers”—just do not possess. John Maxwell pointed out that SpringBoard asked students not only to read a difficult text, but to also to “determine what problems were going on in 1460 England for [Sir Thomas More] to write a reaction to.” This, in John Maxwell's mind, is even more unrealistic. He says, “And even that one [the *Utopia* excerpt], for my honors kids, they’re like, ‘I don’t know what was going on in 1460.’...They’re 13-year-olds. They have no idea there’s a world around them. To ask them what’s going on in England today, let alone 500 years ago— [laughs]...They would have to be extremely high-level students to be able to figure out, ‘Oh, he’s talking about clothing. That must have been a problem that they had.’ ” In the rationale of some CCSS promoters, asking students to draw on the text for evidence minimizes disparities in background knowledge. John Maxwell expresses the opposite view here—that the amount of background knowledge student possess is a key factor in their reading comprehension—and that the amount of background knowledge students possess is closely associated with whether they are a “high-level” kid or one of the “lowest readers.”

Much like John Maxwell, Diane Groves also felt that the extended metaphor in Walt Whitman's “O Captain, My Captain,” along with the historical background knowledge necessary to understand Abraham Lincoln's role in the Civil War, was too complicated for students in the lower track to grasp. “I might [talk about Abraham Lincoln and read the poem] with my higher-level kids,” she described, “because they might get it,” but with students in the lower track, she made a calculated choice to focus on a poem by Robert Hayden in the SpringBoard book, “Frederick Douglass,” and to supplement the poem with several quotes from Frederick
Douglass’s autobiography, which she put into power point slides. Diane Groves described her rationale for this choice, saying that in the lower track class,

We talk about reading, how empowering it is and it’s so important that you learn how to read...I said, “It’s not a matter of making you a reader, it’s a matter of power.” And power is something especially low-income kids understand. “Don’t give away your power. You need to keep that.” And so I use that...we have a Frederick Douglass poem, and after we do the PowerPoint, we do the Frederick Douglass poem, and then I have them write—we work a lot on tone, so “How does the tone of this prove he’s heroic?” A lot of them get that. I kind of double up on the Frederick Douglass, because I think he’s so important, especially for minority kids and especially for low readers, to see that reading is that important...

Here, Diane Groves makes the observation that many of the students in her lower track class are from low-income backgrounds and that this message about the power that reading and education can bring to students is a critical one for them to hear, more important than exposing students to every text in SpringBoard. Diane Groves sees this lesson as culturally relevant for this group of students, and she modifies her instruction accordingly as a way to meet her perception of their needs.

While teachers sometimes chose to skip certain texts with their lower track classes, teachers also sometimes sought out easier versions of SpringBoard texts or found alternate texts with similar themes to use with their lower track classes. Several teachers mentioned an excerpt from Homer's *The Odyssey* as an example of a very difficult text for some eighth grade students in the lower track class to understand. Cassandra Berry chose to skip it entirely with her lower track students, while Diane Groves found an easier version to substitute. Similarly, Diane Walker, in an eighth grade SpringBoard unit on the Holocaust, has chosen in the past to read Anne Frank's
The Diary of a Young Girl with the lower track class and Elie Wiesel's Night with the higher track class. These texts are endorsed by SpringBoard; the Holocaust unit offers multiple selections for students to read in small groups, but instead, Diane Walker chooses one text for each track to do as a whole-class reading. She explains her thinking, saying, “With my lower-level kids sometimes I’ll do Anne Frank, because it’s easier for them to understand than Night is. And it’s not as graphic, because their suffering is, they can’t go outside, they don’t get enough to eat. But they do eat.” However, Diane Walker says she has been reading Night with both classes for the last few years, though she says “It's difficult for them [the lower track class].”

Similarly, Marcia Johnson, during a seventh grade SpringBoard mythology unit, felt that “having so much vocabulary...that's so difficult for them [her special education inclusion class].” Instead, Marcia Johnson decided to have the inclusion class read Maniac McGee by Jerry Spinelli, a classic young adult novel, with the rationale, “I’m just trying this to see if I can get the same concepts but with something that’s a little more user-friendly for that class.” Skipping a couple of small texts in SpringBoard is not likely to get a teacher in trouble with the “SpringBoard” police: the local representatives of the district and the College Board who do walkthroughs to monitor compliance (from teachers’ point of view), or to see building-level trends (from district administrators’ point of view). Skipping a unit and adding a novel might raise eyebrows, but Marcia Johnson is an experienced teacher working in a high-income, high-performing school where there is likely to be less scrutiny than in a low-performing school.

Modifying instruction around a text rather than modifying the text itself

Instead of modifying the texts in the curriculum, some teachers also described using the same texts but changing their instructional approach for different levels of classes. John Maxwell described his instruction around The Odyssey in the lower track class as “a lot more teacher-
directed.” Below, John Maxwell describes how he asks the higher track class to read the text in small groups, but asks the lower track to sit and listen to him read the text. In his words,

SpringBoard will say, “Get in a group and talk about it.” Regular kids, number one, don’t have a lot of experience with sitting in groups discussing, so I’ll do a lot more like, “Let’s discuss it as a class.” In my honors class I can say, “All right, read it. It’s gonna be tough. It’s gonna be difficult, but you can get through it. Mark the text. We’re lookin’ for problems and solutions.” They’re gonna struggle a little bit because Homer’s complex for an eighth grader to understand. With my regular kids, it was more, “All right, I’m gonna read it,” [laughs] because I know if I say, “Read eight pages,” they’re gonna just sit there and they’re not gonna read it, because they don’t even have the reading level to be able to make a little bit of meaning from the text. So I read it out loud, and then I’m kind of modeling. “This is a problem.” We work together...You’ve read Homer, I’m sure. It’s prepositional phrases modifying prepositional phrase modifying—and low-level readers, they don’t get that it’s just saying, “We fought for Agamemnon.” It’s “We fought for Agamemnon, son of this, destroyer of this,” and by the time they get to the end of the sentence, they’re like, “I don’t even know what this says anymore.” So for me, I have my ELMO [overhead projector] and I put the text under the ELMO and we read it and they followed along...[and then periodically I say] Let’s stop. Is this a problem to Odysseus and his men? Yeah, that’s a problem. Let’s put a P next to it.” Modeling what good readers do, because they have very few strategies when it comes to reading, and that’s why they struggle a lot of times at school.

Here, John Maxwell describes allowing students in honors class to read the text independently and take notes on the problem and solution described in *The Odyssey* excerpt (reading to identify the problem and solution is one of many “text marking strategies” taught in
PCPS). His rationale for this approach is that students in the honors class have the reading comprehension to come to a basic understanding of *The Odyssey* excerpt, and students in the honors class can be coached to persist through a difficult text. In the class for the “regular kids”, he chooses to read the text to students and take a “more teacher-directed” approach to meet his assessment of students' needs. (Although my observations of John Maxwell’s classes do bear out his statement that his regular-level classes are taught in a slightly more teacher-centered way, all of his classes are taught in a very teacher-centered manner.)

Sarah Henderson, a mid-career teacher in an affluent suburban school, described how she modified instruction around *The Scarlet Ibis*, a text that is not in SpringBoard, but that she chose specifically to model persistence with passages on state tests that students may find boring. In the honors class, she modeled how to mark the text using the first paragraph of the text, “then I release it to partner pairs, and then walked around.” In contrast, her approach in the inclusion class, “...because I have an intern and a co-teacher, we split the class into threes. We have small groups of nine kids, and then we went through the whole paper together. We would say, “You do the next paragraph. What did you circle? What did you write out to the side?” So they can listen to each other.” Sarah Henderson explains, “My honors kids I didn’t do that with, because they’re held at a higher standard.”

Deborah Wright, a less experienced teacher in a high-income, high-status school in the center city, described her approach to the SpringBoard text with her groups of students as distinct, in that she checks for comprehension before moving on to higher-order questions. “I definitely do [SpringBoard] very differently with my lower-level students than I do with my higher-level students,” Deborah Wright tells me. Explaining her approach, she says,

*I differentiate a lot. I will do more of a read-aloud or shared reading with some of the articles [in the lower track class]. We will go through the terminology, and we’ll really discuss, maybe we’re talking about the tone or the theme or something like that, and for
them [students in the lower track class], *it’s like first I need to make sure that they’ve comprehended what they’ve read, and then we can have that great discussion about the tone or theme.* Whereas the others [students in the honors-level class] are definitely comprehending. I can definitely let them go a little bit more, depending on the level of reading. And then we can still have that really great discussion. And then they go—I typically have them [students in the honors class] go a little bit above and beyond, and they’ll respond or analyze or do something like that. So I definitely take and use SpringBoard as kind of like a map, but I definitely change it from one class to the next...I scaffold a lot more with the lower level and a little bit less with the higher level. I know my students and I know what they’re capable of doing. (italics added)

To summarize, in the higher track class, Deborah Wright assumes that students have a basic level of comprehension of what they read, and moves quickly to a discussion or activity in which students interpret the text. In lower track class, Deborah Wright feels that comprehension is not guaranteed, so she needs to double check that students understand the events of the text first, before moving onto a discussion. She refers to these instructional modifications using the verbs “differentiate” and “scaffold,” and mentions that her instructional choices across tracks are intentional and a result of her assessment of what students across levels are “capable of doing”. To Deborah Wright, differentiation means a different instructional plan for the lower track class, in which students must demonstrate reading comprehension before they are allowed to engage with a higher-order question. This view of “differentiation” and “scaffolding” reflects a sequential view of knowledge (Watanabe, 2008), in which students must proceed through content in a certain order.

When I talk with Diane Walker, a veteran teacher at the end of her career in an affluent suburban school, she also describes her approach to leading students in discussion about a text as
different across tracks. The day that Diane Walker and I first speak, students are reading “O Captain! My Captain!”, and Diane Walker tells me that in her regular-level, inclusion class, I will really lead them through and help them...And for my honors kids, I ask a question, I throw it out there, and they maneuver around, and if they’re right, we go on. If they’re not, I facilitate further discussion for them to come to the right decision...And this morning [in the first period honors class], they pretty much got it. They understood that the Captain was really Lincoln and the ship was really the Union and the country. My next period class [a co-taught inclusion class] won’t get that.

When I followed up on Diane Walker’s comments to ask her how she plans to lead students in the inclusion class through reading “O Captain, My Captain!”, she says, “A lot of it will be feeding. I really feed them. Most of them except for two people are level one readers, so they’re not going to get that insight and that comparison. I’ll really have to lead them through it. Here, for both classes, Diane Walker displays a view of class discussion around a poem as less of a dialogic process of meaning-making, and more of a process in which the teacher lobs a series of questions to a group of students in order to elicit a correct answer. In the lower track class, Diane Walker will be far more explicit, “feeding” them information until they hopefully come to an understanding of the extended metaphor. Further, Diane Walker refers to students’ state test scores (e.g., “level one readers”) to provide an explanation for why she feels it is unlikely that students with an assessed reading level at the level of “one” on the state test would come to an insight about the extended metaphor without being told about it.

Rather than reading the text to students and modeling a text-marking strategy or telling students a particular interpretation, another approach to modifying instruction around a text is to supplement the text with other resources that help students understand the plot. One teacher I observed, Lisa Cooper, used this approach frequently. In an eighth grade class for English
language learners, Lisa Cooper chose to supplement *The Odyssey* excerpt with a video from the History Channel dramatizing the events of the encounter between Odysseus and the Cyclops (the topic of the SpringBoard excerpt). Similarly, to help students understand the extended metaphor in “O Captain, My Captain!” Lisa Cooper said, “we built the background knowledge first. “Who was Lincoln? What do you know about him?” She found a video of a middle student who won the national Poetry Jam competition with a reading “O Captain, My Captain!” and had students listen to the poem repeatedly while reinforcing, “Every time you see ‘Captain,’ it equals Abe Lincoln.”

**Modifying grading and/or expectations**

In addition to modifying the texts that teachers used with different classes or their instruction around those texts, some teachers were open about having different (and in teachers' minds, realistic) expectations for the quality of work across the multiple levels of ELA courses within each grade. When I ask Marcia Johnson, an experienced teacher in a high-income, high status middle school, “Would you say that the expectation for the quality of work [across tracks] is pretty similar?” she responds, “No, I’m lettin’ them [students in the inclusion class] off a little bit easier, definitely. Definitely. And there are some kids who are in there [the inclusion class] because they have IEPs, but they’re a 4, perhaps [on the state test]...So their work has to be better because they can produce the better work.” Here, Marcia Johnson demonstrates not only different expectations for students across her different classes, but also a connection between students' test scores and their ability: if a student receives a score of four on the state test (again, note the shorthand of students described as numbers), then their work must be held to a higher standard of quality.
Similarly, Diane Groves, a veteran teacher in a mixed-income school, grades the essays of her different classes according to different expectations because, in her view, there is really no other choice—if she does not, all of the students in the lower track class would fail the assignment. Diane Groves tells me that she believes you have to celebrate students' accomplishments where they are. If you grade all students according to one standard, students who fall far below that standard will further internalize a sense of failure. Sarah Henderson, an experienced teacher in a high-income school, similarly acknowledges grading students in the lower track class differently. Like Diane Groves, she feels that evaluating students based on their starting point is a good thing to do. In fact, she wishes that social studies teachers, who teach mixed ability groups, would remember to “differentiate” in their grading, by which she means grade students' work based on what teachers understand about their abilities and starting points.

**Modifying tasks**

Though large assignments in SpringBoard like the embedded assessments remained constant across tracks, another way teachers changed their approach across tracks was to modify the smaller tasks that they asked students to complete. One way of modifying a task is to change the *quantity* of work students are asked to do. For example, Diane Groves came up with her own task to extend the SpringBoard curriculum’s unit on heroes. She asked students to read a recently published article from CNN.com on a teenager named Nicholas Lowinger, who created a program to supply new shoes to homeless children. Diane Groves chose this article in order to extend students’ understanding of the qualities of a hero: heroes need not be only historical and mythical figures, but can also be everyday people who solve a problem. To complete this task, Diane Groves asked students to mark who/what/when/where/why/how in the text as they read. Then, students were to answer the text-dependent questions that Diane Groves had come up with:
(1) The article stresses a few great benefits for the kids who get new shoes. Explain what ONE of these benefits is and use evidence from the text to support your answer.

(2) Describe what kind of person Nicholas Lowinger is based on what you read about him in the article. Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

(3) What heroic qualities does Nicholas exhibit? Use evidence from the article to support your answer.

Students across all of the classes were asked to read the article and answer the questions independently. However, students in the honors class were expected to complete all three questions, students in the regular-level class were expected to complete the first two questions, and students in the inclusion class were asked to complete the first question. This is mostly a difference mostly of task quantity, as the three tracks were asked to complete one, two, or all three questions respectively. To some degree though, Diane Groves also varied the level of coherence between the task and the guiding questions of this unit. (Applebee et al. (1994) also found a lower level of curricular coherence across tracks in ELA.) All three of the questions Diane Groves came up with ask students to draw on textual evidence, but only though the second and third questions (which only the advanced and honors classes answered) engage with the essential question of the unit (what is a hero?).

Sarah Henderson also described picking and choosing among the SpringBoard tasks for the lower track class. She described her approach as looking carefully at the activities in SpringBoard, and thinking about what activities (and associated texts) are essential for the embedded assessment, as well what activities she thinks could be “confusing” for students in the lower track class. “What I find,” she described, is that “with the lower-level classes, I tend to skip some activities that I think really are just gonna confuse them. When you really look at that
embedded assessment, do they really need to watch clips of Mulan? Those are the things I skip [with the lower track class] to spend longer on how to embed quotations in a text. For my honors kids, I think, maybe I’m missing something. Maybe they’ll show me, ‘Hey, this is a good activity, because we got to do—’ So I’ll include those activities.” Here, Sarah Henderson makes her decisions about which texts and activities to do in each class based on what she considers to be the most essential lessons for completing the embedded assessment (for this unit, a culminating writing assignment in which students define a hero). To help her make sure that she has accurately identified which activities are worthwhile, she tests the activities by using them all with her honors-level class.

**Modifying instruction and scaffolding around tasks**

Many teachers modified their instruction around SpringBoard tasks for different groups of students in ways that they believed met the needs of different classes. For example, Monica Duncan, a reading coach at a low-income school, told me about one approach the district is encouraging to scaffold students’ writing in response to texts. In this system, students read a text with a note-taking matrix that allows them to record evidence and ultimately, scaffolds the process of answering a question using textual evidence. For example, John Maxwell has his students use a matrix for responding to the question, “What makes Odysseus a hero—his physical, mental, social, or moral characteristics?” As students read, they record places in the text that provide evidence of Odysseus' heroism and label the evidence as representing a physical, mental, social, or moral characteristic. After reading and taking notes in this way, students can easily see which argument makes the most sense to make based on the preponderance of textual evidence in a particular category. Further, students have the evidence close at hand already, without having to go back to the text. In Monica Duncan’s telling, teachers might use this kind of
a note-taking system with all of their classes, but teachers would lead different groups through the CIS process in different ways. “In advanced classes,” Monica Duncan says, “they’re given a blank page where they fill it all out. In the lower level, we may provide some of the comments. They’re still responsible for findin’ what paragraph it’s in and checkin’ off the characteristic that matches. It’s a little bit more scaffolded to help them out. Eventually the goal is to release them to where they can do it on their own.”

Sarah Henderson also reports that her approach in the lower track class to the first embedded assessment (the essay in which students are asked to define a hero) is more scaffolded, as well as more tightly controlled. In the lower track class, Sarah Henderson says, “…I do a little bit more handholding. So on Thursday and Friday of this week, we’ll do writing workshop. With that, we make little stop signs for our kids of checking with us.” In this version of “writing workshop,” the teacher asks students to check in with the teacher after they compose each paragraph by filling out a graphic organizer. The teacher checks the graphic organizer is filled out correctly and gives permission to move to the next paragraph by providing their signature underneath the paragraph in the graphic organizer. The rationale for this approach is that students receive feedback that they can immediately put into practice, rather than receiving a graded essay weeks after turning it in and having no possibility of revision. As Sarah Henderson explains, “Instead of getting this whole paper and you’re like, ‘That’s not a thesis statement.’ Then the kid gets frustrated and goes, ‘Why’d you let me get this far?’” Sarah Henderson goes on to talk about how these writing workshops work differently in the inclusion class, where she not only has a special education teacher, but also happened to have a student teacher that semester, saying “So with that [inclusion] class, there’s a lot more—and with three adults, they have tons of adults to check into with the stop sign. Versus the honors group, I still have the stop signs there, because I want them to know, but with them it should be, ‘You know how to do this. Go back, page 22, get it there.” In other words, the honors-level class is not asked to check in as frequently with the
teacher, and when they do, the teacher asks them to refer back to SpringBoard for help, rather than helping them directly.

Diane Groves uses a similar approach to scaffolding the hero essay, holding “writing conferences” during the day that students are drafting their essays in class. She does not use the district-created template for the hero essay that includes the stop signs after each paragraph of the graphic organizer. Instead, she has created what she calls a “skeletal frame” for the essay. Students in the lower track class are asked to fill this skeletal frame (a fill-in-the-blank graphic organizer), where there are suggested hooks and transitions already in place, and students' primary task is to identify the evidence that they want to use to define a hero. While students fill this out, Diane Groves calls students up one-by-one for writing conferences. The purpose of the conferences is to look over what a student has filled out in the graphic organizer and clarify any parts they have filled in that are not correct (e.g., do not match the predetermined form). For example, many students in the lower track class try to impose a structure that they are more familiar with from previous writing assignments—if they are defining a hero, and there are three body paragraphs in the five-paragraph essay, then multiple students assume that each body paragraph should address one quality of a hero. Instead, Diane Groves has set up the graphic organizer so that students are asked to talk about the “function” of a hero in first body paragraph (with two examples of how a hero functions in real life), the “definition” of a hero in the second body paragraph (students decide on a hero's main two qualities and then use two examples of each of these qualities), and the “negation” strategy in the last body paragraph, where students define a hero by what a hero is not (e.g., provide non-examples). Students in the lower track class had to complete the graphic organizer, and because it was fill-in-the-blank, they were composing their essay as they planned it. Then, students were to type their essays by typing what they had written down on the graphic organizer. In the honors class, students had slightly more freedom with the organization of their essays. Whereas students in the lower track class had to complete
the “skeleton”, students in the honors class were not required to complete the skeleton (though most did). Students in the honors class were provided with the skeleton, as well as a list of the components of each paragraph. However, Diane Groves emphasized that students in the honors class could choose in what order the body paragraphs (function, definition, and negation) could appear.

The way that Diane Groves modified the scaffolding around the task across tracks reduced the degrees of freedom (Langer & Applebee, 1987; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) for the lower track class to almost zero (e.g., students could really make only one choice, which was choosing the pieces of evidence). The degrees of freedom for the higher track class were slightly higher (students could choose the pieces of evidence and the order of the body paragraphs). However, both approaches gave students almost no choice about the structure of the essay.

Modifying classroom management style

While multiple teachers varied the kind of texts and the kind of tasks they used with different classes, SpringBoard and the SpringBoard police9 ensure an overall, basic level of consistency in curriculum and instruction. While differences in instruction around texts and tasks across curricular tracks were more common, one of the most obvious differences across tracks had nothing to do with curriculum and instruction, but was instead a marked shift in the tone of a classroom from one period to the next, as an honors-level class gave way to a regular-level class, or vice versa. I observed a change in many teachers' demeanor, from a relaxed jokester in the honors-level class to a stern authoritarian in the regular-level class.

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9 The people teachers referred to as “SpringBoard police” are two representatives who work for both the district and The College Board. These representatives periodically tour every secondary school in the district and flip through randomly chosen student workbooks. Teachers felt that the “SpringBoard police” were monitoring their fidelity to the curriculum, and thus were reluctant to make too many drastic changes.
Some teachers were hyper-aware of their shift in their behavior, making explicit remarks to me about how their demeanor would shift. When Diane Groves comes over to her desk (where I am sitting) to get post-it notes in the third period regular track class, says to me, “My regular class. I have to try not to get mad.” At the end of this class, she comments under her breath, “It is a whole different experience—to me or to herself, I'm not sure. At the same school, when I walk into Hannah Webb's classroom to watch her seventh period regular track class, Hannah Webb says to me, “Now this is a different class.” Before class begins and while she is still standing at the door, Hannah Webb says in a loud voice, “Let's go, folders, seats.” Though students are still very quiet, Hannah Webb says preemptively, “What should you be going right now? BELLWORK. What's our conversation level for bellwork? ZERO! Ok, show it to me. Remember, we are writing our bellworks with complete sentences, punctuation, capitalization, subjects, predicates. What was the best thing that happened over fall break?” Hannah Webb starts calling on students to respond before they even write anything down—less important than having students complete the bellringer is finding a way to capture the class’s attention and tightly maintaining control over it. Similarly, John Maxwell says he “can let his guard down” in his honors classes compared to his inclusion classes, especially in his fourth period class, where he displays the tightest control of the day.

A final example comes from Cassandra Berry, who told me during the few minutes in between the fifth period honors-level class and the sixth period regular-level class, “You will see me change.” Indeed, Cassandra Berry was still warm in her regular-level class, but far less relaxed and joking than the period before. She explained her change in behavior as stemming from how “They [the students in the lower track class] feed off of each other. My teaching and my classroom management has completely improved, because I know which class I can work with and which class I have to be stern, work from the beginning to the end, which you should...I will tell you, when we read, that’s the quietest they are ever, they’re very attuned...But if they
have a little time to talk, it goes downhill.” Cassandra Berry feels that letting students talk or interact with each other can easily spiral into a loss of control over her class. It is also striking that all of the teachers described above taught in racially diverse, mixed-income schools.

**Becoming more teacher-centered**

Even when teachers remained relaxed in the lower track class, they frequently changed their instruction to become more teacher-centered—believing this was a necessary, proactive strategy to ward off student misbehavior (though I am not sure if this was based on their experience or their perception). For instance, on one of the days that I observed Sarah Henderson in the high-income Flagstaff Middle School, students were working on a unit about the media's influence on teenagers. In the honors class, Sarah Henderson lets the honors class sit on top of their desks for a class discussion about the influence of the media on teenagers. In the regular-level class, she had students remain in their desks and raise their hands in order to speak. When I asked Sarah Henderson what she thought would have happened if she had tried the discussion in the lower track class, she said the sitting on the desks, like she let the higher track class do, would have turned into “Hey, look at my crotch.”

Similarly, Lisa Cooper made a number of modifications to her instruction in her inclusion class with the direct goal of maintaining a high degree of control. In all of her other classes, Lisa Cooper has certain designated students whom she asks to pass out the SpringBoard books at the beginning of class and stack them neatly at the end of class, but in the sixth grade inclusion class, Lisa Cooper told me that the students throw the SpringBoard books if a student passes them out, so Lisa passes them out before students come in. For responding to the day's bellringer, Lisa Cooper told me, “They [the students in the inclusion class] have an issue with paper, so maybe I'll use index cards with this class” for students to write on. (The “issue with paper” being that
students would tear it or throw it, whereas index cards are harder to tear off in little pieces.) Lisa Cooper also acknowledged that “many of these kids can't even read so I'll have to read [the prompt to them].” Another day, Lisa Cooper did a literature center activity where students rotated between different stations and completed different activities related to the vocabulary, point of view, and literary elements in the short story “Flipped” they were reading in SpringBoard. In the inclusion class, Lisa Cooper chose to do the activities from the centers as whole class activities where she could better control students and solicit student responses, rather than as small group activities where frequent transitions were required, feeling that there would be too many opportunities for student misbehavior.

**Unintended consequences of class-size reduction on inclusion classes**

Voters in this southern state passed a class size reduction amendment to the state constitution in 2002, which specified that by the 2010–11 school year, each core academic class would have a student-teacher ratio in grades 4–8 of no more than 22 students to one teacher. Though this policy might seem unrelated to views of student ability, I include it here because of the unintended consequences of the class-size reduction amendment on the inclusion classes in PCPS that I observed across multiple teachers in multiple schools. Offering an inclusion class that uses a college-preparatory curriculum seems, on the one hand, to send a positive signal about access and inclusion to high-level content; on the other hand, the majority of the inclusion classes I observed in PCPS were teachers' largest classes of the day because they were co-taught. Special education self-contained classrooms are subject to the class size reduction amendment, but because two teachers are in the room of a co-taught class, the student-teacher ratio can be maintained with a class of up to 44 students.
The inclusion classes that I observed were routinely in the neighborhood of 30 students, as opposed to the 22-student cap on the teacher's other classes. Placing all of the students with IEPs in one, large, co-taught class created a *de facto* lowest track class, particularly given that the other students in the class had received scores of 1 or 2 on the state reading test, and in some school contexts, English language learners that had just tested out of the ELA class dedicated to ELL students. It was in this class where the pace was the slowest, student behavior was the most erratic, and teachers were the most stressed. To cope with the large class size and diverse needs of their students in this class, teachers conducted this class in a more teacher-centered way than their other classes, feeling that student activities were too “risky” to their control over the classroom. The irony of the inclusion class is that it was least inclusive of students’ voices and the most teacher-centered.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I responded to the research question, “In the context of the Common Core State Standards and a standardized curriculum, how do teachers modify their curriculum and instruction across curricular tracks?” To answer this question, I described the ways in which teachers modified aspects of the SpringBoard curriculum and their instruction to meet their assessment of students’ needs—assessments that were often related to the level or track of the class. Teachers responded by adjusting texts and tasks within the SpringBoard curriculum across tracks. Teachers also responded by adjusting their instruction around those texts or tasks, and sometimes by modifying their expectations for the quality of work students would produce across tracks. Teachers frequently modified their classroom management style to become more teacher-centered and rigid in the lower track classes—sometimes as a deliberate strategy to manage a large inclusion class; other times, as a deliberate strategy to prevent student misbehavior that
teachers felt sure would result if they kept the relaxed, joking demeanor they had in the higher track class.

I do not mean to suggest that all such adjustments are problematic, nor that a potential response to the findings described here is for teachers to have less autonomy. Indeed, I believe that teachers should be encouraged to meet their needs of their students. However, this chapter raises important questions about how to best identify and meet students’ needs without sacrificing students’ opportunity to learn. In other words, how can districts and schools give teachers a high degree of autonomy over curriculum and instruction, and encourage teachers to meet the needs of their students, without resulting in large gaps in students’ learning experiences? I believe that the answer to this question may depend on what drives teachers’ decisions. I argued in earlier chapters that testing and tracking lead teachers to view student ability as hierarchical and unevenly distributed. If this is the case, then teachers will naturally see their groups of students as different with different needs and adjust their curriculum and instruction accordingly. Conversely, if teachers believe that all of their students are capable of high-level work and see it as their responsibility to scaffold that work, then teachers’ decisions should preserve opportunity to learn, perhaps even if a tracked structure is still in place.

In the next chapter, I contrast two teachers who illustrate these two approaches: (1) modifying curriculum, instruction, and expectations for lower track classes as a strategy to meet students’ different needs, and (2) modifying instruction by adding scaffolding, but keeping curriculum and expectations constant.
Chapter 7

Two Approaches to Standardization and Differentiation in the Context of the Common Core

Introduction

This chapter presents two contrasting approaches to classroom instruction across curricular tracks. Like the previous chapter, this chapter responds to the question, “How do teachers modify curriculum and instruction across curricular tracks?” However, this chapter takes a closer, deeper look at two teachers’ instruction in order to more richly describe their school contexts and instruction, and to identify the normative beliefs underlying their decisions. In this chapter, I profile two middle school literacy teachers within Palmetto County Public Schools, each of whom exemplify one of the following approaches: (1) differentiating curriculum and instruction across tracks and holding different expectations for the quality of student work; and (2) using different curriculum and instruction but having similar expectations for the quality of student work. Finally, I compare and contrast these two approaches, illustrating the distinct beliefs about student ability underlying each approach.

Diane Groves: Different instruction; different expectations

Diane Groves, a veteran teacher in an economically and racially diverse suburban middle school, wears hot pink sneakers and casual clothes over the three days that I observe her. After more than sixteen years of teaching in Palmetto County Public Schools (and twenty years of teaching total), Diane Groves finds herself tired of the constant churn of district initiatives and
frustrated by student misbehavior in the lower track class. In fact, she recently applied for a job “downtown” (in the district central office) in a moment of despair after a regular-level class with severe student misbehavior.

The physical atmosphere in Diane Groves's classroom is colorful and welcoming. For example, the SpringBoard curriculum asks teachers to have a “word wall” in their classrooms, where they post important terms. In some classrooms, this takes the form of terms printed in black and white on computer paper and taped to the wall. In Diane Groves's classroom, however, literary terms, examples of heroes, and vocabulary terms are printed on colorful paper and pasted on colorful paper (terms such as challenge, Hercules, Martin Luther King, tone, stereotype, connotation, and denotation). Diane Groves enhances the welcoming atmosphere of her classroom in the arrangement of student desks—desks are arranged in groups of four to facilitate cooperative learning. Diane Groves is an expert in groupwork strategies and often spends her weekends serving as a district trainer for a national cooperative learning program (Kagan Cooperative Learning Structures). Diane Groves also has a large collection of young adult literature on the bookcase in the front corner of the classroom. When another teacher is unexpectedly absent, administrators split the students among the other teachers' classes, and Diane Groves encourages the students who come in to grab a book from her extensive collection.

**School context**

Veteran ELA teacher Diane Groves works in a suburban middle school at the far north edge of this countywide district, but a suburban school that is both economically and racially diverse. County Line Middle School was built during a district-wide, suburban school construction boom during the mid-2000s. Many of the district's suburban schools from this wave of construction are visually similar, with two-story buildings surrounding a central courtyard of
manicured lawns edged with palm trees. During the 2013–14 school year (at the time of data collection), County Line Middle School's student population is composed of 32.5% white students, 27.4% Hispanic students, 23.3% African-American students, 8.8% multi-racial students, and 7.8% Asian students (according to the demographic information County Line reading coach, Kelly Murray, pulls up for me during our interview). In fact, I chose County Line Middle School specifically because its student demographics were similar to the district's demographics, though I subsequently learned from County Line Middle School staff that the school is in the midst of a demographic transition. Since the school opened in the 2006–07 school year, reading coach Kelly Murray tells me that the proportion of white students has declined from 41.5% to 32.5%, while there has been a gradual increase in the number of Hispanic and Asian students, and a relatively constant proportion of African American students.

County Line Middle School also has a growing population of English language learners. Although there are a high number of Spanish-speaking students, which is typical for the district, twenty-three different languages are represented among English language learners at County Line Middle School, including about 25 students who speak Arabic (interview with Kelly Murray). During the recession, construction stalled and buyers never materialized for the subdivision directly behind County Line Middle School, so the county turned the subdivision into Section 8 housing. The school's enrollment zone also includes a portion of the neighborhood next to the local university, which is recognized as a low-income, transient neighborhood.

To further illustrate the school context and the mood of the teaching staff, I should say that several teachers conveyed a sense of unease and uncertainty with the changing student demographics they are experiencing in their classrooms, as the number of minority students attending County Line Middle School has increased over time. Eighth grade Language Arts teacher Cassandra Berry tells me that last year she inducted more than 70 students into the National Junior Honor Society, but this year, only 37 students were eligible; I suspect that
Cassandra Berry is trying to tell me that the decline in NJHS membership is some kind of proxy for a certain kind of student [white? affluent? with an enriched home life?] that she no longer feels is the predominant kind of student in her classes. Cassandra Berry also tells me about how local parents [code for white and/or affluent parents?] are no longer choosing County Line Middle School because of its changing demographics and/or the school's new grade—no longer an “A”, but a B so low it was almost a C—a drop that happened in one year. Kelly Murray, the reading coach, echoes Cassandra Berry's description of how affluent parents are using the district-wide choice program to pull their students out of County Line Middle School. Like many of the newer suburban middle schools in the district, the middle school building is adjacent to an elementary school. According to Kelly Murray and Cassandra Berry's descriptions, some affluent, white parents send their children to the elementary school located next door to County Line Middle School, but not to County Line Middle School. Instead, these parents send their students to private middle schools in the area or to other public middle schools nearby with better reputations. As the elementary school student population has grown over time, but middle school enrollment has shrunk, the upper elementary students now occupy part of the middle school.

The drop in school grade led to County Line Middle School being targeted for a district intervention during the 2013–14 school year. County Line Middle School is the only school in this district intervention located in an upscale suburban area, with the other eight schools targeted for improvement all located in low-income residential areas. County Line Middle School reading coach Kelly Murray relates to me that only a few weeks earlier, the superintendent had come to meet with all County Line Middle School faculty about their status as one of the schools in the improvement program. Kelly Murray told me, “when the superintendent spoke to us as a faculty, the superintendent said, 'What is up? Your population next door [at the elementary school] is not coming to you.' And one of the teachers said, 'Why is it that they’re not coming to us?' And the superintendent said, ‘They’re not coming to [you] because they don’t hear good things about
your school.” Teachers and administrators in County Line Middle School are under a great deal of pressure to improve their school grade this year to exit out of the school improvement program. When we chat in the hallway, the school principal tells me about a high-stakes monthly meeting that he attends with district staff where County Line Middle School data (and his performance) from the last month are scrutinized, and further action plans are put into place to be evaluated the following month.

In fact, later that school year (in March 2014), the district announced that County Line Middle School would merge with the elementary school next door to form the district's third K–8 school. The rationale provided publicly was that a merger makes better use of the available space given the growth in elementary enrollment and will improve the elementary-to-middle-school transition. While this is likely true, I suspect that the merger is also a last ditch effort to retain white enrollment. Both County Line Middle School’s principal and the elementary school principal were given the chance to apply to become the principal of the newly merged K–8 school. While I do know not if they applied or not, newspaper articles from the 2014–15 school year revealed that the elementary school principal was reassigned to another elementary school, while County Line’s principal, under so much pressure the year before to deliver results in the school improvement program, was assigned to the district transportation department (this seems a clear demotion). Instead, PCPS selected a principal from one of the district’s other K–8 schools, who ostensibly would have experience managing this type of school, to manage County Line Middle School.

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10 When I chat informally with the County Line Middle School principal in the hallway, I ask him something like, “So, do you find that being in this school improvement program is a lot of pressure?” He turns around and peers at his rear end, asking me, “Do I have any ass left?” In response to my confused look, the principal tells me that part of the school improvement program is a monthly administrative meeting, in which school and district administrators look at data and discuss what is and is not improving—and the County Line principal in the one on the spot to answer for why County Line Middle School is not improving quickly enough.
Attitudes towards students

In this racially and linguistically diverse school context, Diane Groves thinks carefully about how to meet her students' many different needs and projects deep care for her students. Diane Groves high-fives and jokes with students who pass by in the hallway before class begins. During homeroom, one of Diane Groves's students has her cell phone out and takes a few photos of herself with the girl sitting next to her. Then, the girls scroll through the pictures on the phone. When a photo comes up of the student with Diane Groves, the student says to her friend, “I love this one.” Diane Groves owns a copy of Ruby Payne's book on understanding the needs of students in poverty and considers herself sensitive to issues in students' home lives. When she asks students to read an article on a young man who starts a program to give shoes to homeless people, she introduces the article by saying to students, “Some of you may have experienced homelessness, and some of you have not...There is a large homeless population in [Palmetto County], and there are actually many ways you could participate in an effort like this.”

Even when correcting students, Diane Groves generally demonstrates compassion and care. When an African-American student in her regular-level class is wearing headphones while Diane Groves is giving directions, Diane Groves compliments the student on how nice the headphones are, but tells him that she can hear his music, and it's not supposed to be on during class. Another day close to the holiday break in December, Diane Groves walks around while student work on the second unit assessment, creating a panel for a comic that illustrates the hero's journey in The Giver. Diane Groves admonishes one student, saying, “Honey, get your pictures out and draw...don't just sit here doing diddly-squat.”

At the same time as many of Diane Groves's actions demonstrate a deep sense of care toward her students, when I visit her class in October, Diane Groves is still struggling to remember some of the students’ names that are unfamiliar to her—names that generally belong to
her African-American students. As she calls a student up to her desk, she says half to herself and half to the student, “[student’s name], did I say that right?” Diane Groves expresses her discomfort with names she finds unusual; this occurs on several different occasions in conversation with students, me, and other teachers. For example, as we look through some of the students' papers, she pauses on one and says, “Names just aren't like they were when I was a kid”, and in a district-wide literacy meeting, grumbles to another teacher about “the names that you spell 14 different ways.” To be clear, I do not offer this example to imply that Diane Groves is racist, but as a way to describe what I believe is her discomfort with names that are unfamiliar to her—names that I believe she finds unfamiliar because of the quickly changing racial demographics within the school.

**Different texts**

Within the context of the standardized SpringBoard curriculum, Diane Groves makes choices about how to modify SpringBoard in ways that she feels better fit the needs of her different groups of students. Diane Groves keeps a weekly calendar for her classes on the whiteboard on the side wall of the classroom, listing each day's agenda and objective. The weekly calendar is grouped into three sections: one for periods 3 and 4; one for period 7, and one for periods two, five, and six. Though not labeled, these class periods correspond with Diane Groves's advanced, co-taught inclusion, and advanced honors classes, respectively (and students are aware of their track placement). Sometimes the daily agenda across classes is the same; sometimes the daily agenda is different. All of her classes are about the same size (around 20 students), with the exception of the inclusion class, which is closer to 30 students.

Diane Groves makes choices about how to allocate time amongst the SpringBoard texts for different classes. Recall, as mentioned in the previous chapter, that in her regular-level and
inclusion classes, Diane Groves spends extra time on the poem about Frederick Douglass in the SpringBoard curriculum and adds extra background knowledge from the autobiography of Frederick Douglass. Diane Groves focuses on Fredericks Douglass in these classes because she feels it is important for her “low income kids”, whom she recognizes as primarily in her lower track class, to understand the power of reading and the power of language. The tradeoff here is to not read the excerpt from Utopia with her lower-track class. As we look at the Utopia excerpt in SpringBoard together, Diane explains why Utopia is not an appropriate text for students in the lower-track class, saying something like, “Look at this sentence...it's how many....one, two, three, four lines long. And this vocabulary....’ruder’...,” she says as she shakes her head.

Different expectations and grading

As another strategy to accommodate her assessment of students' needs, Diane Groves asks students across her classes to complete different amounts of work, and grades students according to her assessment of where students are starting. For example (also discussed in the previous chapter), although Diane Groves asks students across her classes to independently read the same article on a teenager who starts a program to give new shoes to homeless children, she asks one of her regular-level classes (the class where she experiences the most behavior issues) to respond to one text-dependent question in response to the article; she asks her other regular-level class to respond to two text-dependent questions in response to the article; and she asks her honors-level class to respond to three text-dependent questions in response to the article.

Diane Groves clearly communicates her expectations for how quickly this work should be completed in the honors-level class, reminding students that she will take their responses home over the weekend and grade them for the completeness of their answers, so they need to make sure that they are working hard. At the end of the honors-level class, Diane Groves tells students
that if they have not finished the three questions, it is their responsibility to find time to finish it that day and turn it in by the end of day. At the end of the regular-level class, however, Diane Groves tells students she will give them a grade for whatever they got done today.

Similarly, Diane Groves talks about how she grades the essays of the different students according to different expectations, because she really doesn't see a choice: if she graded students according to the same expectations, all of the students in the lower level class would fail the assignment. She thinks that a teacher's job is to celebrate students' accomplishments according to where they are (and where they have progressed based on where they are starting). Diane Groves goes on to say that if you grade students according to one standard, you risk that students will internalize a sense of non-accomplishment and failure.

**Different instruction around tasks**

Diane Groves not only grades groups of students according to different standards, but also modifies her approach to major tasks to meet her assessment of the needs of students in the higher track versus the lower track. She assumes that students in the lower track class need a high degree of explicit instruction about the structure and content of their essays. Diane Groves provides students in this class with what she calls a “skeletal frame,” or a fill-in-blank graphic organizer (this was also mentioned in the previous chapter). Students in the lower level class are required to complete the graphic organizer. The organizer has blank lines for students to fill in their evidence, but comes with a pre-filled introduction, transitions, and conclusion. Diane Groves says that this is a higher degree of structure than she would use later in the school year; because this is the school year's first major writing assignment, she wants to be sure that students understand its parts. After students in the lower level class fill in the blanks on the organizer, the class will go to the computer lab and, over two days, type up what they have handwritten on their
organizer. Similarly, students in the honors-level class will draft their essays and then type them. Telling this plan to one of her honors-level classes, Diane Groves says “You guys should be able to type an essay in two days,” conveying her expectations that she will receive nicely typed essays to grade rather than, presumably in the regular-level class, half-typed essays in which she may have to grade the graphic organizer. Unlike the regular-level class, the honors-level class is not required to use the graphic organizer to compose their essays, though most students do.

Students in the honors-level class receive the graphic organizer, as well as a sheet of paper with the necessary components of their essay listed. Students can write their rough drafts on loose-leaf paper, using the list of essay components. While Diane Groves dictates the topic of each of the three paragraphs, students in the honors-level class can choose the order of the three body paragraphs.

In the examples above, Diane Groves’s choices about how to vary her instruction and her expectations for students are guided by her assessment of where students are and what she feels is realistic to expect of them, given her assessment of where they are now. In Diane Groves’s thinking, students are different—and in ways that correspond with their course placement—therefore, her instruction and expectations for their work in different classes should be different. Diane Groves, and other teachers, did occasionally mention modifications that they made for individual students, but far more common were class-by-class modifications corresponding with track placement.

**Lisa Cooper: Same goals; different instruction**

Lisa Cooper’s curly brown hair is pulled back into a tight ponytail and her apparel reflects the practicality of someone who stands on her feet all day—comfortable slip-on sneakers, stretchy shirts, and capri pants. Lisa’s classroom at Monument Middle School, where she teaches
sixth grade ELA and eighth grade English language learners, exudes the cozy, colorful clutter of elementary school, with student work and posters covering much of the walls. A large air conditioning unit mounted to the ceiling blows clammy, mildew-scented air over the five tables where students sit in small groups.

Lisa Cooper’s classroom is in the corner of the second floor, near the stairwell, which she monitors closely, telling me that students inclined to make trouble in the hallway avoid “Cooper's Corner” entirely. Lisa teaches several “levels” of sixth grade English/Language Arts, as well as an eighth-grade ELA class for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Lisa is certified in ESOL but does not speak Spanish, which she sees as an asset rather than a liability. Lisa feels that a colleague who frequently speaks Spanish to her ESOL students can prevent students from learning English as quickly and can alienate the students in the class from non-Spanish speaking backgrounds.

Lisa Cooper worked for two years as a district writing coach embedded in Monument Middle School, but decided to return to the classroom because she felt that there was too much pressure on her as a writing coach to improve things that she could not control—namely, all eighth-grade students’ writing test scores. Writing coaches are not formally held responsible for a school’s state writing test scores, but more than one writing coach I interviewed expressed that they either personally feel responsible for their school’s writing test scores or feel that others hold them responsible. Lisa Cooper went back to the classroom because she feels that she has more agency as a classroom teacher, and a better chance of improving the learning of students that she works with every day in a sustained way.

Now in her seventeenth year of teaching, Lisa Cooper displays the classroom management of a veteran teacher. Students are assigned particular tasks to help the classroom run smoothly (for example, designated students pass out the SpringBoard workbooks, stacked at the front of the room and kept in the classroom, so that students do not lose them), and all students
are inculcated into a series of procedures to help the lesson run smoothly and efficiently. Lisa frequently projects an online timer onto the board from her computer to create a sense of urgency as students complete their “bellwork,” or the short assignment in the beginning of class that introduces the day's lesson.

**School context**

Monument Middle School was built in the early 1900s as the “south campus” of Palmetto High School, a Gothic revival masterpiece located just across the street, complete with mullioned windows, stained glass, and a clock tower. Palmetto High School, completed in 1928 to serve as the county's sole high school, is now one of the four high schools in the county with an International Baccalaureate program, which serves as a school-within-a-school magnet program. A renovation in 1999 left Monument Middle School with little historical character, though glimpses of its former life shine through: ornate, tarnished copper gutters descend a third of the way down each corner of the building before giving way to PVC pipe. Monument Middle School is located in a gentrifying neighborhood of original Craftsman bungalows in Palmetto County. Approaching the historic neighborhood on a major street, intricate eight-foot brick walls signal that one has entered the neighborhood and insulate the houses on either side from the noise of the busy avenue.

Monument Middle School is a Title I school, whose population has declined over time (Lisa Cooper tells me that the student body has declined from 1,400 to 750 students in her time there). In the 2009–2010 school year, 785 students attended Monument Middle School, with 89.3% of the student body qualifying for free or reduced price lunch (and of those 701 students who qualified for free or reduced price lunch, the majority (614) qualified for free lunch) (NCES
Common Core of Data, 2010). Because the population of the school has declined so dramatically, the majority of teachers in the school have to teach more than one grade level.

Monument Middle School's 2013 state-calculated school grade was a D, the same as it was in 2012. From 2001 to 2011, however, Monument’s school grade hovered between a B and a C (state department of education). As mentioned in the previous section, Palmetto County runs their own school improvement program to supply extra resources and interventions to schools scoring C or below, or to schools who have dropped a letter grade in the hopes of forestalling any subsequent decline (the suburban County Line Middle School, described in the example above, is also in the district school improvement program, but because of its one-year drop in school grade, rather than a low school grade like MMS). In the 2012–13 school year, 32% of MMS's students passed the state reading test; 33% passed the state math test, and 46% of that year's eighth grade students passed the state writing test. In 2011–2012, the school had 21.5% African American students, 58.9% Latino/a students, and 17% white students. 23% of students were identified as having limited English proficiency.

**Instructional scaffolding around SpringBoard texts and tasks**

Lisa Cooper described numerous examples of the ways that she scaffolds students' understanding of texts in the SpringBoard curriculum (as mentioned in the previous chapter), such as Walt Whitman's “O Captain, My Captain!”, and excerpts from Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and Homer's *The Odyssey*. For example, to help students in her ESOL class understand “O Captain, My Captain!”, she played video clips of Robin Williams reciting the poem in *Dead Poet's Society*, as well a clip of a young girl who won the *Poetry Jam* competition reading the Whitman poem, so that students hear the poem multiple times in different, eloquent voices. Lisa helped students to understand the implicit metaphor in “O Captain, My Captain!” by building
background knowledge about Abraham Lincoln from another text, and then reinforcing with students across multiple readings that Abraham Lincoln was the captain in the poem. As she described it, “I said to them [the ESOL class], “Every time you hear ‘Captain’ I want to think Abraham Lincoln. Every time you hear ‘vessel,’ I want you to think of the U.S. And every time you hear ‘journey’ I want you to think of the Civil War.” Once we read it and we started having this dialogue about it, they got it, like, they totally got the point of the poem!” Lisa describes her overall approach to facilitating the ESOL class as “breaking things into very small chunks” and recursive: “We’re gonna watch it, we’re gonna discuss it, we’re gonna watch it again, we’re gonna stop, we’re gonna take notes together as a class. I do little things like that to break it down into little steps for them.”

Lisa speaks eloquently and knowledgeably about ways to engage students at a variety of readiness levels in the same SpringBoard texts and tasks. In her ESOL class, students fall along a wide continuum of English language skills, which she (and the district) classify into three basic groups: those who are monolingual in their home language (LY-A), students who can engage in conversational English but struggle with academic language (LY-B), and students who have been in the ESOL program for two years or more and are fairly fluent in academic language (but have not yet tested out of the ESOL course) (LY-C). A particularly instructive example of scaffolding in the ESOL course is in how Lisa Cooper engaged students in the tale of the Cyclops from *The Odyssey*.

In the case of *The Odyssey*, Lisa provided background information in a visual format to assist with students' comprehension (e.g., as I mentioned in the previous chapter, she showed a clip from the History Channel retelling the story of Odysseus and the Cyclops). Lisa and the students used the video to clarify unfamiliar words in the text (such as “entrails”), as well as to have repeated exposure to the text in different genres, so that all students can access the meaning of the text regardless of their current level of English proficiency. In her description:
I was not going to do this with that group of kids, and I said to them, “Look, some of the teachers just skip over it because they think it’s too difficult. What do you guys think?” And they were like, “We want to do it.” I said, “All right, but we have to break it apart, we have to look at language, we have to look at history.” Because the kids have no knowledge of Greek mythology. We started working on it at the beginning of the week, and I just showed them the video clip from the History Channel that covers some of the details, and we did what we call a fusing, which is a vocabulary strategy where as you’re reading, and we do mostly shared readings, you circle the words and then you have dialogue, in groups or as a whole class, with, “Can you determine the meaning of the word based on context clues? If you can’t, here’s a Spanish-English dictionary, let’s figure it out.” So when you look at their workbooks, how many words those poor children circled...

After reading the excerpt, students engaged with the theme of the unit, which is the definition of a hero. After reading, students were to “write an analytical paragraph using textual evidence to reinforce the idea that he is an epic hero.” To make sure that her instruction would enable her ESOL students' success on that task, Lisa describes how she had students brainstorm four qualities of a hero, “including fearless, faithful, mentally strong, smart,” and then watch the video clip multiple times. As they watched the video, they looked for examples of those qualities, “and then we went to the text and picked out specific evidence, wrote down which page number, because we also labeled the paragraph, there were, like, 27 paragraphs, which paragraph, so that when they write their analytical piece tomorrow, they can go back and say, “If I’m gonna write about him being brave, I can go to this page, this paragraph, and that’s where I’ll find the information.”
In the example above, Lisa Cooper displays both a deep knowledge of strategies for scaffolding instruction, as well a belief that her students are able to access certain texts and tasks. Lisa sees this approach as a potential threat to business as usual in her school, telling me “...I can make [an excerpt from *The Odyssey*] accessible to kids where English is not their first language. And let me you something. People don’t want to hear that. What they want to hear is, ESL kids should not be using that curriculum. There’s an ESL teacher at this school who, for two years she’s been teaching this curriculum and has barely gotten through the first unit.”

**Underlying logics of instruction: Comparing and contrasting Diane Groves and Lisa Cooper**

After describing Diane Groves’s and Lisa Cooper's divergent approaches to teaching across curricular tracks (above), I now compare and contrast their teaching and discuss how each of their approaches reflects different beliefs about student ability. Both approaches reflect a deliberate attempt to meet students' needs and make decisions about the kind of curriculum and instruction that both teachers believe is “appropriate” for different groups of students, but Diane Groves and Lisa Cooper arrive at different conclusions.  

Diane Groves's approach—varying instruction and varying expectations—signals that she believes students have different needs, and those needs can best be met by varying aspects of the texts and tasks she chooses for different classes, as well as her grading and expectations for the quantity and quality of work students in different instructional levels will be able to produce. Further, her view of students’ different needs basically corresponds with students' identified instructional level, and thus, with their state test score (since the state test score is used as the

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11 In contrast to both Diane Groves and Lisa Cooper, some teachers that I watched did not display intentional decision-making about curriculum and instruction for different groups of students, but muddled through all of their classes in much the same way, confounding my attempt to attribute their instructional decisions to their assessment of a particular group of students' needs.
basis for instructional grouping). Diane Groves uses what she sees as instructional scaffolding in both classes (e.g. the fill-in-the-blank graphic organizer), but does not believe that any instructional scaffolding she can provide will allow all, or most, of her students to produce work at the same level of quality.

In contrast, Lisa Cooper's approach to teaching her classes across tracks—varying instruction but not expectations—reflects a belief that her students are able to access the same kinds of tasks and texts, and produce work at roughly the same level of quality. Lisa Cooper sees it as her responsibility to find instructional scaffolding that will allow students in her inclusion class and ESOL class to read the same texts and complete the same tasks as the honors class. And indeed, the primary way that Lisa Cooper varies her instruction across classes is in the amount of support that she provides to students as they read the same texts and complete the same tasks.

**Complicating Diane Groves and Lisa Cooper**

Although I contrast the instruction of Lisa Cooper and Diane Groves, and argue that their instructional choices reflect two distinct, underlying views of ability, I also need to make clear that they are both caring, experienced, skilled teachers who are multi-dimensional people and teachers. If either appears essentialized in this chapter, it is the fault of my portrayal, not because they themselves are perfect archetypes for either belief about student ability. In this section, I briefly discuss the “disconfirming evidence” (Maxwell, 2005) for the claims I have made in this chapter by looking at the ways in which both Lisa Cooper and Diane Groves have complex views of student ability.

After I noticed that multiple teachers became visibly tense in their lower-level classes, I started asking teachers about how they would group students in their dream schedules. In Diane Groves's case, she said (this is a close paraphrase of her comments) that she would like to move
students who are “lower but hard working” into honors classes, and group students within those classes so that students who are “low” are working with students in the honors class who could really help them. Diane Groves (recall, a district trainer for cooperative learning strategies) reflected that “[the cooperative learning program] wouldn't say to group students by [state test] scores but to make them, I think, mixed ability groups within each class.” However, Diane Groves thinks, the students who are “the behavior problems, the ones who are low and don't want to work hard should stay in that [lower-level] class” (paraphrase of Diane Groves's comments from field notes). Here, Diane Groves displays a view of student ability as hierarchical—as high and low—but feels that that students who are willing to work hard should be able to be in the honors class where they can learn from their peers and benefit from a calmer and more focused learning environment.

Diane Groves is incredibly caring and believes that she is making appropriate instructional choices to meet the needs of her different groups of students—whom she perceives as having different needs. There are a few different ways to evaluate Diane Groves’s instructional choices. One way to think about Diane Groves is as paternalistic: she is making decisions for groups of students about what texts and tasks are most appropriate for them. However, don't all teachers do this to some extent? At the least, Diane Groves is willing to admit that mixed ability grouping would lead to higher achievement for some of the students currently placed in the lower track class, but she thinks that only students in the lower track class willing to work hard should have that opportunity. In some ways, this shows that Diane has a more mutable view of student ability, in which hard work relates to achievement (similar to a “growth mindset” (e.g., Dweck, 2010)). However, this mindset also reflects a view of the honors-level class as a halcyon zone of well-behaved students, more reflective of behavioral traits than of intelligence. The students whom Diane Groves wants to leave in the lower track class are the “trouble-makers”, or the students whom she perceives as having less intrinsic motivation.
Lisa Cooper is similarly complex. Although in many ways, Lisa Cooper serves as the “good example” of this dissertation because she models how to provide a more equitable learning experience across curricular tracks by varying instructional scaffolding, Lisa Cooper does not always display a mutable view of ability. In our interview, Lisa still describes students as “high” and “low”. Lisa Cooper, like other teachers I observed, takes a more teacher-centered approach in the inclusion class as a way to cope with managing such a large class. Lisa is not easily ruffled however. Whereas some teachers became tense and rigid in their lower track classes, Lisa Cooper maintained her enthusiastic, calm, and firm disposition in her inclusion class. In addition, although Lisa Cooper scaffolds her ESOL class through reading and analyzing *The Odyssey* excerpt, just as she does with the honors class, recall what she says about why she read this text with the ESOL students. She tells me,

I was not going to do this [read *The Odyssey*] with that group of kids, and I said to them, “Look, some of the teachers just skip over it because they think it’s too difficult. What do you guys think?” And they were like, “We want to do it.” I said, “All right, but we have to break it apart, we have to look at language, we have to look at history.”

Lisa Cooper, despite having the deep instructional toolbox to lead students through a difficult text, had initially planned to skip the text entirely! Instead, she put the choice of whether or not to read it to the students, who expressed the desire to be challenged. Then, Lisa Cooper was able to come up with multiple strategies to lead students through reading and writing about this text in a sophisticated way, but what explains Lisa Cooper’s instructional choices? Did she decide to take on this text because students wanted to and she had faith in her teaching abilities to assist students who speak limited English in comprehending a difficult text? Or, was Lisa’s choice the result of an enduring, underlying belief about student ability as mutable? Even though this series of questions weakens the argument I have made in this chapter about how underlying
beliefs about ability driving instructional choices, the larger issue here is vital to raise: does action drive belief, or does belief drive action?

Media reports of Common Core implementation in Washoe County, NV describe skeptical teachers being asked to use a “CCSS-style” lesson, and then being converted to holding high expectations for all by the end of the lesson (i.e., beliefs following action). In the series of American Public Media stories, reporter Emily Hanford (2014a, 2014b) describes a fifth grade teacher in Washoe County, Linnea Wolters, who “was suspicious of the Common Core. It seemed like just another education reform in a long line of reforms that, in her opinion, weren't improving schools.” However, then, as Hanford (2014b) writes,

Wolters agreed to try a Common Core sample lesson with her students, a ‘close reading’ of a text…She was shocked when she realized the sample lesson focused on “The New Colossus,” a sonnet by Emma Lazarus that's engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty: ‘You gotta be freaking kidding me,’ she said to herself, assuming the poem would be much too difficult for her fifth-graders…Wolters' students began by reading the sonnet on their own. Next, Wolters read the sonnet out loud, in part to help students who may have had trouble reading on their own. After everyone had read the sonnet at least twice, Wolters guided the class through a series of “text-dependent questions and tasks.” The first asked students to figure out the poem's rhyme scheme and to assign a different letter to each set of rhyming words…

By the end, Hanford (2014b) reports, “Wolters was amazed. She'd rarely seen her kids so excited about learning. And she had no idea they could succeed with such a challenging text. She couldn't wait to tell her colleagues about what had happened.” This series of articles suggests that belief may follow action, rather than action following belief. In other words, teachers may cultivate a more inclusive, mutable view of student ability if they are presented with evidence that students they think are low-performing can perform a complex task. In this report from Washoe County,
NV, the evidence of students’ performance is generated from teachers following a *scripted* lesson plan, however, again raising questions about teacher autonomy in evaluating and meeting students’ needs.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I described the school contexts and instructional choices of Lisa Cooper and Diane Groves, whom I argued have contrasting beliefs about student ability. Diane Groves’s sense of care for her students led to her having different, and in her mind, appropriate, expectations for the quality and quantity of students’ work. She also varied the texts and tasks she had students engage with across tracks as a strategy to meet students’ needs. Lisa Cooper was much more likely to hold her curriculum and expectations constant across the different classes she taught, and instead vary her instruction and the level of instructional scaffolding. In the next chapter, I discuss how the findings presented in the last four chapters relate to the research base on standards, tracking, and sense-making. I also discuss the limitations of this study and directions for future research.
Chapter 8

Discussion

Introduction

In this chapter, I first remind the reader of Palmetto County’s approach to Common Core implementation: Palmetto County used an intermediary organization’s materials to train its 30,000+ teachers. These materials, overall, emphasized the CCSS as an instructional reform that would create equity through changes in instruction, rather than as a structural reform. Then, I discuss the limitations of this approach for creating greater equity within schools and across schools. Next, I evaluate the claim that increased equity can result from instructional changes advocated by some Common Core policy entrepreneurs, such as asking text-dependent questions. Then, I point out some of the issues this study raises about current theories of sense-making, which emphasize agency and meaning-making on the part of district administrators. After that, I discuss how these findings relate to the literature on the unintended consequences of standards-based reform and the research base on tracking and detracking. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this study and detail plans for future research.

Palmetto County’s approach to CCSS implementation

Recall that this study's first research question was “How, if at all, did policy messages about the Common Core shift from the national level to the district and teacher levels across a
diverse metropolitan district in the South?" Though the state policy context is important for the study overall, I did not find that Common Core messages at the state-level were relevant to district and teacher sense-making processes. This district did not use state Common Core materials, instead working closely with an intermediary organization and a network of other large urban districts. In Chapter 4, I traced the ways that Common Core policy messages shifted across these different levels, especially policy messages related to the Common Core and equity. At the national level, policy entrepreneurs believed that the Common Core would lead to greater educational equity by “telling the truth” about the requirements for college success, and creating explicit expectations for college readiness that were shared across unequal school contexts, or “across zip code” (Kornhaber et al., 2014). Thus, to these policy entrepreneurs, the Common Core represented a way to provide more equal opportunity to learn the knowledge and skills necessary to enter college without remediation. In addition to these commonly expressed messages about the Common Core and equity, one policy entrepreneur reflected a belief that aspects of the standards themselves would create greater equity. For example, asking students to use textual evidence, rather than background knowledge, as they read and respond to texts across English/Language Arts, science, history, etc. gives students without as much home enrichment a “more level playing field” (Kornhaber et al., 2014; Snow & O’Connor, 2013).

Yet, the majority of these national-level messages about equity were notably absent in district-level professional development—with the exception of the final message about equity through technical aspects of the standards, such as the importance of reading, discussing, and writing in response to complex texts. For reading and ELA teachers in the district, this final message was amplified through the professional development materials that a national intermediary organization developed in collaboration with district administrators. Initial CCSS trainings for all teachers made glancing reference to some of the frequent national-level rationales: improved workforce readiness and equity “across zip code,” but in general, trainings
for ELA and literacy teachers emphasized the CCSS as (1) a set of fewer standards that clearly build from year to year, and (2) two technical changes in curriculum and instruction: asking students to read complex text, and discuss/write in response to text-dependent questions.

At the teacher level, teachers did not generally see the Common Core as an equity-oriented reform. Teachers did frequently express the view that the CCSS were a smaller set of standards that clearly increased in difficulty from grade to grade. In addition, teachers did frequently mention text complexity and text-dependent questions as important parts of the CCSS for ELA, as one might expect with an entire training session on each topic, but overall, most teachers did not see either text complexity or text-dependent questions as linked to equity.

These findings raise a number of questions about the degree to which an instructional reform can compensate for structural inequities; the degree to which the research base in ELA and literacy supports the claims inherent in the CCSS ELA standards about how to create equity through instruction (claims disseminated through Palmetto County and other urban districts through the intermediary organization); and commonly held wisdom in sense-making theory about the agency of district actors.

**Instructional reform versus structural inequalities**

Middle school literacy teachers in Palmetto County did not generally see the CCSS as an equity-oriented reform, however, *because the bulk of the messages in their environment did not present it as one.* The district’s professional development presented the CCSS as a set of a few technical changes in instruction, not as any kind of normative challenge to beliefs about student ability or as a way to identify and address structural inequalities across highly unequal school contexts. Instead, district administrators saw the CCSS and SpringBoard as creating an equitable instructional experience across schools, allowing them to rationalize highly unequal school
contexts with the argument that students are thought to experience the same curriculum across all schools. Further, splitting students into different tracks that use the same curriculum is seen as a way to differentiate instruction appropriately to meet students’ needs. Although this study could not, in the end, make strong claims about similarities and differences in instruction across high-income and low-income schools, several teachers I interviewed in low-income schools did express the sentiment that standards are not “enough” to create equity given the many challenges their students face.

While one would not necessarily expect a discussion of unequal school structures (within and/or between schools) to be part of a “Common Core training”, is it realistic to expect an instructional reform to compensate for structural inequalities? Though this study did not systematically evaluate racial and socioeconomic inequalities between and within all of the middle schools in Palmetto County, other researchers have documented growing resegregation since the district was declared unitary in 2001. As I observed middle school classes across eleven different school contexts, it seemed—anecdotally—that the more racially diverse a school’s population, the more minority students seemed to be overrepresented in the lower level classes.

Of course, since students are grouped in language arts and reading based on their state test scores, any racial test score gap will be directly reflected in track composition. Though it is not within the scope of this study to investigate the relationship between high-stakes testing, accountability, and racially disproportionate tracking, such a study would be well warranted and would build on other research in metropolitan districts demonstrating the ways that within-school instructional grouping is a form of second-generation segregation (e.g., Mickelson, 2001; Tyson, 2011). However, unlike these other contexts, district policy specifically states that students in Palmetto County will use the same curriculum across these different levels to increase students’ access to pre-Advanced Placement content. I do see this as more equitable than the radically different curricula described in seminal tracking research (e.g., Oakes, 1985).
However, without structural reform to the ways that students are sorted both between and within schools, I argue that any real gains in equity related solely to Common Core implementation in Palmetto County are incidental. Such gains in equity might be attained through teachers’ changing their instruction for their existing classes in the existing school structure—as was the dominant message in CCSS professional development—but can we accept the claim that these technical changes in instruction will lead to greater equity? Next, I evaluate the claims made by some Common Core proponents about the extent to which equity can result from technical changes in instructional practice.

**Evaluating equity through “Common Core instruction”**

Does greater equity result from increased exposure to complex texts? Are text-dependent questions more equitable because they do not draw on background knowledge (as was the prominent rationale in the district/intermediary organization training materials)? In Chapter 4, I shared the text of a slide from the presentation used in Palmetto County (developed by the intermediary organization) giving a rationale for using complex text:
Why Sharing Complex Texts Matters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Some students</th>
<th>Other students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• had lots of books available to them at home and had caregivers who read to</td>
<td>• were isolated from texts before arriving at the schoolhouse door.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>them in their early years with great regularity.</td>
<td>• were classified as unable to succeed within the regular curriculum and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• had teachers who augmented textbooks with adequately complex reading.</td>
<td>hence given materials pitched at a much lower level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• became eager and independent readers because they learned how to read well</td>
<td>• became identified as struggling readers because they were never given the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in their first years of their schooling.</td>
<td>opportunity to grapple with adequately complex texts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8-1: Text from Slide 33, Intermediary Organization Power Point Presentation used in Palmetto County Training on Text Complexity.

The causal chain presented in this slide is students become struggling readers when they have few early literacy experiences—producing a literacy gap that is compounded when these students arrive at school and teachers place students with low reading levels in reading groups with materials that are easier than the materials for students with higher reading levels. It is because of those easier reading materials, according to this rationale, that students’ reading achievement does not advance: because they have been denied the opportunity to engage with difficult texts. This equity rationale is certainly appealing—in fact, this rationale for “moving to” complex text (I put “moving to” in quotation marks because it is not clear that instructional text was not complex before) was the biggest applause line of the night at a National Public Radio Intelligence Squared debate on the Common Core in September 2014 (EH field notes from live debate, 9/9/14). In the quote below, Michael Petrilli from the Fordham Foundation, arguing for the Common Core, explains the rationale for complex text:
We've had a system for years where we've said, 'Okay, if a child can only read at the first-grade level and they're in fifth grade, we're going to give them first-grade level books,' right, with the hope that over time they would get better. The problem is there's five or six rigorous studies showing by and large those kids were never getting better at reading. And that they're—what the studies showed is what you really need to do is find ways to get the kids to read more challenging texts at their grade level, which means at first—and the teachers today helped explain this so, so much better than I could—that the teachers start by reading it aloud, having the kids follow along. They do what they call, “scaffolding,” over time. And over time, they start to teach the kids how to do this reading so that they can let go of the handlebar and they can ride the bike on their own. 

*And kids who are way behind grade level, including kids who are special education students, are never going to make progress if we don't challenge them with those grade level texts. This is what the evidence says, and the Common Core looks at the evidence.*

(Intelligence Squared, 2014, italics added)

This statement, followed by loud audience applause, closely tracks the research rationale presented in Appendix A of the CCSS ELA standards. Appendix A claims that “while the reading demands of college, workforce training programs, and citizenship have held steady or risen over the past fifty years or so, K–12 texts have, if anything, become less demanding” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, Appendix A, p. 2). Therefore, the “instructional shift” called for here, according to CCSS promoters, is to increase the complexity of the instructional materials students encounter in school.

In a recent comparison of Common Core professional development materials (Hodge & Benko, 2014), my co-author and I discuss how the “instructional shifts” disseminated by Student
Achievement Partners square with the research base on English/Language Arts and literacy. Recall that Student Achievement Partners is the organization founded by CCSS lead authors David Coleman, Susan Pimentel, and Jason Zimba, in order to support Common Core implementation. Certainly, the federal government is not able to take on the role of supporting Common Core implementation for reasons both constitutional and political (the Obama administration's support of the Common Core in the Race to the Top incentive program has already contributed to a groundswell of CCSS resistance from Tea Party conservatives in particular (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013b; Hodge & Benko, 2014). Organizations like Student Achievement Partners and the Aspen Institute are trying to fill a perceived “capacity gap” (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009) among teachers and districts by providing lessons and resources to support a vision of instruction they see as consistent with the CCSS.

However, ramping up the complexity of texts for students in the early grades, in particular, runs counter to traditional practice and a long-standing research base on reader-text match (as P. David Pearson (2013) points out, the practice of matching students to texts they can read with a high degree of fluency stems from Betts (1946)). An example of this line of thinking today comes from Lucy Calkins and colleagues (2012), whose Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop program is widely used and relies on the Fountas and Pinnell literacy leveling system. As students are learning to read and gradually becoming more proficient readers, students should be reading “vast amounts of minds-on, engaged reading” (Calkins et al., 2012, p. 96) at a level they can read with about 95% fluency, which is to say that students are able to decode and understand 95% of the words they read at a high degree of fluency (in other words, without stumbling over more than 5% the words). In this line of thinking, students become better readers by reading texts that they find interesting and relevant that they can read fluently. Whether or not greater equity results from increased exposure to complex texts, as in the CCSS rationale, is not yet clear. While such texts may fall into students “frustration zones” and could be unproductive if
students without the reading comprehension to understand a particular text are asked to read it independently, P. David Pearson (2013) notes that there is little research on how teachers might scaffold students' experiences with those texts.

The second dominant policy message about the CCSS ELA standards in Palmetto County was an emphasis on asking text-dependent questions as students read complex texts, or questions that ask students to draw on the text as evidence for their response, rather than on personal experience or background knowledge. As with text complexity, Appendix A for the CCSS ELA standards presents a rationale for this claim:

There is also evidence that current standards, curriculum, and instructional practice have not done enough to foster the independent reading of complex texts so crucial for college and career readiness, particularly in the case of informational texts. K–12 students are, in general, given considerable scaffolding—assistance from teachers, class discussions, and the texts themselves (in such forms as summaries, glossaries, and other text features)—with reading that is already less complex overall than that typically required of students prior to 1962. (CCSSO & NGA, 2010, Appendix A, p. 3)

Although the research cited for the other claims in Appendix A (a decline in text complexity and a heavy focus on narrative vs. informational text in K–12) may not represent the full research base in ELA and literacy, there is research cited for these claims, unlike for the claim quoted above, that is used to justify a “close reading” approach. There has been a heated debate about the extent to which the standards' language of “read closely” should be interpreted as asking students to do “close readings” (see Hodge & Benko, 2014 for a fuller discussion of this debate). David Coleman, in his published speeches (Coleman, 2011a, 2011b) and the Publisher's Criteria document which he and Susan Pimentel released to guide textbook publishers in how to interpret the standards (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012), lays out proscriptions against asking students to draw text-to-self connections, claiming that it is more equitable to ask text-dependent questions.
Are text-dependent questions more equitable because they do not draw on background knowledge (as was the prominent rationale in the district/intermediary organization training materials)? The International Literacy Association became so concerned about these claims—especially as they have been disseminated *through* this intermediary organization's materials on close reading that they released a policy research brief (Snow & O’Connor, 2013), to argue squarely, *no*:

*The notion that we can level the playing field by limiting a teacher's questions to those strictly linked to text is an attractive illusion, but an illusion nonetheless.* Knowledgeable readings cannot be prevented from bringing to bear their background knowledge of concepts, words, and linguistics structures. Readers lacking in background knowledge cannot add to it only by close reading techniques. If we restrict teacher activities to close reading as prescribed, we are actually sustaining inequities in access to global text comprehension, and thus to the expansion of knowledge. (Snow & O'Connor, 2013, italics added)

Regardless of the extent to which there is a legitimate research rationale for aspects of the English/Language Arts standards, the critique of “current practice” presented in Appendix A is mostly with the texts or instructional materials with which students engage, and to some extent, the ways in which they engage with those materials—not with school structures. This again pushes on the central tension of this dissertation: if standards and/or curriculum are replaced, but deeper structures (such as curricular tracks) are left intact, can “curriculum equity” or some kind of increased opportunity to learn be achieved? In this particular context, for the particular set of data that I gathered, my response to this is, overall, no. Though it is doubtful whether or not practices such as asking students text-dependent questions can create a level playing field, this dissertation argues that testing and tracking lead teachers to apply those practices unevenly to tracked groups of students.
Re-evaluating sense-making theory

When I planned this study, I proposed using a “sense-making” theoretical framework for this study. The sense-making framework is based on the work of Karl Weick (1993) and has been taken up more recently in educational research by Cynthia Coburn, James Spillane, and others. In contrast to other paradigms of policy implementation (the top-down, technical-rational view and the bottom-up, mutual adaptation view), much of the sense-making literature in education emphasizes policy implementation as the dynamic interaction of local actors with their environments broadly construed (Coburn, 2001; Datnow & Park, 2009; Spillane, 1996). In the sense-making view of policy implementation, teachers and other local actors actively construct an understanding of a particular policy in ways that align with their beliefs and backgrounds, as well as in ways that take into account environmental cues (including multiple levels of contexts within which teachers function, as well as the people with whom they interact). Rather than the egg crate model of isolated teachers working side by side but barely interacting (Lortie, 1975), sense-making theorists have found that indeed, reforms do penetrate classroom walls—often because of the meaning teachers have made together—though the meanings teachers make may not necessarily be predictable or a “pure” translation of policy makers' intentions.

I proposed using a sense-making framework for this study when I began my investigation of one district's response to the Common Core State Standards because it seemed an appropriate framework to understand how district administrators were framing the Common Core for their teaching staff, and, in turn, how these messages were understood by classroom teachers. Now, I wonder if sense-making theory adequately explains the growing power of intermediary organizations in Common Core implementation.

I assumed that district administrators would engage in a sense-making process around what they understood the CCSS to mean and how they might convey that meaning to the 30,000-
odd teachers in the district. After all, other research in this area emphasizes the role that district administrators play in translating the meaning of policy for the local actors within a particular district. Drawing on Cohen and Barnes' (1993) term, “the pedagogy of policy,” Spillane (2002) focuses on how district leaders (including “district administrators, curriculum specialists, and lead teachers”) “both learn from policy and 'teach' it, at least what they understand of it, to school administrators and teachers” (p. 143). Spillane discusses how district administrators, much like David Cohen's “Mrs. Oublier” (Cohen, 1990), interpreted mathematics reforms intended to promote deep conceptual understanding of mathematics in ways that ended up reinforcing procedural learning. Many of the district officials Spillane interviewed would discuss superficial aspects of the reform that invoked conceptual approaches to mathematics, like using “hands-on learning” or “manipulatives”, but then described how these approaches were a strategy to improve students’ retention of math procedures and operations.

As I began to analyze the district’s approach to CCSS implementation and professional development, however, I realized that district officials were neither “learn[ing] from policy” nor “teach[ing] it, at least what they understand of it” (Spillane, 2002) to teachers. Instead, district officials relied on an intermediary organization to interpret the CCSS for them and their teachers. To be fair, two district administrators are credited with giving feedback to the intermediary organization on drafts of the training materials, but these same district administrators relied on the intermediary organization to lead them through a demonstration of “close reading” and openly admitted to being shocked at the “heavy lift” in the vision of Common Core instruction that the intermediary organization presented to them—close reading of complex text.

In this section, I have addressed how the district’s approach to CCSS implementation leaned heavily on an intermediary organization’s understanding of the standards, challenging other research that portrays district actors as active, local sense-makers. Next, I turn to how my
findings broadly relate to the research base on the previous iteration of standards-based reform under No Child Left Behind.

**Speaking back to the research on standards-based reform**

The literature I reviewed on the unintended consequences of standards-based reform when coupled with high-stakes accountability found three main areas of unintended consequences: narrowing curriculum and “teaching to the test”, penalizing schools with large numbers of students who need extra resources, and creating incentives to prioritize some students’ learning over others. How do my findings confirm, deny, or extend earlier research?

**Narrowing the curriculum and teaching to the test**

The first common charge leveled at standards and accountability policies is how they narrow the curriculum, encouraging schools and teachers to “teach to the test” and eliminate electives in favor of a slavish focus on math and reading (since those are tested most frequently under NCLB) (e.g., Berliner, 2011; Nichols, Berliner, & Glass, 2012; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Palmer & Snodgrass Rangel, 2010; Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004). The related critique is that the pressure to drive up test scores at all costs—pressure that is greatest in low-income schools—leads to the widespread use of scripted curricula that depprofessionalize teachers (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglman, 2004; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001). Was this the case in Palmetto County?

On the one hand, one could argue that Palmetto County’s decision to adopt a scripted curriculum, SpringBoard, not just in schools that were low performing, but in all secondary schools, demonstrates this pressure. However, is it accurate to call SpringBoard either a “scripted” or a “narrowed” curriculum? Further, was SpringBoard adopted as part of an explicit strategy to help students pass the state test? The research literature (Achinstein, Ogawa, &
Speiglman, 2004) tends to discuss scripted curricula as low-demand, low-engagement learning experiences that are geared towards passing state tests. SpringBoard, for all of its flaws, and however problematic teachers may find it, is neither tightly scripted, nor was it adopted to help students pass a low-demand state test.

The public rationale for adopting SpringBoard in Palmetto County was that it would help increase the rigor and quality of secondary students’ experiences in math and ELA in middle and high school. Because SpringBoard is intended to expose students to the knowledge and skills necessary for Advanced Placement coursework, it is perhaps not in the same category as other scripted, “scientifically based” curricula that schools that have been declared “failing” under NCLB have been forced to adopt. Several teachers did express skepticism about the motives behind the SpringBoard adoption, as (in their telling) the superintendent’s bonus is based on increasing Advanced Placement enrollment, especially increasing enrollment of minority students.

The College Board pitches SpringBoard as a cognitively demanding curriculum that will prepare students for Advanced Placement courses. Teachers did not always see it this way; several described SpringBoard’s default activities as pitched to the “regular student.” However, in my opinion, although I (personally) find the compulsory nature of any mandated curriculum off-putting, the activities in SpringBoard ask students to draw on textual evidence in sophisticated ways and to analyze texts from multiple genres, including film and the media. In addition, SpringBoard activities are quite often inductive and student-centered. For example, one activity I observed, in a unit on advertising and the media, asked students to bring in a magazine advertisement featuring a man or a woman. Students taped these ads to the classroom walls, and teachers then asked students to generate inductive understandings about the ways in which the media reflects and perpetuates gender stereotypes.
How scripted is SpringBoard? The answer to this question depends on the level of scrutiny and oversight with which teachers are asked (or required) to use SpringBoard. The teachers’ edition of the eighth grade ELA curriculum, for example, provides suggestions for teachers in the margins, but not a word-for-word script. In Palmetto County, Teachers reported that during the first year of SpringBoard implementation, they were asked to follow the program with fidelity so that both teachers and district administrators could get a sense of what worked well in SpringBoard and what (pacing, units, tasks, texts, etc.) would need to be changed. In subsequent years, however, teachers reported being encouraged to “make [SpringBoard] your own,” a message echoed in the district professional development meeting that I attended. In this meeting, the district administrator (Anna Carpenter) told teachers when previewing next year’s SpringBoard curriculum,

If you are not a fan of SpringBoard, here is some other exciting news. They [SpringBoard developers] have specifically encouraged you to know and understand the purpose of the unit...and then bring in different texts, so you can feel like you are back to owning the curriculum and have a say in what your students and reading and investigating. [They are] trying to bring the teacher back into the curriculum. (The teacher next to me says, “Awwww” in a sarcastic tone.) (EH Field Notes, 12/20/13)

This “make it your own” message was a mixed message though, undercut by the people teachers repeatedly described as the “SpringBoard Police,” or, in one case, the “SpringBoard Nazis.” Teachers described to me representatives from The College Board, whom they said did building-level walkthroughs in each middle and high school and provided a report to the principal about each teacher’s fidelity to SpringBoard. I asked Anna Carpenter, the district administrator I spoke with, about the “SpringBoard police,” and her perspective was the walkthroughs are for planning and informational purposes—not for compliance.
Interestingly, the two individuals who do the SpringBoard walkthroughs are not “outsiders”, sent from The College Board headquarters in New York, but are homegrown former teachers from Palmetto County. One was formerly principal of Flagstaff Middle School, the affluent exurban school where I observed Sarah Henderson and Jim Forest teach eighth grade ELA. The other was a teacher in Palmetto County, later a mid-level district administrator, and then an employee of The College Board in the state before returning to work with for Palmetto County to support SpringBoard implementation. District administrator Anna Carpenter may have been influenced by my comments about the Spring Board police. In the following day’s districtwide professional development meeting (that I observed), she emphasized to the gathered teachers and coaches that the role of these two administrators is to provide global feedback to principals about the school as a whole. The Springboard walkthroughs do not have any real consequences, in her view, and teachers should “worry about things that are actually relevant.”

Anna Carpenter went on to say,

What happens if you guys bomb it? Nothing. Your principal may get irritated...and they are given next steps overall to share with you so you can improve. What is really good about the SpringBoard walkthroughs is that they just want to see growth. Last year, nobody had a word wall, or objectives written, and this year everyone had an objective even if it wasn't written correctly….Sometimes there is the [fear/worry], ‘Oh my gosh, we are so behind in pacing; they are going to kill us,’ [but really,] they are applauding and praising you for your progress. [The conversations are always,] ‘Wow, look at the growth—They do write down [information], but it's only so info can be shared. It is, sincerely, a progress monitoring tool…Only in a few instances are information reported to [the superintendent], and trust me, you know when that is going to happen, like, if you walk in and there are grammar books on the table, and students don't know what SpringBoard is; it isn't used at all. (EH field notes, 12/20/13)
In addition, because Palmetto County is such a large consumer of SpringBoard materials, which must be purchased annually, The College Board has been responsive to changing the materials in response to concerns voiced in Palmetto County. In this districtwide professional development meeting I attended, the district administrator for middle school language arts previewed the following year’s changes, which she described as a result of teachers’ feedback: a new choice of novels in one of the 8th grade units; from *The Giver* only to a choice between *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Giver* (the administrator suggested perhaps teachers could use the books for different classes, ostensibly for the higher/lower track), the addition of close reading workshops, and streamlining the number of activities in each unit (about 17 down from about 30), among other changes.

Was there a narrowed curriculum in Palmetto County? In some ways, but not necessarily because of the Common Core. Students who did not pass the state reading test were required to take a remedial reading class, so yes, their curriculum did narrow, but because of a state-level policy tied to a state-level test, not because of the Common Core. Two social studies teachers I had informal conversations with (one in low-income Scott Middle School and the other in mixed-income County Line Middle School), felt that the CCSS would be a return to primary sources and more emphasis on teaching like a historian. Relatedly, did I observe teaching to the test? Yes, a great of instruction is explicitly focused on driven by the test…but a *state test that was on its way out*. Palmetto County has devoted an extreme level of resources to teaching students how to pass the state writing test, which asks students to write a narrative or expository response to a prompt asking them about their personal experience. Teachers are told to teach students to use a format called “bare bones” developed by the district writing coach; district administrators coach teachers to not see this strategy as problematic. As a district administrator told the group of assembled Palmetto county literacy teachers, students “have to learn to walk before they can run”—meaning
that students must master this particular state test writing formula, even if their writing becomes formulaic, before they will later understand how to depart from it.

However, Palmetto County and this southern state in which it lies are moving to a new Common Core assessment in the 2014–15 school year. As part of their CCSS implementation strategy, Palmetto County was already building capacity around a Common Core-style assessment in the 2013–14 school year. Palmetto County changed their quarterly writing benchmark assessments to a “Common Core-style” writing test, where students read several texts and composed a written response to a prompt using evidence from those texts. One of the ideas behind assessments like these at the national level is even if they do not reduce “teaching to the test,” at least they might reduce teaching to a “bad” test. However, it is not clear to me that these kinds of writing assignments will reduce the formulaic nature of writing instruction that I observed. One teacher discussed what she saw as necessary to teach students to be successful on a CCSS-style writing assignment—teaching students a variety of text-marking strategies and outlines for different kinds of writing assignments—and she described this as a “formula”, just a more complex formula. Further, the longer writing assignments in SpringBoard are much the same as the CCSS-style assessments, asking students to analyze multiple pieces of text in writing, and teachers use tightly scripted outlines to have students complete these SpringBoard writing assignments in proscribed formats (in fairness, I observed the first major writing assignment of the year, and this level of [over] scaffolding may very well change over the course of the year. However, I observed students being asked to choose only their textual evidence and “plug it in” to a fill-in-the-blank graphic organizer where transitions and a conclusion were already written).

To summarize, because the Common Core assessment was not yet in place in this state during the time of data collection, the extent to which the Common Core may or may not be linked to some of the problematic aspects of earlier standards and accountability efforts in
Palmetto County it is not yet clear. The standards themselves in this district context did not seem linked to narrowing the curriculum, etc.

**Campbell’s Law: Distorted incentives and penalties for low-income schools**

Other research on standards and high-stakes accountability has demonstrated the phenomenon popularly known as Campbell’s Law (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Paraphrased, Campbell’s Law describes how when consequences are tied to particular measurements, an assessment will no longer be a valid measurement because humans will change their behavior (e.g., the cheating scandals in Atlanta Public Schools (described in Rachel Aviv’s (2014) piece in *The New Yorker*). Certainly, there is a great of pressure on schools and teachers in Palmetto County from the state and district to increase and maintain high state test scores. State test scores determine school grades, play a significant role in teacher evaluations, and determine students’ course placement, to name only a few of the consequences.

Because the statewide Common Core assessment had not yet been implemented during the time of data collection, this data cannot speak to how, if at all, pressure from this new assessment will influence teachers’ behavior. Currently, state assessments are used to calculate school grades, and school grades (either a C or lower, or a drop in letter grade) qualify Palmetto County schools for a district-created and district-managed school improvement program. This school improvement program may have unintended consequences that penalize students in these schools, but overall, the program is intended to support schools by providing extra human and financial resources. Schools in this improvement program have monthly data meetings with school- and district-level administrators, schools receive reading and writing coaches, and schools have the opportunity to ask for targeted resources. School staff do not always perceive these efforts as supportive, however. The reading coach and an ELA teacher in County Line Middle School, whose dramatic drop in school grade led to them entering the improvement
program, both described the superintendent visiting a faculty meeting and asking them what they needed to be successful—but the reading coach felt there would be consequences attached to whatever they asked for if test scores did not improve in a short period of time. Similarly, the principal experienced the monthly data meetings as stressful because of the degree to which he felt his performance was constantly scrutinized and measured by student data.

That said, there may have been a greater focus on improving test scores in low-income schools, which was the only place I saw posters on the wall with the names of students who had scored proficient on a writing benchmark; this was intended to be a motivator. However, I only spent extended time in one low-income school, and all schools were encouraged in district professional development to come up with rewards for students who were passing the writing benchmark tests as a strategy to motivate students (EH field notes, 12/20/13). In addition, there is a large focus throughout the district on having students be aware of their own data. I observed students in high-income and mixed-income schools filling out “data sheets”, where they reflected on their most recent benchmark performance and made a plan to increase their test scores.

To summarize, there was not yet a visible relationship between the Common Core and Campbell’s Law (or when an assessment distorts behavior) because the Common Core assessment was not yet in place. However, I observed ample evidence of the previous state assessment distorting behavior.

**Speaking back to the research on tracking and detracking**

In Chapter 6, I described the different ways that teachers I interviewed and observed modified curriculum and instruction (both deliberately and unconsciously) for the lower track class. While all levels of ELA use SpringBoard, some teachers modified the SpringBoard text, task, and/or their expectations for the quality of work for students in the lower level class as a
strategy to meet their assessment of students’ needs. Then, in Chapter 7, I compared two teachers, Lisa Cooper and Diane Groves. Lisa Cooper generally held the task, text, and expectations consistent across tracks, while Diane Groves modified all three. I argue in Chapter 7 that Lisa Cooper’s approach is more equitable, but at the same time, this argument raises key questions about the extent to which the same curriculum is and isn’t equitable (e.g., what is the role of culturally relevant instruction? Teacher autonomy?) How do these findings mesh with the large body of literature on tracking?

Much of the tracking-related literature from the 1990s looks at detracking. This literature did not apply to Palmetto County, as all regular public secondary schools are tracked, per district policy. The literature on tracking itself, however, claims first that there are large differences in curriculum and instruction across tracks (Oakes, Ormseth, Bell, & Camp, 1990; Oakes, 1985, 2008; Page, 1991), and second, that those differences lead to negative academic and affective consequences for students in the lower track class (Gamoran, 2004, 2009; Oakes et al., 1990). Because my study focuses on teachers rather than on students, I cannot speak to potential negative effects on students. However, I can speak to teachers’ decisions about instruction across tracks, and the degree of similarity and difference that I saw in curriculum and instruction across tracks.

Consistent with much of the research base, many of the teachers in my sample did often have lower expectations for the quality of student work and the pace at which students in the lower track class would complete the same amount of work (as discussed in Chapter 6). Also consistent with the research base is the difference in curriculum and instruction across tracks. In English/Language Arts, research suggests that students in the higher track class tend to read and write more (Caughlan & Kelly, 2004; Watanabe, 2008), experience a more coherent curriculum (Applebee et al., 1994), and to engage in more class discussion and participatory learning (Applebee et al., 2003; Watanabe, 2008). My findings confirm some of these aspects of this
earlier research: teachers repeatedly became more tense and concerned about classroom management in the lower track class. This led them to change their instruction so that it was less student-centered and less participatory; teachers perceived a more teacher-centered approach as less of a risk to their control over the class. Students did, overall, read and write more in the higher track class, with its district-mandated faster pace. However, overall, the curriculum across tracks was the same, so students experienced the same amount of coherence in their ELA curriculum across tracks.

Another prominent finding in the tracking research base is “teacher tracking” (Kelly, 2004): both within and across schools, the least experienced and/or least competent teachers are most often assigned to low-income schools and also to lower track classes. All teachers in my study taught across at least two “levels” of ELA. Across schools, I did interact with several long-term substitutes in the low-income schools where I spent several days (of course, this is hardly a strong claim). However, even if there is high turnover at low-income schools, which I cannot claim with any certainty, there is also a concerted effort to put a network of coaches into place in Palmetto County’s low-income schools. Coaches are required to be experienced teachers and are chosen after an extensive interview process and teaching demonstration. Lisa Cooper, who in many ways serves as the “good example” in this dissertation, was a writing coach who went back to the classroom.

These findings demonstrate the continued importance of tracking as an organizational structure that influences teachers’ decisions about curriculum and instruction, and their views of students’ capabilities. A standardized curriculum and/or a new set of standards, no matter how rigorous, does not mitigate the powerful signal sent by curricular tracking.
Limitations

There are, of course, limitations to this study—the most notable of which is the relatively short length of the classroom observations. I had to make choices about the depth versus breadth of my observations. Should I observe fewer teachers for a longer period of time, or more teachers for a shorter period of time? In the end, I opted for doing more, relatively short observations (the longest observations were three full days; the shortest observation was two class periods on one day). Clearly, I cannot make strong, generalized claims about individual teachers’ instruction based on this data. Another limitation of this study and the data that I had at the end of it is a lack of clear differences in teachers’ sense-making of the Common Core and their instruction across school type (high-income, mixed-income, low-income). In particular, the amount of data I collected in the low-income school category was smaller than in the mixed-income and high-income categories. I observed multiple teachers’ instruction in only one low-income school, so I cannot speak to instruction in low-income schools in Palmetto County. Similarly, my interview data in this category relied heavily on interviews with instructional coaches rather than classroom teachers, whose time was carefully protected by many of the principals of low-income schools to whom I reached out. However, an important part of validity is to recognize the limits of the data I have and to not overstate my claims.

Future studies could address some of these limitations: an ethnographic study of classroom instruction in the context of Common Core implementation would be well warranted, as would a study that systematically gathered a larger set of data across different types of schools. Palmetto County, or another large metropolitan district, would be an ideal setting for such a study because there are such a large number of middle schools within one district context.

Another limitation was timing—though Palmetto County is known as a leader in CCSS implementation, research has demonstrated (for better or worse) the importance of the assessment
in driving instruction; data for this study were collected before the state assessment had changed. Some of the most interesting findings about how the state test categories were taken up by teachers, but this was the *old* state test. Who knows how the new Common Core test will be graded, and how those scoring categories may or may not influence teachers’ language when they speak about student ability? Second, it is also uncertain how or if Palmetto County will continue to use state test data to group students for instruction after the transition to the Common Core assessments in spring 2015.

**Implications**

**Implications for teacher education**

Very few of the teachers I observed demonstrated the ability to scaffold instruction for students in the lower track class, such that the text and task remained the same, *and* the expectation for quality of student work was similar (Lisa Cooper was the notable exception). In part, these findings imply that pre-service teachers need far more technical knowledge related to instructional scaffolding, as a way to help teachers bring students with a variety of readiness levels to “rigor for all” in its best and most hopeful sense. Beyond this technical knowledge, however, these findings highlight how important it is to cultivate a mutable view of ability in pre-service and practicing teachers—the disposition and belief that all of their students have unbridled potential and capabilities. This normative belief (Oakes et al., 2005) is perhaps harder to address but more critical to cultivate in pre-service teachers because teacher educators are working *against* the hierarchical signals about student ability sent from tracked school structures and testing policy when pre-service teachers enter many local districts.
Finally, teacher educators can continue to support pre-service, and practicing teachers, for that matter, in being change agents for curriculum equity. Teacher educators can encourage pre-service teachers, if they work in a tracked setting, to think carefully about how to design their lessons and units in a way where much of the curriculum *is* the same across tracks, but the level of support is different. Second, teacher educators can help pre-service teachers think about the kinds of structures and stratification that influence their work, and about how to push to change some of those structures.

**Implications for educational leaders**

When considering educational change, working with classroom teachers has the natural limitation that classroom teachers primarily effect classroom-level change. Educational leaders, however, are able to effect school- and district-level change. Indeed, many of the stratifying policies described in this dissertation were *district-level decisions*. The implications for teacher education described above apply to working with aspiring educational leaders as well. Although there have been calls throughout the twentieth century for educational leaders to serve as instructional leaders (Gamson & Hodge, 2013), certainly, such calls have intensified in the last decade. For educational leaders to serve as instructional leaders, a full knowledge of instructional scaffolding is critical to helping leaders support teachers in enacting “rigor for all.”

Beyond this, university faculty in educational leadership programs can support aspiring educational leaders in being change agents for curriculum equity. For example, leaders can be encouraged to use their increasingly important role as instructional leaders to emphasize to teachers how important it is to have common goals and assignments across different tracks, while providing a range of supports. In addition, leaders can and should be encouraged to supervise and
evaluate teachers in a way that considers curriculum equity, or the ways in which they open up the learning experiences for all of the students within and across classes.

In addition, these findings demonstrate that school structures matter to teachers’ views of students and their decision-making about curriculum and instruction; school and district leaders are the people who can change tracked organizational structures, not teachers. There are numerous examples of schools that offer a reduced or single-track curriculum, using advisory periods and other supports built into the school day. While I am not necessarily saying that every school must fully detrack, detracking sends a clear normative message about the nature of student ability. Regardless, helping school and district leaders reflect on how their own schools’ organization influences their students’ achievement and learning opportunities, and push to change some of those structures is a critical implication of these findings. Further, what would—what could—Common Core implementation have looked in Palmetto County like if the district had used this opportunity to look at structure and instruction? Palmetto County did not generally frame the Common Core as an equity-oriented reform, but what if it had not only framed the Common Core as a chance to ask text-dependent questions across tracks, but had looked carefully at the track structure itself?

Implications for research

These findings have a number of implications for research. The findings described in this dissertation highlight how mutually dependent many different educational policies are on each other. A single standards policy such as the Common Core does not operate in a vacuum, nor does it mean the same thing to different individuals and groups. The biggest lesson I take from these findings is how easily testing policy and tracked school organization can constrain the “rigor for all” rhetoric of the Common Core. This project looked at how testing and tracking
policies influenced the Common Core, but another key policy many states are implementing at the same time as the Common Core State Standards is a new system of teacher evaluation.

Forty-plus states and the District of Columbia are in the midst of a transition to the Common Core State Standards and assessments aligned with the Common Core. Compounding the uncertainty of this transition, forty-one states are also moving (or have moved) to teacher evaluation plans that incorporate, in part, test scores or other measurable evidence of student growth. Both policies—the Common Core and teacher evaluation plans—claim to serve the same twin goals of excellence and equity: ensuring a high-quality education for all students, yet their theories of action conflict. Whereas Common Core policy entrepreneurs believe the Common Core will improve the quality of teaching through more rigorous curriculum standards, assessments, and high-quality professional development, teacher evaluations aim to improve the quality of teachers by identifying those who are low performing. Both policies claim to produce more equitable educational opportunities and outcomes by ensuring that high expectations and high-quality teachers, respectively, are more evenly distributed. In addition to the new evaluations’ increased reliance on test scores, these new teacher evaluation policies ask educational leaders to use new observation rubrics to evaluate the quality of teachers’ instruction (commonly, the Framework for Teaching, from the work of Charlotte Danielson). Understanding how leaders and teachers make sense of these policies and use them, or not, as authentic levers for instructional improvement, represents one direction for future research.

In addition, my findings also speak to the question of who “owns” a curriculum reform, and who the most dominant voices are (and should be) in defining what the Common Core mean for instruction? Are the most prominent voices from The College Board and/or David Coleman? Are they teachers’ voices? Intermediary organizations played a large role in Palmetto County’s approach to Common Core implementation, but how can we measure the relative power
and influence of intermediary organizations such as the Aspen Institute and Students Achievement Partners on a larger scale?

Responding to these questions, a current research project analyzes all of the Common Core professional development resources on state department of education websites. On one level, the purpose of this project is to understand the extent to which different states are currently supporting teachers in Common Core implementation. Interviews with CCSS policy entrepreneurs revealed that one of the prime benefits of a common set of standards, in policy entrepreneurs' view, was that the quality of curriculum and professional development would increase as ideas and resources were shared across states (Kornhaber et al., 2014). This project engages with this aspect of policy entrepreneurs' theory of action for the CCSS by looking at the landscape of professional development resources offered to teachers—as well as who is providing these materials. For example, do states provide practical resources (e.g., lesson plans), theoretical resources (e.g., an explanation of the benefits and drawbacks of various tools for determining text complexity), or both? Are resources geared towards helping teachers with their classroom instruction or towards helping teachers communicate with other stakeholders about the Common Core? A second aim of this project is to surface the linkages between states and the various individuals and intermediary organizations providing Common Core resources. Using a social network analysis, I examine the density and centrality of the linkages between the teacher resources provided on state department of education websites and the organizations sponsoring those materials.

As described previously, my prior work suggests that “CCSS instruction” is interpreted in different ways by various interest groups (Hodge & Benko, 2014). For example, David Coleman, lead author of the English/Language Arts standards, has argued that students become better readers by experiencing mostly, if not exclusively, complex text, even if it is well above students' assessed reading level (Coleman, 2011, p. 13–14). In contrast, Lucy Calkins and her colleagues at
the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project argue that students become better readers by reading large amounts of text at or just above their assessed reading level (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012, p. 96). Which of these messages are endorsed at the state level, and how might teachers decide which voice, if either, should guide their instructional practice?

**Conclusion**

In one way, this dissertation investigates the implementation of a timely, national-level standards policy: the Common Core State Standards. In another way, however, this dissertation explores an enduring question that has emerged and reemerged as a point of concern since the growth of formal schooling in the United States: how can educational systems, schools, and teachers organize instruction to best meet students’ individual needs? This enduring tension, which I describe as the tension between standardization and differentiation, manifest itself in multiple ways in Palmetto County Public Schools. In PCPS, teachers and administrators tried to balance a common set of standards and a standardized curriculum, with a genuine desire to assess and meet students’ instructional needs, with a system of state testing and curricular tracking that ranked and sorted students into a number of curricular tracks and sent powerful signals about student ability. Recall that in PCPS, state tests were used to sort students into curricular tracks. Curricular tracking has certainly been one common solution over the twentieth century to the dilemma of how to best organize instruction to meet a diverse array of student needs. Often, curricular tracking (itself a form of system- or school-level “instructional differentiation”) has meant different curriculum, as well as different instruction. In Palmetto County, however, students experience a common curriculum, SpringBoard, despite being organized into a number of “levels” of English/Language Arts… but do students in Palmetto County experience a common curriculum?
The district recommended that the pacing of the curriculum be different and that teachers modify their instruction to meet their assessment of students’ needs. Teachers often took this one step further and modified aspects of the standardized curriculum across tracks as well, in ways that I suggest sometimes reduced cognitive demand. Even so, there was a basic level of consistency in curriculum across tracks—far more than the stereotypical tracking Jeannie Oakes (1985) describes from the 1970s. Yet, it seemed clear to me, from teachers’ language about students and the decisions they made about their curriculum and instruction, that the system of testing and tracking influenced the way that teachers thought about students’ potential and ability to engage in high-level work. Testing and tracking, in turn, influenced teachers’ decisions about how to modify curriculum and instruction across tracks in ways that I argue were often not equitable.

This leaves me in an awkward position as someone who claims to value teacher autonomy and professional decision-making: what happens when teachers’ decisions are not equitable? (And, of course, on what yardstick might we judge an “equitable” decision, and have I clearly laid out criteria for doing so? This is likely an area for improvement.) Further, a related, critical question that this dissertation raises—but does not fully answer—is, *what kind of differentiation is most equitable?* What is the role of culturally relevant instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), for example, and can curriculum and/or instruction be *different but still equitable?* I argued that Lisa Cooper, who scaffolded instruction to allow her class of English language learners to read and analyze difficult texts, provides one model of equitable ELA instruction across curricular tracks. However, is this the only way that instruction can be equitable?

Some might answer these questions by restricting teachers’ autonomy and adopting tightly scripted curricula. However, as this study demonstrates, a standardized curriculum doesn’t *prevent* teachers from making decisions to meet the needs of their students. Instead, I think we
should look at how teachers construe their students’ needs and their conception of student ability, and then consider how we might encourage teachers to hold a view of students as capable of cognitively demanding work. Part of this may very well be working to change structures and policies that influence teachers’ views of student ability—especially a system of curricular tracking that relies on state test scores to sort students.
References


Officers, Achieve, Council of the Great City Schools, National Association of State Boards of Education.


Appendix A

Teacher Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me a bit more about the path that got you to teaching here at X Middle School today?
2. Can you take me through a typical school day for you?
3. What is your X period class doing right now? Your Y period class?
4. How are decisions about books and assignments made for your ELA classes? What comes from you, and what comes from the department, district, etc.?
5. What is taking place to help you draw on the Common Core in your teaching? (Or, what kind of information has been getting out to you about the Common Core?)
6. How do you anticipate drawing on the same standards across the different classes you teach?
7. How would you describe the school community to a new member of the English department?
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Title of Project: How English/Language Arts Teachers Make Sense of the Common Core State Standards and Related Policies

Principal Investigator: Emily M. Hodge
emily.hodge@psu.edu
301 Rackley Building
Department of Education Policy Studies
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802
(804) 370-5890

Advisor: David A. Gamson
gamson@psu.edu
310D Rackley Building
Department of Education Policy Studies
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 865-2583

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to understand teachers' impressions of and experiences with the Common Core State Standards for English/Language Arts, as well as related policies (e.g., Common Core assessments, teacher evaluations). This study also looks at how teachers make decisions about curriculum and instruction in the context of a common set of standards.

2. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to participate in a general interview with me, in which I will ask you questions about your teaching experiences, and your experiences with the Common Core State Standards and related policies. I will also ask you about any changes you have made, or plan to make, to your curriculum and instruction because of these policies. If you allow me, I will audio-record our interview. After our interview, I may ask you if you would feel comfortable having me come to your school and sit in on your classes for 3-5 days to gain a better understanding of you and your school.

3. Duration/Time: The interview should take between thirty and forty minutes. Any classroom observations are limited in duration from three to five days.

4. Statement of Confidentiality: I will take a series of measures to ensure that your identity remains confidential. The data will be stored and secured on a password-protected computer. If you allow me to audio-record our interview, I will destroy the audio recording once I have transcribed it (within a six month period from the interview date), and only the transcription will remain in the password-protected file. Any paper documents that you provide will be stored in a locked drawer and accessible only to the researcher. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. Only I will have access to your identity, as well as access to the data.

5. Right to Ask Questions: Please contact Emily Hodge, Penn State University doctoral candidate, at (804) 370-5890 or emily.hodge@psu.edu with questions or concerns about this study.

6. Voluntary Participation: Your decision to participate in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any interview questions you do not want to answer. You do not have to allow me to audio-record our interview. You do not have to allow me sit in on your classes.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

_____________________________________________  ____________________
Participant Signature  Date

_____________________________________________  ____________________
Researcher Signature  Date
Appendix C

Sample Recruitment Scripts

Dear (principal),

My name is Emily Hodge, and I am a doctoral candidate at Penn State University. I am writing to ask your permission to contact your Reading and Language Arts teachers to invite them to participate in my dissertation study. My study (approval number RR1213-419) explores middle school Reading/Language Arts teachers' experiences with the Common Core State Standards. I would be asking teachers for one forty-minute interview, with a possibility of 1–2 weeks of classroom observation. Of course, their participation is completely voluntary. I have done a great deal of work with the Common Core and would be happy to share some of resources that I have found with teachers, or, if there's any other way that my expertise might be helpful for the school, I'd be happy to discuss those options. Would it be all right with you if I move forward with contacting your Reading/Language Arts teachers?

Very best wishes with open house today and getting ready for the upcoming school year!

With thanks,
Emily Hodge

Hi (teacher),

This is Emily Hodge from Penn State. I am a PhD student researching teachers' experiences with the Common Core in (district) for my dissertation. I believe that (principal) forwarded my email to you a few days ago, and I just wanted to follow up with you to see if you might have a half an hour sometime to share some of your teaching experiences with me.

I used to teach middle school Language Arts in Pittsburgh, and I am now researching the experiences of middle school Language Arts teachers in (district) with the Common Core and related policies like the new assessments and new evaluations. (My project has been approved at the district level, #RR1213-419.)

The ultimate goal of my research is to share teachers' voices with policymakers, who often make policies without considering teachers' perspectives. I would be honored if you would be willing to speak with me for about 30–40 minutes sometime about your teaching experiences, and how you have dealt with these new demands on your work. To be clear, anything you might say to me will be kept strictly anonymous.

If you would be willing to chat with me for about thirty minutes at some point, please let me know. I am in town for the next week with a flexible schedule. If there isn't a time in the next week when it would be convenient, I could also call you at a time that works for you.

Thanks so much!
Emily Hodge
## Appendix D

### Interview and Observation Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT-LEVEL DATA</th>
<th>Type of Data</th>
<th>Participants*</th>
<th>Role/Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Anna Carpenter</td>
<td>District Curriculum Supervisor for Middle School Language Arts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Rebecca Lawrence</td>
<td>Academic Writing Coach (works closely with schools targeted for improvement); district wide writing coach, works closely with Anna Carpenter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>All middle school Language Arts Subject Area Leaders, and Reading/Writing Coaches across the district.</td>
<td>Middle School Literacy Area Meeting (December). Led by Anna Carpenter, a full day meeting of Language Arts Subject Area Leaders, Reading/Writing Coaches. The purpose of this meeting was to hear about changes to the SpringBoard curriculum for the next school year, get information about the district-created midterm exam, and share lessons for preparing students for the state writing test.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL-LEVEL DATA</th>
<th>Type of Data</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Role/Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flagstaff Middle School</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Sarah Henderson</td>
<td>8th grade ELA teacher (honors, inclusion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flagstaff Middle School</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Sarah Henderson</td>
<td>Over a 2 day period: 8th grade honors (1 period/day), 8th grade inclusion (1 period/day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flagstaff Middle School</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Jim Forest</td>
<td>8th grade ELA and reading teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flagstaff Middle School</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Jim Forest</td>
<td>Over a 2 day period: 8th grade honors (2 periods/day), 8th grade adv. reading (2 periods/day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flagstaff Middle School</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Rachel Smith</td>
<td>7th and 8th grade reading teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeSoto Middle School</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Diane Walker</td>
<td>8th grade ELA teacher (honors, inclusion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeSoto Middle School</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Diane Walker</td>
<td>Over a 3 day period: 8th grade honors (3 periods/day), 8th grade inclusion (1 period/day)</td>
</tr>
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<td>DeSoto Middle School</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Jessica King</td>
<td>8th grade ELA teacher (honors, advanced)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DeSoto Middle School</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Jessica King</td>
<td>Over a 1 day period: 8th grade honors (2 periods)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeSoto Middle School</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Mary Ruiz</td>
<td>7th grade ELA teacher (honors, inclusion) former peer evaluator</td>
</tr>
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### Live Oak Middle School

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<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Marcia Johnson</td>
<td>8th grade ELA teacher (honors, inclusion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Deborah Wright</td>
<td>8th/6th grade ELA teacher (honors, advanced, inclusion) (also teaches 6th grade World Geography)</td>
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</table>

### MIXED-INCOME SCHOOLS

### Fielding Middle School

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<th>Role/Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>John Maxwell</td>
<td>8th grade ELA teacher (honors, advanced, inclusion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>John Maxwell</td>
<td>Over two full days:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8th grade honors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8th grade advanced (i.e., regular)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8th grade inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Chris Green</td>
<td>Special education ELA teacher (co-teaches with ELA teachers all day, including John Maxwell)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Chris Green</td>
<td>Observed co-teaching one class period with DM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Megan Bailey</td>
<td>7th grade ELA teacher (honors, advanced)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### County Line Middle School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Data</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Role/Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Diane Groves</td>
<td>8th grade ELA teacher (honors, advanced, inclusion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Diane Groves</td>
<td>Over 3 days:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Honors (3 periods/day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced (2 periods/day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Inclusion (1 period/day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Charlotte Stewart</td>
<td>8th grade ELA teacher (honors, advanced), 7th grade ESOL teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Charlotte Stewart</td>
<td>Over 3 days:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Honors (1 period/day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Regular (1 period/day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ESOL (1 period/day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Hannah Webb</td>
<td>7th and 8th grade reading teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(8th grade reading, 8th grade ESOL, 7/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Combined Reading/LA (double block); 8th grade ELA (advanced (regular)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Hannah Webb</td>
<td>Over 1 day:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8th grade ESOL (1 period)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7th/8th grade double block (2 periods)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Kelly Murray</td>
<td>Reading Coach; interviewed for about 4 hours in her office during the school day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Role/Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Line MS Reading Professional Learning Community Meeting Led by reading coach Kelly Murray, the purpose of this meeting was for all reading teachers in the building to share student data and student work.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Line MS ELA/ESOL Professional Learning Community Meeting Led by ELA subject area leader Diane Groves, the purpose of this meeting was to come up with suggestions for ways to meet the needs of English learners across the curriculum.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Monument Middle School**

| Interview | Lisa Cooper | 6th grade ELA teacher of honors, advanced, inclusion; 8th grade ESOL teacher; former writing coach. |
| Observation | Lisa Cooper | Observed 2 days: 6th grade honors (3 periods) 6th grade advanced (2 periods) 6th grade inclusion (1 period) 8th grade ESOL (1 period) |

| Interview | Cassandra Berry | 7th and 8th grade teacher of honors, advanced, inclusion |
| Observation | Cassandra Berry | Observed 1 day: honors advanced inclusion (1 period) |

| Interview | Peter Olson | Writing Resource Teacher Not directly observed; did co-teach a review game with Cassandra Berry the day I was observing her |

| Observation | ELA Team Meeting | Led by Peter Olson, the purpose of this meeting was to discuss students’ most recent writing benchmark test scores. |

**Harper Middle School**

<p>| Interview | Monica Duncan | Reading Coach |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Role Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scott Middle School</td>
<td>Amy Spencer</td>
<td>Dropout Prevention Specialist, Former Reading Coach (PhD in ELA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Middle School</td>
<td>Christina Greene</td>
<td>Writing Coach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All participants’ and schools’ names are pseudonyms.*
Appendix E

Initial Code Tree

1. Descriptive, individual-level codes
   1.1. Grade level taught
      1.1.1. 6th
      1.1.2. 7th
      1.1.3. 8th
   1.2. Subject taught
      1.2.1. ELA
      1.2.2. Reading
      1.2.3. ESL
   1.3. Role
      1.3.1. Classroom teacher
      1.3.2. Coach
         1.3.2.1. Reading
         1.3.2.2. Writing
      1.3.3. Other
         1.3.3.1. Special education inclusion teacher
         1.3.3.2. Dropout prevention specialist
         1.3.3.3. Administrator
   1.4. School Category
      1.4.1. High-income
      1.4.2. Mixed-income
      1.4.3. Low-income

2. Beliefs
   2.1. Teachers’ Language Related to Ability
      2.1.1. Ability as fixed and/or hierarchical
         2.1.1.1. “True” Honors
         2.1.1.2. Ability as high/low
         2.1.1.3. “Honors kids” and “regular kids”
         2.1.1.4. Sequential view of knowledge
         2.1.1.5. “Their level”
         2.1.1.6. Students as state test scores (numbers)
      2.1.2. Ability as mutable
         2.1.2.1. State test scores NOT personified
         2.1.2.2. Labels NOT personifying students
   2.2. Teachers’ beliefs about ELA
      2.2.1. Love of literature
      2.2.2. Relevance
   2.3. Teachers’ perceptions of other school environments
   2.4. Motivation – low SES vs. high SES (teacher perception)
   2.5. Lack of student motivation (teacher perception)

3. Environment
3.1. Influence of Testing
   3.1.1. Bubble Kids
   3.1.2. Test Pressure
      3.1.2.1. Test pressure – high achieving schools
   3.1.3. Test prep
   3.1.4. Students personified as state test scores
3.2. Teacher evaluation
   3.2.1. Teacher evaluation validating teachers’ current practice
3.3. District context
   3.3.1. Superintendent ahead of the game (in policy)
   3.3.2. Pace of (policy) change
3.4. Outside of school factors
   3.4.1. Parent involvement
4. Tracking (descriptions of)
   4.1. Informal tracking
   4.2. Students as leftovers
   4.3. Scheduling
   4.4. Parent choice – course placement
   4.5. Inclusion class
   4.6. State test scores and tracking

5. Common Core
   5.1. Common Core Policy Messages
      5.1.1. Author’s Craft
      5.1.2. Close reading
      5.1.3. Fewer standards
         5.1.3.1. Coverage vs. complexity
      5.1.4. Text Complexity
      5.1.5. Textual Evidence
         5.1.5.1. Evidence-based writing
         5.1.5.2. Response to text
         5.1.5.3. Text-dependent questions
            5.1.5.3.1. Confusion over text-dependent vs. higher-order questions
      5.1.6. Nonfiction
      5.1.7. Speaking and listening
      5.1.8. Higher-order questioning
      5.1.9. Instructional shifts
      5.1.10. CCSS as nothing new
         5.1.10.1. CCSS as a cycle or pendulum
         5.1.10.2. CCSS as actions or strategies
         5.1.10.3. CCSS as consistent with progressive teaching
            5.1.10.3.1. CCSS as supporting primary sources
      5.1.11. CCSS as requiring consistency in writing across content areas
      5.1.12. CCSS - Rigor
      5.1.13. CCSS and Equity
         5.1.13.1. CCSS as consistent education across states and districts
         5.1.13.2. College as a choice
         5.1.13.3. Writing – background knowledge
5.1.14. Interstate comparisons (consistency/measurement, not equity)
5.2. Common Core assessment
  5.2.1. State test vs. CCSS test
    5.2.1.1. Writing – background knowledge
  5.2.2. Unfair to assess CCSS for older students
5.3. CCSS resistance
5.4. CCSS trainings
  5.4.1. How CCSS build from year to year
  5.4.2. Text-dependent questions
  5.4.3. Text complexity
5.5. SpringBoard–CCSS links

6. Classroom-level Curriculum and Instruction
  6.1. SpringBoard curriculum
    6.1.1. Modifications to SpringBoard
    6.1.2. SpringBoard Consistency
    6.1.3. SpringBoard Police
    6.1.4. SpringBoard–Common Core
    6.1.5. SpringBoard–Equity
  6.2. LDCA curriculum – high expectations
  6.3. Classroom instruction
    6.3.1. Instruction – “regular” class
      6.3.1.1. Rational for instruction in “regular” class
    6.3.2. Instruction – “honors” class
    6.3.3. Instruction – ESL class
      6.3.3.1. Writing instruction
      6.3.3.2. Instruction as “Same show” across tracks
    6.3.4. Rationale for instruction-general
  6.4. Classroom management
  6.5. Differentiation
  6.6. Expectations across tracks
    6.6.1. Same
    6.6.2. Different
### Appendix F

**Taxonomy of Teachers’ Modifications to Curriculum and Instruction for the Lower Track Class**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Modifications</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Modifications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modifications to Texts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skip text</td>
<td>Cassandra Berry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>substitute text</td>
<td>Diane Groves, Diane Walker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. easier version of same text</td>
<td>Diane Groves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. different, easier text with same theme</td>
<td>Marcia Johnson, Diane Walker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modifications to Tasks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decrease task length</td>
<td>Diane Groves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Modifications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modifications to Instruction Around a Text</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more teacher-directed</td>
<td>John Maxwell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. teacher reads text to students</td>
<td>John Maxwell, Deborah Wright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. teacher models where to take notes</td>
<td>John Maxwell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. telling students what a text means</td>
<td>Diane Walker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use co-teacher to split into smaller groups</td>
<td>Sarah Henderson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ask comprehension questions before asking higher-order questions</td>
<td>Deborah Wright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supplement text with related texts</td>
<td>Lisa Cooper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modifications to Instruction Around a Task</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher checks individual student work frequently (e.g., after every paragraph)</td>
<td>Sarah Henderson, Diane Groves, John Maxwell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher uses graphic organizer for students to compose essay</td>
<td>Diane Groves, John Maxwell, Sarah Henderson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher specifies order for essay body paragraphs</td>
<td>Diane Groves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentional Differences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different Grading/Expectations</td>
<td>Marcia Johnson, Diane Groves, Sarah Henderson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking a Teacher-Centered Approach to Prevent Misbehavior</td>
<td>Sarah Henderson, Lisa Cooper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unintentional Differences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Atmosphere (Tense)</td>
<td>Diane Groves, Cassandra Berry, Hannah Webb, John Maxwell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* when compared to curriculum and instruction for higher track class
VITA

Emily M. Hodge

EDUCATION
2007  MA, English Language and Literature, University of Virginia.
2006  MT, Secondary Education (English 6–12), University of Virginia.
2006  BA, English Language and Literature, With Distinction, University of Virginia.

SELECTED AWARDS AND HONORS
2013  Penn State Phi Delta Kappa Kozak Award for Dissertation Expenses: $1,500.
2013  Penn State Dissertation Research Initiation Grant: $600.
2010  Penn State College of Education Dean’s Graduate Assistantship for Engaged Scholarship & Research in Education

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS


