Transforming Through Power: Teachers and the Negotiation of Authority in Schools

Madhu Narayanan

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

Recommended Citation

Narayanan, Madhu, "Transforming Through Power: Teachers and the Negotiation of Authority in Schools" (2019). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/3294
Transforming Through Power: Teachers and the Negotiation of Authority in Schools
by Madhu Narayanan
Transforming Through Power: Teachers and the Negotiation of Authority in Schools
by Madhu Narayanan

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

______________________________
Date
______________________________
Wendy Lutrell
Chair of Examining Committee

______________________________
Date
______________________________
Wendy Luttrell
Executive Officer

Supervising Committee:
Sherry Deckman
Anthony Picciano
Anna Stetsenko

City University of New York
ABSTRACT

*Transforming Through Power: Teachers and the Negotiation of Authority in Schools*

by Madhu Narayanan

Advisor: Wendy Luttrell

Schools are unique institutions where structural and cultural dynamics shape the actions of humans. Teachers work within structures of power to establish themselves as legitimate figures of authority worthy of the right to command respect. Such efforts are complicated by the multi-faceted and swirling relationships of power that exist everywhere in schools, defining and guiding individuals. In this study, I interview and observe the practice of seven secondary teachers working in New York City public schools. All in their third year of teaching, they were at an interesting time in their development, not novice teachers and not quite veteran. Using a grounded theory approach, I analyze and interpret their reflections on seeking to establish positive classroom cultures as well as trying to make an impact in their larger school communities.

My participants spoke of teaching as a process of constant negotiation; they imposed an order on their classrooms by controlling time, space, and resources, yet also modulated their efforts to meet the initiatives of students. When expectations were challenged, they showed a range of responses, sometimes cementing their moral legitimacy, at other times resorting to actions like yelling, threats, and consequences that might be interpreted as harsh. They navigated complex and shifting structures of power within their school, including ritualistic sites of evaluation, to carry out their own agendas. Their practice showed a dialect relationship between power and knowledge and used constructed ideas of learning to cement their authority. Sometimes they challenged the hierarchy of schools to create spaces of shared learning.

Emerging from their words and re-tellings is a picture of teaching as self-creation through confrontations with questions of power and authority. As teachers sought their own answers, they showcased a joint transformative growth, a “becoming,” through their work with students and the community.
THANK YOU

Dr. Wendy Luttrell – For your support from the beginning to the end of this project; making time to talk through everything and help me see the richness of metaphor and language, for helping me see my research subjects as rich creators of knowledge. And for making me read *Bitter Milk*.

Dr. Sherry Deckman – For consistently treating me like a scholar with something worthwhile to say, for modeling what excellent advising & teaching looks like, and for the continuously rigorous feedback.

Dr. Anthony Picciano – For introducing me to organizational theory, for making me commit to this work, and for stepping in at a moment’s notice.

Dr. Anna Stetsenko – For challenging cynicism and nihilism, expanding my (are they really mine alone?) conceptions of the mind & community, and restoring hope through activism.

Dr. Ofelia Garcia – For creating the space for Foucault & me to get to know one another.

Dr. Nick Michelli – For letting me argue with you and giving me the opportunity to publish and present meaningful work.

Dr. Kalyanaramakrishan Sivaramakrishnan – For supporting my first research project way back when, and helping lay the groundwork for this one.

Tamika Goburn – For helping me see classrooms as endlessly complex places.

Matt Willoughby – For being a true partner in education and a symbol of the power of true and sincere empathy.

Lydia Cordero – For being a fierce educator, and showing me what it means to believe in students.

Dr. Annie Ferrell – For supporting my goals, modeling what a scholar and educator can be, for accepting any and all takes on everything when we talk, and consistently living your values through your work; & for the timely spirit monkey.

Prof. Wyoshe Walker – For always being willing to talk education, and for the connection!

Dr. Patrick Comstock – For providing a place to give voice to these ideas.

Franklin, Lydia, Chanda, Sophia, Chiemeka, Paige, & Anita – For being open, real, and generous. You all introduced me to a spirit of growth and possibility, demonstrated incredible reflectivity, and shared with honesty the vivid and fascinating experience of becoming in the institutional world. I hope I’ve done justice to your stories.

To my family – For unending support…

& Sebastien Maruthi - May you find the power to create the future you desire.
LIST OF FIGURES:

FIGURE 1: Elements of Authority (Metz, 1978, p. 28) p. 11
FIGURE 2: Excerpt from transcript of interview with Chanda R. p. 55
FIGURE 3: Transcript excerpts coded as Trust p. 56
FIGURE 4: Whiteboard in Lydia's classroom with agenda and the day’s learning goals. p. 99
FIGURE 5: Section of whiteboard with the team roles for students p. 99
FIGURE 6: "Accountable Talk" placecards taped to each group’s table p. 100
FIGURE 7: Inspirational quotes in Sophia’s classroom p. 102
FIGURE 8: Artwork by Sophia’s students p. 102
FIGURE 9: Collages made by students in Sophia’s classroom p. 103
FIGURE 10: A plant on the windowsill in Paige's classroom p. 106
FIGURE 11: Paige's materials shelf p. 107
FIGURE 12: Paige’s Notebook organizing system p. 107
FIGURE 13: A sketch of characters by members of Paige's Anime Club p. 118
FIGURE 14: Chanda's Graphic Organizer for an essay p. 218
FIGURE 15: Posters of the Hochman Method in Chanda’s classroom p. 218
FIGURE 16: Worksheet from Chiemeka’s p. 225

LIST OF TABLES:

TABLE 1: Participant Information p. 61
TABLE 2: Participant Responses to modified “School and Staffing Survey” p. 209
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables &amp; Figures</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Power and Authority in Schools</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A different way to think about Power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Relationships of Authority: Legitimacy and Student Assent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Outline of the Dissertation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Teacher Authority and Power - A Literature Review</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Relationships of Power in School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Authority in Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ethnographic studies of authority in schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teacher Authority in Different Settings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Skills for developing an Authoritative Stance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Authority in Institutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Research Methodology</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Positionality and Performance – Pitfalls of the Study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Research Site &amp; Participants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Data Collection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Data Analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Participant Profiles</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Franklin Howard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Lydia Rosario</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Chanda Roy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sophia Elmassi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Chiemeka Mulder</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Paige Rhodes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Anita Basile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: “In it for me:” Ordering Classrooms in Support of Authority</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Controlling Space and Time in the Classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Relationships in Support of Order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 6: Laying down the Line – Challenges to Authority as a Pathway to Care

Flexible Rules in the Classroom.
Flexible Enforcement
Laying Down the Line: Authority as Strength
Discussion

Chapter 7: Negotiating Control within School Structures

Rules for Teachers
Grading
Being Evaluated
Discussion

Chapter 8: Knowledge and Authority in Classrooms

Knowledge & Authority
Student Agendas in the Classroom
Discussion

Chapter 9: Transformations: Power, Authority, Identity, and Becoming

Power, Authority, and Identity
Teaching as an act of “Becoming”

Appendices

References
“Issues of power are enacted in the classroom.” This phrase from Lisa Delpit (2006, p. 24) is an opening to a range of complex and challenging questions about what it means to be a teacher in modern public schools. The simple presence of power in the classroom is not so surprising; many teachers realize within a few days the need for assertiveness and some degree of control (Pace and Hemmings, 2007, p. 6). Rather, it’s a claim that power has a pervasive dominance, that every dimension of the classroom is shaped by certain larger structures and forces and translated through the personal enactment of a teacher. Delpit (2006) highlights that without adequate consideration teachers may be reproducing structural forces that further disempowerment and oppression. How much do teachers think about and understand their use of power? How do teachers rationalize and explain their own personal approach to their power? How do teachers interpret their positions within larger structures of power? And, most centrally, how do teachers change in their own identity and self-perception as they confront the idea that they are both agents and subjects of power relations?

As this last question suggests, these inquiries are less about the inner workings and mechanics of power, and more about how the experience of power has significant and lasting impacts on the fundamental beings of people. Public schools, where I have spent my career, are places where this topic is inescapable; these are questions about the modern experience of being and acting in institutions. I’m interested in the work of teachers because they exist at a unique place within the institutions of school, both upholders of various rules and structures within their classroom as they seek to intentionally order the learning of their students, but also subject to a litany of regulations and evaluations that control their work; teachers are nodes in a lattice of
power relations. My interest is borne of personal experience working in schools and wrestling with the uncomfortable feeling that the dynamics of power were not only flowing through me, I was also a magnifier of those very dynamics. It was a feeling of the weight of institutional pressure to do and be a certain way, and reproduce that effect on others; to take unique and vibrant individualities and mold them into a faceless and spiritless subjecthood ready for mass production and consumption in modern society. That general impression has stuck with me; it raised deep philosophical and existential concerns about a central question in sociology around the competing influences of structure and culture on the lives of humans. But it also raised questions of individuality and epistemology – our social relations and interactions with power shape how we view the world and come to believe what is real and valid. This dissertation has arisen from this base. It is an investigation of the perceptions and experiences of seven third year public schools teachers in New York City secondary schools as they confront and reflect on their experiences of power. Given the places I’ve worked, I have often operated under the frustrating belief that teachers were too stressed and beat down to care deeply about their work. Surprisingly, I found my participants to be far from thoughtless or powerless actors within a rigid and prescriptive bureaucratic structure; they uncovered deeply personal concerns and desires for carrying out projects of great importance to them. More surprisingly, they revealed themselves courageously entering a process of ontological transformation. Through their rich re-tellings and descriptions, I came to see how their very selves transformed through an interaction with power.

To help explore these broad questions, the related concept of authority is extremely useful. Power and authority share many similarities: they are social constructs, they are both theorized as relationships that can be negotiated, they have a certain value neutrality that can be molded towards oppression or liberation, and their presence can be both overt and hidden.
Though closely related, I will not be using the two terms interchangeably. I draw on Foucault’s concept of power as a web of relations existing between and amongst institutions, people, and discourses; this system of relationships is built on a range of disciplinary techniques that produce truth, knowledge, and subjectivity. I also use Sennett’s (1980) theorizing about authority as an effort to interpret structures of power. Furthermore, I will draw on several authors’ ideas about how these concepts are relevant to and can be studied in schools. These two concepts, power and authority, are helpful in challenging the false dichotomy of structure and individuality because they are grounded in the multi-directionality of relationships. They are also united in their relevance to teachers’ perceptions of the tensions and challenges that arise from their dual role both within institutional structures of education and as authority figures in the classroom. An unexpected consequence of this work has been a surfacing of the impact that power has on subjectivity. It was only through a close reading (and re-reading) of the stories of my participants that I came to appreciate how confronting power and authority reflexively and intimately shape an understanding of one’s identity, and indeed a personal transformation – a “becoming” – one that I explore in chapter 9.

I have my own experiences with power and authority. My memories of being a new teacher are still raw; like many others, it was a struggle to create a manageable classroom and contend with the scrutiny and pressure of my supervisors. Yet, these memories have also been re-shaped, redefined, and retroactively reinterpreted through over a decade and a half of work in schools as a teacher and an administrator. I began as an educator at a different time when accountability reforms were in their nascent stages, culturally responsive pedagogy was almost unheard of in my circles, and the management of the schools looked very different. This study is an attempt to tap into the experience of being a teacher in the here and now, a close look at seven
individuals new to the profession but not quite novice, freshly perceiving and feeling and *experiencing* the relationships of power and authority. It is an effort to appreciate how our individualities within institutional settings can find routes through which to express and create worlds that follow from our ideals.

*A Different Way to Think About Power*

Waller’s (1932) influential *Sociology of Education* offered a bleak depiction of schools as places defined by conflict as teachers fough to seize power. Since his time, scholars have theorized a complex idea of power and in this section I will explore how a more nuanced appreciation for power can help build a deeper understand what happens in schools.

Manke (1997) offered challenges to Waller’s simplistic conception of power on three fronts. First, power is not an object or thing that can be possessed; it is not something that the teacher ‘has’ or can ‘seize.’ Second, in schools the teacher is not the only one who controls, directs, or has a relation to power. And finally, power can be shared between multiple parties. Power is popularly perceived as a type of territory that strong parties can occupy or possess absolutely, but Manke’s challenges suggest the need for different metaphors for our understanding (pp. 1-8). Foucault (1980) argued that power is not singularly possessed but is in fact everywhere, fluid, circulating between individuals and operating through a chain of connections:

> Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (p. 98)
Considering teachers, when Delpit writes that “issues of power are enacted in classrooms” (2006, p. 24) she is highlighting this circulation of power – the influence of textbook publishers, state regulations, curriculum designers, administrators. She shows how teacher decisions about language and judgment translate power to students (pp. 24-36), but students also send ripples of influence back up the chain through teachers (Manke, 1997, p. 8). I draw heavily on Foucault’s theorizing of power/knowledge, as well as Phillip Jackson’s metaphor of the hidden curriculum to build a framework for understanding power as a pervasive and subtle concept that, in its production of knowledge and individuality, becomes incredibly relevant for interpreting the school environment.

Foucault’s conceptualization are frightening in the way they challenge typical ideas about power, but his analysis offers insights into how populations are managed and how ideas of knowledge and selfhood are produced. Foucault (2000) uses Machiavelli’s *The Prince* to exemplify traditional notions of power, one where to govern a city-state required preoccupations with holding territory, with nothing more complicated that the maintenance of power. As economies became more interrelated and complex and with booming European populations in the industrial period, a demand arose for the efficient management of large settlements of people. This shift from a reflexive and reinforcing view of power - where the “end of sovereignty is the exercise of sovereignty,” - to a concern primarily with demographics, with population, is what Foucault termed governmentality, a way to understand how power is everywhere in institutions throughout society (p. 217). In this setting, power can be found in the institutions and procedures of government, in the production of knowledge, and in disciplinary practices (pp. 217-220).
Teaching, in its modern institutional form, can be located at the nexus of these three governmental functions of power. Foucault suggests that studying the minute and daily actions at the edges of institutions can reveal the inner workings of power. “We must eschew the model of Leviathan in the study of power,” Foucault (1995) writes in his famous *Discipline and Power*, referring to the state, and instead “base our analysis of power on the study of the techniques and tactics of domination,” (p. 102). Foucault directs our attention to the margins, the edges, where power is not easily visible in its brute force, looking at “those points where [power] becomes capillary,” (p. 96). Power has fled the overt displays of blunt and violent domination used by sovereign kings and morphed into a subtle, banal, rational process that co-opts our actions as we build a controlled self-image of who we are. Classrooms are spaces where such rational processes abound.

Using what he called a ‘genealogy’ of modern psychiatry and corrective institutions, Foucault marks the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a time when new techniques of discipline - surveillance, the timetable, classification - arose as a means to control bodies. This coincided with a vast production of knowledge, an array of data points and normalities that together created new conceptions about who is a proper subject and what are real ‘truths’ (Foucault, 1995; 1982). The connections to education are clear. Teachers are responsible for many of these functions of power - monitoring, classifying, and rationalizing a range of decisions based on the knowledge they create about a student. Small interactions, clinical observations, and larger essentializing judgments (“he’s a good kid”) are examples of how teachers participate in the state’s faceless normalizing project of power.

Foucault’s theory of power shifts our epistemology; what we know and how we understand the world is shaped by power. For this reason he preferred the term
‘power/knowledge’ to indicate that power doesn’t just shape actions, it actively produces different types of truth. Only those types of knowledge that are legitimated by a sanctioned discourse - for example scientific discourse - have sufficient power behind them to justify the label of truth (1980, p. 84). One way that discourses can create truth is through a range of ‘dividing practices,’ actions like classification, judgments, and evaluations, that can create categories of normality opposed against their opposites; for example, the mad and the sane, criminals and the innocent, the sick and the healthy (1982, p. 777).

This created a framework of normalization, largely a ‘scientific’ project housed in disciplines like psychology and criminology where populations were endlessly categorized and classified, human activity was arranged in tables of acceptable and unacceptable modes of being. The resulting tabulation of humanity was “a technique of power and a procedure of knowledge,” (1995, p. 149) and it produced sanctioned ideas of what was considered “normal” while forcing people to self-monitor their actions and remain within the bounds of normality. Through constant surveillance and evaluation, individuals in institutional settings are measured against some produced average, and those that appear lacking can be adorned with a range of deviant labels.

Judgment, ideally scientific judgment, was at the heart of acts of normalization and institutions like hospitals, asylums, and prisons figure prominently in Foucault’s work because these are places where evaluation is routinized and implemented by well-trained and legitimate professionals. Schools are such an institution; writing in 1968 before Foucault’s groundbreaking work, Jackson’s (1990) book *Life in Classrooms* drew a direct line between schools and prisons and mental hospitals. Jackson described practices like the exams, hallway monitoring, and student records, as part of a landscape of near constant evaluation and a defining feature of
schools. Evaluations not only were directed from the teacher, but students were also constantly being evaluated in public and private ways by their peers, their parents, school specialists, and of course, ultimately, they carried out their own self-monitoring (pp. 19-22). Jackson termed this undercurrent of lessons that students are taught the ‘hidden curriculum.’ Parallel to the content and skills determined by the state agencies and education experts, students are schooled in how to be citizens socialized to modern norms. Students learn how to take orders from strangers, to shape their behaviors to the evaluations of others, and to match their personality to the dominant culture. This is a productive force; students aren’t so much prevented from actions as produced as good citizens:

Although it offends our sensibilities to admit it, no doubt that bright-eyed little girl who stands trembling before the principal on graduation day arrived there at least in part because she typed her weekly themes neatly and handed her homework in on time, (p. 34).

Gender differences are vital to the veiled enforcement of power. Schools in many ways can be described as patriarchal spaces: a rigid hierarchy, the constant threat of discipline, and an authoritarian structure. Walkerdine (1990) argues that women, making up the majority of the teaching force, soften the edges of this harsh institution with their loving and nurturing personalities. They effectively hide their surveillance function behind their gender and transform “the harsh power of the authoritarian father” into the “soft benevolence of the bourgeois mother,” (p. 19). Even when engaging in forms of conflict within schools, Biklen (1995) contends women must mask their resistance in gendered codes of gossip, deference, and politeness, out of fear of appearing unprofessional (pp. 152-170). Fine (1988) identified dominant, yet covert, discourses that prevailed in schools and, for example, labeled girls who have sex as victims of violence, or as sexual activity as a barometer of individual morality.
Collectively, these scholars argue we reexamine the norms and values that guide behavior and decisions in schools. That these are 'unwitting' is evidence of a hidden curriculum.

In reviewing power as conceptualized by these authors, a tension emerges in the productive nature of power and its influence on identity. Following Foucault, the idea of subjecthood is deeply shaped by the dimensions of power that operate in institutions – normalizing forces, truth production, objective judgment, even gendered dynamics – all combine to produce a certain selfhood. Lave (1996) offers another perspective on identity formation that foregrounds the social dimension of learning. Learning is a result of participation in social activities that shape how subjects view themselves. This doesn’t necessarily refute the Foucauldian idea of a mysterious collection of power acting to create individuals, but it restores the potential of individual and collective agency to create identities in the process of learning.

*Relationships of Authority: Legitimacy and Student Assent*

I now turn to the related but equally complex concept of authority. In Sennett’s (1980) portrait of the concept of authority, he points out that, like power, authority is not a commodity but rather a bond between unequal parties that serves to stabilize society. People grant authority to others for a variety of reasons, including fear but also out of a desire to be recognized or protected. Thus, authority is a relationship. People try to locate themselves within structures of power defined by gradients of strength among different parties.

Relationships of authority between two people of unequal strengths can be intimate – for example, a parent and child or a manager and their subordinate. When scaled up to the size of bureaucracies, corporations, and armies, these relationships also grow into what Sennett calls architectures of power. Converting this power structure into clear, visible, legible images of
strength is the work of authority, “an attempt to interpret the conditions of power,” (Sennett, 1980, p. 19). Seeking authority at such large and impersonal scales is an idealistic endeavor; authority is thus “an act of imagination” (p. 197) as people search for security in faceless institutional settings. For this reason, there is no outright domination involved in relationships of authority; these are relationships of voluntary compliance. And yet, repression is veiled and coded into the structure, “domination is a necessary disease the social organism suffers. It is built into the chain of command,” (p. 188).

Sennett’s outline of the concept of authority is predated by the writing of Max Weber (1991), who theorized three sources of legitimacy for authority. The first was traditional authority conferred through rituals, customs, and established beliefs; medieval monarchies and tribal leadership are examples of this. A second type is charismatic, an authority not bound by conventions or official rules and grounded in the ability to inspire and incite passions - a revolutionary leader might be an example. Finally, bureaucratic or legal authority is that granted by rules, laws, and policies based in established structures and rational values; examples are an elected official or a managerial position in a hierarchy. A subset of this third type is professional authority from an expertise in a narrow range of activities (Weber, 1991, pp. 246-248). Teachers with strong subject or pedagogical knowledge command professional authority.

This typology proposes three different ways that authority can be seen as legitimate and worthy of allegiance. For this reasons, violence is not necessary to maintain order. A criminal who is tried and convicted is imprisoned because of the force of the legal authority conferred on the judicial system. Rather than direct force, shame is a new mechanism for exacting obedience, be it public humiliation or shame of the body (Sennett, 1980, p. 95). Sennett argues that modern relationships of authority, legitimimized largely by bureaucratic organizations, have adopted the
elements of paternalistic arrangements as corporations and institutions have overtaken the power of the family (pp. 58-62).

In *Classroom Corridors*, M.H. Metz’s (1978) investigation of authority in two high schools, she extends previous theory by offering ideas on the question of why people willingly grant authority to others. She identifies a weakness in Weber’s work in that it doesn’t pay adequate attention to those who she terms *subordinates*. Schools are organizations that rely on the ability of certain actors to command obedience from others. What defines this relationship as one of authority is that the superordinates have a mutually agreed upon right to command others, and subordinates have a duty to comply. This right is granted by virtue of the hierarchical position of the superordinate, for example, the role of the teacher, which represents some higher moral purpose. Thus, Metz defines authority as a triangular arrangement between the right of superordinate to command obedience, the duty of a subordinate to comply, and both in support of a moral order (see figure 1). In schools, this moral order is represented by educational goals (pp. 26-32).

The absence of this ‘moral authority’ can breed resistance and a rejection, on moral grounds, of teachers’ (and others) right to demand compliance. Bourgois’ (2003) study *In Search of Respect* chronicles an example of drug dealers in 1980s New York who have rejected the existing economic order. Having been shut out of legitimate economic opportunities and labeled as deviant by the institutions (like schools) around them, they valiantly fight for respect in other domains (p. 115). Males in particular feel dislocated when seeking entry-level work in
the white-collar towers of midtown Manhattan, a place where office culture is a “direct contradiction to street culture’s definitions of personal dignity.” Small acts of defiance in such settings are rejections of corporate America’s moral order and represent “triumph of free will and resistance,” (p. 115). Bourgois writes that such acts of noncompliance are part of a history of resistance ranging from simple foot dragging in the workplace to petty theft, and the small and myriad ways that students push back against school norms is part of a larger collection of the ‘weapons of the weak’ that confront structures that do not invest their subordinates in the dominant moral order.

Student-teacher relationships are unlikely to be positive when cultural differences are not successfully bridged. By culture, I mean to include a range of factors that define norms grounded in race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Teachers struggle to establish their moral authority when there are different ideas of what constitute appropriate behavior (Pace & Hemmings, 2007, p. 18). For example, differences in modes of communication or expectations from authority figures can lead to misunderstandings and struggles in the classroom (Kleinfeld, 1975; Bondy, Ross, Hambracher, & Acosta, 2013). Furthermore, when students view teachers as a representative of an oppressive mainstream culture, they are not likely to grant legitimacy to their teacher and can engage in stiff resistance (Wolcott, 1987). From another perspective, imposition of knowledge and modes of learning associated with the dominant culture can be oppressive and deny students access to their inherited ways of beings (Valenzuela, 1999).

The literature on culturally responsive teaching collectively argue that welcoming and valuing student cultures is an vital part of building trust and preventing alienation (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Gay 2010). To align with teachers’ conscious and unconscious normative ideas about the academic potential of students, those who can’t conform or meet the standards of
school are portrayed as deficient and deserving of the consequences that result (Villegas and Lucas, 2002, pp. 33-36). Small moments of judgment enacted by teachers when trying to evaluate a student behavior can have lasting implications on who or what is deemed appropriate (Nolan, 2011, pp. 53-65; Ferguson, 2000, pp. 51-67; Delpit, 2006, pp. 35-37). These moments of bias can also breed resentment in students who translate punitive or negative judgments into a racial rationale for contesting the legitimacy of teachers’ authority. Students can reject what they view as an illegitimate white culture through shedding the burdens of “acting white” and disengaging with academic work (Ogbu, 2004), or using pejorative labels like “school boys” (Ferguson, 2000). This perspective has been complicated by the work of Prudence Carter (2007), showing how social capital intertwines with power and authority to legitimize or marginalize parents of different classes (Lareau, 2003, 199).

Thus far I have discussed how relations of authority operate within a certain moral order; how teachers and students negotiate this order can deeply influence the learning culture of a classroom. Whether cast as student assent, moral authority, or a commitment to a shared moral order, the mutual negotiations between teacher and student are all examples of Sennett’s concept of authority as a relationship. The nature of this relationship has profound implications for the identities of both teachers and students. As this study takes teachers as its subject, it is worth following Lave (1996) to consider how teachers themselves are learners and the act of teaching is a process of becoming. Lave argues that we undertake a “reconsideration of learning as a social, collective, rather than individual, psychological phenomenon,” (p. 149). Teachers, and their perceptions of classroom authority relationships, is a product of shared experiences and deeply influences both how students view themselves as learners and teachers view themselves.
as teachers. That is, in the act of teaching (or anything), “crafting identities in practice becomes the fundamental project subjects engage in,” (p. 157).

Following Lave, I am interested in how negotiations of authority within structures of power fundamentally shape teachers and their identities. As a foundational idea for this study, considering authority provides a way to investigate how teachers interpret the complex spaces between themselves and students where trust is fostered or undermined through the speech, actions, and activities of a classroom, all shaped by the larger power relations. By connecting legitimacy, student motivation, trust, and the moral order, authority offers an insight into the institutional and existential phenomena that influence how teachers ultimately view themselves and the impact they will have on children.

Outline of the Dissertation

This first chapter served to share my motivation for undertaking this study as well as provide a conceptual understanding of power and authority. Chapter two is a review of the literature on power and authority in educational – and a few non-educational – settings. In chapter three I share my research methodology that guided the collection and analysis of data for this study. I introduce my participants in chapter four and share some context about their backgrounds and the schools in which they work. Chapter five is an exploration of how teachers work to create order in their classrooms to support the establishment of strong relationships of authority. Chapter six carries this further to investigate how teachers approach instances when this order is breached, and use these as opportunities to strengthen ties of authority. In chapter seven I will explore how teachers navigate the workings of power and authority up through the hierarchies of the school to make their own impact on their communities. With chapter eight I
will look at the close relationship between power and knowledge in the classroom, and how knowledge both legitimates a teacher’s authority while also provides the grounds for new types of shared knowledge to be created. I close in chapter nine by arguing that the collective confrontations of teachers with questions of power and authority help build a multifaceted sense of identity, and through the work of teaching with a community, there is a process of self-creation, of becoming.
In my conceptual framework, I proposed an approach to exploring relationships of power within institutions by investigating the concept of authority. Authority, writes Sennett (1980), is “an attempt to interpret the conditions of power,” to transform the real processes of control and influence into images of strength (p. 19). Several scholars have sought to understand how teachers establish their authority or how their authority is challenged. The literature makes clear that authority relations, whether strengthened and legitimate, negotiated, or undermined and resisted, are intimately connected to shifting relationships of power.

First, I’m going to describe three ethnographic studies of school sites that show how systems and structures of power act through disciplinary techniques like surveillance, truth production, to enact subtle hidden curricula. Then, I will turn to the concept of authority in schools. I will look at arguments about historical changes in the nature of school authority, and share several studies from school sites that investigate how teacher authority is established or challenged, including discussing moral authority and resistance. Next, I will describe a few studies from outside the K-12 context to demonstrate how negotiations of authority relationships have positive possibilities. After describing educational research on the skills that are believed to be necessary for developing an authoritative stance, I’ll close with a mention of how this study builds on the existing literature on power and authority in schools.

*Relationships of Power in School*

Schools are institutions founded on a number of relationships of power. Most fundamentally, and often overlooked, is the necessarily coercive nature of an institution that
functionally holds students largely against their will. The resulting friction from involuntary participation of students was the driving force behind Waller’s (1932) classic study of a school site. His book is filled with moments of confrontation between willful teachers and frustrated and creative students; teachers not up to the fight were quickly dispatched. Since then, understandings of power have become more nuanced, in part due to Foucault’s theoretical ideas of a subtle, administrative power that produces self-regulating subjects.

Ferguson’s (2000) book *Bad Boys*, the result of a lengthy and deeply involved ethnographic study of an elementary school, showed how students - especially boys - are subjected to a state of constant monitoring and evaluation. Learning specialists give diagnostics of student academic ability, movement in hallways are tracked by school staff, counselors classify parts of their caseload as “troubled students,” (p. 43), and playground staff keep a watchful eye on the black boys who creep along the periphery (p. 217). Routine classroom examinations, psychological screening, and systemized school rewards build a system of classification. Even the local shopkeepers are watching black boys when they congregate; the surveillance is non-stop and ubiquitous. This surveillance helps measure students against a norm. The school actively provides a constant discourse of normalized behavior against which many black boys are contrasted. Students who make the ‘right’ choices are celebrated, transforming those who don’t meet this ideal into non-learners. Hegemonic norms in domains such as language, speech, social interactions, and response to adults, are upheld and reproduced in the school. There is a correct way to respond when spoken to, a correct mode of speech with which to interact with adults. The official curriculum sets a standard that allows the creation of abnormality through a division of general and special education programs.
For marginalized students, failure to adhere to this way of being has severe consequences. Rather than participating in the exercise of middle class values, they are sent different messages about their preferred place in society. For example, the remedial education classes that Ferguson observed are spiritless places, “tedious, interminable, and deadening of any imaginable impulses or insight,” (p. 166). For students thus marginalized, the lessons they learn are subtle but unmistakable:

Being in the right place at the right time and the physical acts of going about the tasks called for when you are there is the fundamental knowledge about work impressed on the children. The kids recognize this. They have registered that the timetable, the form, not the content of the curriculum, is the significant element in their education, (Ferguson, 2000, p. 166)

In her book Police in the Hallways, Nolan (2011) shows schools to be defined by constant surveillance, monitoring, and punishment. Rather than being spaces of community and learning, schools are a governed by a “culture of control.” Seeking to explain the culture in an inner city high school, she argues that the “systematic use of order-maintenance-style policing," (p. 53) encourages numerous classifications of student behavior, and because they are measured against norms of middle-class (and white) behaviors, minor infractions are often inflated in seriousness and can quickly transform a simple teacher-student encounter into a police matter. A manifestation of this is the near-ubiquitous surveillance apparatus that has been built into schools. There is both the physical apparatus - the scanners, observation stations, patrols, and security cameras and desks of monitors - but also the data systems, academic tracking, and collections of student files. Such a surveillance infrastructure creates a key site where “penal policing” can occur and relies on subjective interpretations of behavior. When constantly on the lookout for misbehaviors, misbehaviors are what one tends to see. Primed to instantly and narrowly detect what is abnormal or deviant rather than approach students as complete human beings worthy of dialogue, an instinctual punitive response is developed.
Those tasked with identifying “problems” rely on “considerable subjectivity in determining whether a behavior was actually a violation,” (pp. 64-65). This all comes to a head in the most frequent category of infraction leading to arrest at her study site: disorderly conduct. Nolan offers countless examples of the mundane student actions that become re-classified as “disorderly conduct:” swearing, refusing to take a hat off, not standing properly in the metal detector line, being in the hallway during class time. All of these actions are quickly escalated when the students fail to immediately obey instructions (pp. 53-65).

These examples show how Waller’s simplistic conception of power can be challenged on three fronts (Manke, 1997). First, power is not an object or thing that can be possessed. It is not something that the teacher ‘has’ or can ‘seize.’ Second, in schools the teacher is not the only one who controls, directs, or has a relation to power. And finally, power can be shared between multiple parties (pp. 1-8). Manke’s study of a school site show how power is shared or contested in decisions like the knowledge to be learned, the physical arrangement of the classroom, and in following or disobeying class norms. Often, the circulation or existence of power is veiled, hidden behind discourses of science, politeness, and normalcy (Delpit, 2006). In schools, language is a key site for masking power within a range of ‘politeness’ formulas and indirect speech acts. Manke (1997) describes how polite requests, offering a selection of sanctioned choices, praising desired behaviors, and stating general principles of citizenship are all ways teachers convey commands without explicitly revealing their power. Consider these examples:

- "Sally, would you like to sit down?"
- "Sally, your desk is messy" instead of clean up your desk
- "Please do him the favor of listening"
- "I have two children who need to work in their listening"
- Carlton, why are you sitting in front of him?
There are advantages for teachers adopting such strategies. They can show respect to their students, avoid escalating conflict, protect student self-esteem, and lessen the likelihood of humiliation. These techniques ease the constraints of inequity and the sting of stark power differences. However, students are likely to recognize that behind the expressions of politeness lie the full weight of the “institutionalized authority of teachers,” (pp. 75-90).

Manke, Ferguson, and Nolan all describe the operation of power in schools, and also how a hidden curriculum of citizenship operates along norms of white and middle class values. A hidden curriculum for gender and heteronormative behavior has also been theorized, a range of unspoken and tacitly accepted ways of being that normalize stereotypical male and female roles as well as straight identities and relationships (Lorber, 1994). In Pascoe’s (2007) study of a high school, it is argued that in modern schools a hegemonic system of gender is not only alive and well but also dishearteningly oppressive. The central argument is that “school itself [is] an organizer of sexual practices, identities, and meanings;” the ethnographic research shows high school males becoming forces of oppression, ravenous social bodies egged on by their peers to out-do each other.

Most importantly, a picture emerges of schools as institutions not where such masculinity is merely allowed but rather actively encouraged by a “compulsive heterosexuality” defined by the rituals, subtle encouragements, and tacit support of structures of power structure. For example, multiple instances are described where males use expressions of gendered dominance to assert their identity. Shows of masculinity are less about gender and sexuality than about outright dominance, like in the discourse of the ‘fag,’ where boys use the word is less as a move to stigmatize homosexuality (though obviously that happens) and more as a disciplining mechanism among males to regulate behavior. Another example concerns the tacit support and
collusion of school administrators and teachers. A shop teacher mildly participates in the discourse of the fag, a teacher implicitly supports heteronormativity by prominently displaying a wall of pictures showing male-female couples. Lastly, school rituals like prom and jocular assemblies are used to uphold a hidden curriculum or gender.

An interesting dimension of power is how students, and people in general, are attracted to shows of strength. Several studies include examples of teachers effectively being firm and even yelling at their students (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Howard, 2001, p. 139; Ware, 2006, p. 452). A further explanation for this can be found in Ballenger’s (1992) reflection on her work with pre-K Haitian children. Rather than interpret that harsh statements as denials of a student’s worth, children see these statements as symbols of strength and security, legible images of authority that are worthy of their allegiance. She offers the example of her angry admonition to one of her students to not run across a parking lot. She then “Why do I want you to wait for me?” expecting her student to answer with the linear rationale that running in a parking lot is dangerous. Instead, the student responded “Because you like us,” (1992, p. 205). Ballenger’s reflects on how “reprimands can be confirming, can strengthen relationships, and can, in a sense, define relationships for the child,” (2000, p. 206). Noblit (1993) connects power with caring in his profile one teacher’s practice and argues that shows of strength can be symbols of care. Displays of power, then, can paradoxically inspire allegiance when combined with trusting relationships. This relates to an interesting theoretical idea about authority as a conversion of the elements of power: we are both attracted and repulsed by shows of strength (Sennett, 1980). I now turn to reviewing literature in education about this topic.
Authority in Education

Weber’s (1991) writing on authority laid a foundation for the concept, particularly his typology of the nature of authority and the idea that authority is a relationship of power that has been legitimized. It represents the ability to control the actions of others without having to rely on force. Research in education has combined this original idea with Durkheim’s writing on school teachers as moral agents (Pace, 2003; Arum, Pitt, Thompson, & Way, 2009) to offer a more complex and dynamic view of authority. Different approaches to teacher authority have been connected to student race (Delpit, 2006), to socioeconomic status (Anyon, 1980), or to ‘academic ability’ (Oakes, 2011). Studies from schools, educational history, and directly with various types of teachers have positioned authority as a relationship of constant negotiation, a shared commitment by individuals in a hierarchy to support a certain moral order (Hemmings, 2005; Amit and Fried, 2005; Metz, 1978; Pace 2003). This body of literature is essentially seeking to understand why students seemingly voluntarily comply with the order and directions of educators.

Studies have looked at how the balance of authority in classrooms can be shared and negotiated between students and teachers. Rewards, incentives, grades, and punishments comprise a battery of techniques teachers might use to barter for and uphold their authority (Pace & Hemmings, 2007). Schultz and Oyler (2006) describe a social action project where the teacher cedes significant control of the classroom, including class goals and curricular design, to the students. Amit and Fried (2005) describe a vision of math classrooms where teachers can step back and let the actual content, the mathematics, emerge as a source of authority in relationship with students to create an “anthropogegic” culture with a shared commitment to building community. Yet, this process of negotiation is not always mutually agreed upon by all
parties, and students can in fact seize class authority as a form of resistance. Waller’s (1932) example of a study hall devolving into chaos is one example of this.

Some authors have argued that historical developments in American education have changed the nature of authority relationships in schools from all-encompassing parental relationship to a more bureaucratic and formalized one (Pace, 2003). One argument has been that legal challenges to school policies have furthered student rights, including landmark civil rights cases, and chipped away at the ability of teachers to exert control in the school, and thus undermined their moral authority. Societal changes like the rise of single-parent homes and divorced families affected the family structures. The resulting changes transformed the student-school relationship; instead of parents being partners with schools they became advocates for their children, and the potentially adversarial stance that left teachers wary and their “institutional standing” diminished (Arum et al, 2009). Kafka (2009) offers a different reason for an increased bureaucratization of teacher authority: educator fear of unruly classrooms. She uses the historical setting of Los Angeles in the 1950s and 1960s to contend that teachers sought to both increase their control of classrooms by formalizing rules and decrease their responsibility for misbehavior by shifting disciplinary decisions to school administrators. Teacher unions, fearing a lack of leverage in classroom management, agitated for clear guidelines that distanced teachers from having to make judgments and justified strong disciplinary responses through a code of conduct.

Lortie’s (1977) exploration of the ‘ethos’ of teaching offers a more robust and complicated explanation for the changing nature of teacher authority. In previous decades, compulsory attendance and order could be maintained through outright physical force; but as social mores changed in the industrial era, teachers were asked to maintain their authority
through persuasion and other leadership qualities (p. 4). Persuasion alone is a limited tool however, as parents and teachers (and presumably students) have different goals for education; parents are concerned with the holistic and long-term development of their students while teachers are most concerned about short-term scholastic performance and order. Furthermore, the constant siege of societal demands placed on the institution support feelings of inferiority amongst teachers combined with fears about their competency, low achievement, and the overall status of the profession.

Yet, in his comprehensive surveying Lortie found the question of establishing authority central to teacher concerns. When asked explicitly about why they teach and what they value about teaching, he found teachers responses fell into three broad categories - valuing the moral purpose of education, promoting a connection with school, learning, or a specific subject, and finally, the inclusive goal of reaching all students. Interestingly, when discussing moral preparation he found teachers actually emphasizing compliance and obedience. That is, teachers talk about morals but what they really mean is order and control. The types of teachers that were viewed favorably demonstrated either instructional efficacy or a strong relational capacity. Wishy-washy personalities, cheap pandering, and outright authoritarianism, were soundly dismissed: “[Teachers] are ready to consider a teacher outstanding if he gets observable results and exercises firm leadership. Since these outcomes are labeled ‘outstanding,’ the inference is that most teaching falls short of those standards (Lortie, 1977, p. 121).” Lortie argues that one reason for respecting concrete firmness is because the profession is largely defined by uncertainty. The source of uncertainty are many: lack of regular recognition, not knowing if they are the cause of a certain accomplishment, the timing of success. Furthermore, teachers work in a state of “dual captivity,” working students who are “involuntary clients” while they themselves
have not choice over who they serve. Yet simple arithmetic can show that teachers can only give limited attention to any one student in a class, most interactions are “group” interactions (pp. 137-138). The most interesting challenge is the navigation of building strong relationships with students while also creating productive students. Indeed, to the extent that the job is about results and teachers want to have achievement, they must maintain an orderly classroom, but finding this “delicate balance of teacher leadership” risks jeopardizing relationships with students and the ephemeral psychic rewards of teaching (pp. 151-155). Perhaps that’s why Lortie found so many teachers expressing shame and regret about their own outbursts in their classrooms. They know they must get production from students, but they also know that yelling and losing control can damage positive relationships. Navigating this tensions between control and learning combines with all the other weird and unique truths about teaching to create a large sense of doubt, something that Lortie drily notes: “…doubts about one’s effectiveness can spoil the pleasures of teaching,” (p. 142).

I’d like to close this section by discussing Metz’s (1978) classic study of authority in education, *Classrooms and Corridors*. This study was designed as an investigation into a fundamental paradox of schools – that they exist for the noble end of education, yet they rely on strict order to ensure that this end is met. Drawing on organizational analysis, she approached teachers and students as superordinates and subordinates (and sometimes both) within a hierarchy serving a moral purpose. Metz conducted extensive interviews and observations at two school sites and asked teachers directly about their approach to education and authority and she found that teachers approached the goal of supporting the moral order in two distinct ways. In what she termed the “incorporative” approach, some teachers firmly seized the reins of the classroom and expected students to fall into line. Their purpose, loosely aligned with students,
was to convey as much information as possible to the students. The second approach she termed “developmental,” whereby teachers were primarily concerned with developing the interests and character of the students. She also found a small subset of teachers who couldn’t sustain the work of investing students in a shared moral order, whatever the approach, and ultimately abdicated their authority altogether by essentially keeping time in their jobs. In all these cases, Metz points out how the stated purpose of education quickly gives way to a less acknowledged but equally important and pressing goal: the maintenance of order.

An interesting part of the study is how Metz sees the role of students in accepting the authority of their teachers. She describes the powerful effects of race and class in determining the types of authority they accept and the ways they resist authority. For example, students in low tracked classes would generally accept a teacher’s legitimacy; but they challenged this legitimacy when teachers showed an inability to manage classes and they did so through physical and behavioral disruptions. Conversely, high track students also challenged teacher authority but usually on the grounds of professional incompetence. Their challenges took the form of outright questioning of a teacher’s ability or knowledge. Metz found these types of student resistance complicated by faculty culture that didn’t fully understand or acknowledge the racial dynamics in a recently desegregated and diverse school.

*Ethnographic studies of authority in schools*

Several studies have studied authority through ethnographic methods in actual school sites. Hemmings (2005) examined two different school contexts with an ethnographic methodology to see how the moral order of school was maintained through three routes: curriculum, pedagogy, and character. She found that, despite variations in the sites, a key driver of the strength of the moral order (or lack thereof) was a variable teacher commitment combined
with the pressures of students and community on authority relations. In largely black and poor
Central HS, she finds that teachers express care for students but actually engage in a
“disenabling” care by holding low standards, expecting little out of students, permitting students
to not work hard. As she writes:

Although teachers demonstrated their commitment to communitarian care for students as
disadvantaged youth, they acted in the classroom as if they did not care about students as
capable learners. With some notable exceptions, teachers as they related to students in
their classes greatly compromised their positions as authorities who are morally obligated
to offer worthwhile curricula, use proper pedagogy, and cultivate good character. In other
words, they did not go far enough to establish themselves as professional authorities who
foster the intellectual and moral development of their students. (p. 141).

Instead, teachers adopted “defensive tactics” to prevent chaos from ensuing or further
alienating students, or to make school ‘as pleasant as possible. Students were of course clued in
and many felt shortchanged. At a wealthier school site a similar dereliction of duty occurred
where teachers tilted towards upholding an ethos of individuality and away from the egalitarian
ideals of public school; savvy students brazenly manipulated teachers into upholding this moral
order by bartering compliance for grades. Both schools offered examples of a paradox of moral
order where teachers expressed one desire and their actions showed another.

Pace (2003) used classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with a teacher
and her students to describe authority relations in an advanced track high school English
classroom. In this class, the teacher struggled to compel student participation while also
maintaining a positive rapport. As the course wore on, the teacher increasingly drew from
bureaucratic modes of power - grades, rules, policies - an array of tactics that conversely
undermined student investment in her class. Pace argues bureaucratic authority, governed by
rules and incentives and the latent possibility of punishment, is essentially an authoritative
relationship that draws on power, whereas other types of authority draw legitimacy from
relationships and charisma. While exerting power may garner superficial compliance, it can also
backfire by inspiring half-hearted participation and low investment. That is, an over-reliance on power can set the stage for the types of collusion and deal-making around grades and behavior that others have written about (Sizer, 1992; Haberman & Post, 1998).

Kitzmiller (2013) investigated how different teachers attempted to control their classroom in a yearlong study of a high school in the wake of a violent incident. She distinguishes between teachers who rely on power – in the Weberian sense of outright coercion and administrative force – and authority. In both cases, however, she describes teachers as being largely unsuccessful; but what is most interesting is her classification of the different types of failure. She finds some teachers fail by trying to use power – abdicated power, autocratic power, and relinquished power. Using power without legitimization – that is, authority – created a gulf between student and teachers that was filled by resistance. Other teachers sought legitimacy through what she terms thwarted authority, partitioned authority, and goal-oriented authority. The first two ultimately failed because the teachers couldn’t sustain their efforts at establishing a firm legitimacy over time or outside the classroom. The third example, a teacher who built a goal-oriented community, found success student motivation was largely extrinsic and not shared by all. Kitzmiller offers one success story of a teacher who adeptly shares authority in the classroom, a mode she terms apprenticed authority. She describes a learning community where students are empowered to uphold class norms, where incentives modify behaviors in ways small and large, and where authority is shared with students in a way that builds trust.

In another interesting study, Winograd (2005) used an ‘auto-ethnographic’ method to explore the fluidity of power and authority in his own teaching practice in an elementary classroom. He argues that negotiating authority is a necessity in classes because students and teachers have different interests, and because power is distributed differently between students
and teachers. Regarding the second point, he notes how his students actually have considerable authority and wield it in many different ways; most brazenly when exercised collectively. Winograd differentiates “open” and “closed” negotiations, the former where both parties work together to a mutual goal and engage in compromise, and the latter a situation where neither party can successfully reason with another nor is there promise of give and take. In a very interesting contribution, Winograd uses Hargreaves’ ideas of pseudo-concord to describe three types of results from this process of negotiation: consensus, hegemony, and the most feared counterhegemony. Winograd adds a fourth, the power struggle, and then gives great illustrative examples from his own self-reflections. He finds that teachers must accept the reality and necessity of negotiating authority through building strong relationships. However, larger pressures on teachers that cut funding, impose new restrictions, and most glaringly raise class size, make meeting individual needs difficult and challenging. Wills (2005) similarly argues that the increasing pressure from accountability reforms and testing have damaged teacher-student relationships of authority by decreasing the time available for building trust.

Where students resist or challenge teacher legitimacy, the idea of moral authority has helped frame their actions. Moral authority, built on any of the three types of legitimacy outlined by Weber, is difficult to establish when cultural differences are significant. By culture, I mean to include a range of factors that define norms grounded in race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Teachers struggle to establish their moral authority when there are different ideas of what constitute appropriate behavior (Pace & Hemmings, 2007, p. 18). For example, differences in modes of communication or expectations from authority figures can lead to misunderstandings and struggles in the classroom (Kleinfeld, 1975; Bondy et al, 2013). Furthermore, when students
view teachers as a representative of an oppressive mainstream culture, they are not likely to grant legitimacy to their teacher and can engage in stiff resistance (Wolcott, 1987).

Nolan (2011) describes how teachers who are locked into certain roles or cultural outlooks are to some extent trapped within racial and institutional “discourses of control” that shape their view of what is appropriate behavior and who is justified in being punished. Adults turn to a set of scripts or explanatory devices to justify the highly regulated atmosphere in which they operate and the consequences that follow, and these phrases combine to create an ideology of control. Comments like “better 5 days (suspension) now than 5 years later,” and “he got what he deserved,” indicate a discursive effort to make sense of both the behaviors of students and the punishment that educators are enforcing. It is a form of rationalization. It is also the mechanism by which educator's moral authority is undermined. This is a central point of Nolan's work drawing on the work of John Devine, who has argued that teachers have lost the capacity for moral guidance by being “undermined by legal authoritarianism,” (pp. 115-116). Stuck in “my way or the highway” type thinking, teachers and educators lose the flex that comes with a culturally responsive approach. Time and again in her book, Nolan describes incidents that start small and via minor acts of defiance are turned into points of data in the criminal justice system; once located there, the range of responses becomes pre-determined.

Indeed, a certain moral authority can be bred by teachers who are willing to move out of the bureaucratic legitimizing framework and leverage shared cultural traits with students or a willingness to negotiate. Nolan (2011) also describes educators in a low-income minority school who are reluctant to rely on the official school rules to influence their students. Many of these teachers explain that they are “from the neighborhood” or share a cultural background with their students. They express a willingness not to let students get stuck in the jaws of the penal system.
What most characterizes such educators is not a single set of practices or actions; rather, it is a willingness to draw on a range of actions and match them appropriately, and with subtlety, to the specifics of a student or a situation. There are moments for having a private conversation, others of getting tough, sometimes a slight raised eyebrow in the hallway to communicate a messages of recognition and expectation (2011, pp. 103-107).

Nolan is building off the work of Erving Goffman, who argued that institutions like asylums can strip individuals of their autonomy; in such contexts, acts of defiance are emphatic assertions of identity. Theorizing resistance as an assertion of identity owes a debt to Paul Willis’ (1981) ethnographic account of working class high school boys and working class laborers. These students, in their resistance, recast themselves as ‘lads’, in contrast to the conformist ‘ear’oles (a derisive attack on students who are mere ‘earholes’). He describes students whose refusal to participate in school is a rejection of what they determine to be an unattractive teaching paradigm; the rewards for participating don’t hold much attraction, and their worldview is supported by a Marxist interpretation of the labor market for high school graduates in Britain of the seventies and eighties. Against this backdrop, resistance is a way to establish a form of collective selfhood, defined against others through acts of sexual and racial domination, an “attempt to weave a tapestry of interest and diversion through the dry institutional text,” (p. 52).

Hemmings (2002) complicates this explanation by suggesting that explaining youth resistance as a direct reaction to alienating structures or even teacher indifference is simplistic; she argues instead that youth seek to create a variety of discourses to support cultural expressions of identity and self-hood. In a post-structural analysis of school hallway culture, she found that youth were more using resistance as a form of identity creation; instead they navigated several
cultural adaptations to find an identity. That is, students who are reluctant to grant their teachers the right to provide order and security may be less concerned about following some moral imperatives and more about developing personal agency through a variety of discourses of power, and hostility.

*Teacher Authority in Different Settings*

Questions of authority in education have been explored in settings other than K-12 schools and they offer some interesting insights about voluntary participation in education, the often unspoken norms of classroom behaviors, and the reasons students are willing to follow a teacher’s directions.

College-level instructors have experimented to various degrees in modifying authority relationships in their own classrooms. Brubaker (2015) used a ‘self-study’ method to document and reflect on his experiment with student-led grading; he refused the power vested in the grading process and instead invited his students in a teacher-education course to create their own criteria for success. He underwent a major reconsideration of this idealistic endeavor when there was a breach of his established norms for self-grading. He documents his journey through a six step reflective process that left him questioning his right to the authority of grading and even his right to make decisions to subvert expected grading norms. Brubaker identifies three main challenges in response to an incident where his student, Franklin, didn’t engage in the self-grading process. First, he realized that while his values about authority caused him to “seek legitimacy through consensual acceptance,” some students draw legitimacy from rule and order maintenance. For Franklin, the failure to establish clear guidelines appeared as an abdication of responsibility. Furthermore, rules are a part of game from which this student felt alienated, and his nominal compliance is a way of getting by. The second challenge is “constructing
knowledge through continual questioning,” a process that carries the danger of further undermining teacher legitimacy by risking the appearance of incompetence. When doing so, the power embedded in knowledge creation is shifted; meanwhile, Franklin dodges and shirks this responsibility in his own show of power. Finally, Brubaker wanted to respond to students’ expressed interests, drawing heavily on the philosophy of Dewey, but needed to confront the possibility that an expression of individual interest is a fraught endeavor for some.

In another study reflecting on instructional practice with college students, MacGillivray (1997) sought to explore how her efforts to implement critical pedagogy sometimes resulted in reinforcing systems of power she wished to challenge. She examines how some of her students, when transgressing these hidden norms, can quickly fall out of favor and don’t receive the benefits that the teacher’s authority can bestow. One example is of a student who MacGillivray initially describes poorly because of public in-class displays of emotion. Through reflecting on her practice she identifies how even her progressive class design silently reinforced norms of private and “academic” feedback. She locates the origin of her biases in her own familial interactions growing up (the “order at all costs” mentality), and gender ideas and institutional models baked into her ‘pedagogical unconscious.’

Perumal’s (2009) study of various college-level educators also makes clear how students can resist efforts to relinquish authority. One reason she identifies is when the teacher steps back, students must take on different roles that they are not used to playing the classroom and that demand more from them. The benefits of engaging in democratic pedagogy comes at the cost of higher student expectations. Furthermore, there is a resilience to the authority of teachers; grading still exists, class discussions still default to a teacher hierarchy, and knowledge that is produced is always filtered through the teacher. When encountering these dynamics, the
power that a teacher employs becomes apparent. Perumal, thus, concludes by saying efforts to erase or deny power are futile. Instead, teachers “should embrace power and use it more knowingly, by being conscious of its effects in terms of interpersonal relations and the discourses produced through pedagogy,” (p. 397).

In a different educational setting, the dynamics of teacher authority can become quite shifted. Delamont (2006) conducted a participatory study of teacher authority in adult capoeira classes in Britain. Given that authority is be tied up with race and class, these classes flip the markers of power that exist in traditional school settings; rather than middle class and whiteness (and to a certain extent, maleness), black males are immediately conferred a level of respect by virtue of their African-ness connected with something authentic in the practice of capoeira. Their life stories of poverty and markers as descendants of slaves confer a further measure of authenticity that legitimates their authority. Unlike K-12 schools, these capoeira classes are voluntary. However, in both settings there is always exists a choice of whether to grant authority to a teacher. As one capoeira instructor exhorted his pupils: “The master does not choose his students,” (p. 169).

Skills for developing an Authoritative Stance

Several studies of authority discuss work with prospective new teacher. This strand of literature is important because the ability to connect with students, invest them in a shared moral order, and establish one’s self as a legitimate upholder of that order, is among the most difficult and complex aspects of teaching. New teachers, and the teaching force in general, is largely white and female (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014), and the resulting cultural difference grounded in bias and years of structural disadvantages adds an extra barrier to establishing trusting relations of authority.
Elliot and Stemler (2008) explicitly take on the question of training new teachers in developing a command of authority. Classroom management is a challenge inherent to the profession, and the changing nature of teacher authority over the last century has increased the need for teachers to draw on what Weber would term charismatic authority, and what the authors’ term interpersonal skills. They claim that teacher education programs have neglected training for classroom management, and when it is taught the focus is on visible teacher moves rather than the cultivation of tacit knowledge through direct experience. Teacher educators and scholars have largely left classroom management by the wayside, however there have been many attempts to teach it. These often describe concrete actions, which are important but suffer from the shortcoming of only defining the visible, actionable, tangible teacher moves when in fact much of teacher authority is developed through tacit knowledge; that is, knowledge developed through (a) direct experience, (b) through procedural actions, and (c) in a way highly reliant upon one's personal goals. They identify such intangibilities as ‘with-it-ness,’ ‘overlapping,’ (the ability to handle multiple inputs at once), and ‘non-verbal behavior’ as important skills and give examples of each. The reality is that skilled teachers are largely successful because of the acts they prevent, their ability to anticipate issues, and their demonstration of a calmness that communicates “I am in control.” Consider non-verbal behavior, which they break into five components (space, body, face, visual behavior, and voice). Taking 'voice' as an example, its use is subtle and can be either a remedy or a provoker of behavior:

For the skilled teacher, the voice is a powerful tool that is used to maximize student engagement and response. For the novice, it is often a window that can betray their emotions and uncertainties. …what some, even experienced teachers, fail to grasp is that, in challenging situations, a lowered voice, but one signaling a strength of intent and purpose, carries a far greater air of authority. (Elliott & Stemler, 2008, p. 86)

Teachers need to understand that their authority rests not in traditional or bureaucratic, but in a general presentation. Authority is “conveyed to students by an overall demonstration of
expertise that consists of subject knowledge, pedagogical ability, and skill in managing complex interpersonal dynamics," (p. 86). The description of “interpersonal skills” is similar to a list of traits that Haberman and Post (1998) identified as essential for new recruits into teaching. Their list includes several attributes that legitimate a teacher’s authority, including subject knowledge, an experience with institutions of poverty, and a level of confidence in violent environments.

Given the importance of cultural connections in establishing legitimacy, I’d like to close by including a brief description of the literature on culturally responsive pedagogy. This literature doesn’t explicitly address authority; yes the mindsets that are associated with culturally responsive pedagogy includes a belief that all students are capable of learning, that their backgrounds are to be recognized and valued, and that as educators the responsibility is to communicate a combination of respect and high expectations (Gay, 2010). Everything else - a belief in a school’s neutrality and meritocracy, a failure to recognize power differentials, blindness to dynamics and race and class - are examples of ‘dysconsciousness,’ (Villegas and Lucas, 2002, pp. 33-36). White teachers, lacking cultural connections, tend to rely on their institutional authority or turn to their expertise to leverage a professional authority. One consequence of this is found in Deckman’s (2017) study of new teacher reflections, where white teachers often downplayed racial differences while teachers of color confronted race more openly. In Weber’s typology, teachers who rely solely on their legal or bureaucratic authority will breed resentment and resistance in those who refuse to see the institutional structure as legitimate.

Paradoxically, white teachers who aim to soften their institutional authority and make connections with students on the level of friendship can see their efforts backfire. Such friendly overtures and softened requests (for example, the phrase cited above, “Is this where the scissors belong?”) hide the teacher’s power; they are surprised when the students don’t respond with the
behaviors they expected and can become frustrated by their perception of a student’s inability to behave. Delpit (2006) explains this dynamic as follows:

Black children expect an authority figure to act with authority. When the teacher instead acts as a ‘chum’, the message sent is that this adult has no authority, and the children react accordingly. One reason that is so, is that black people often view issues of power and authority differently than people from mainstream middle-class backgrounds. (2006, p. 35).

Thus, it is not their words that matter but rather the unsaid expression of control. For black teachers, their authority comes from their words and actions - they have authority because they are authoritative. Delpit is arguing that white teachers’ attempts at indirectness may be intended to convey care and concern, but instead they fail to inspire respect.

**Authority in Institutions**

As can be seen there is a rich literature exploring questions of power and authority in schools. These studies have examined how power is enacted, how authority is established, and the effects of both on the lives of students. And, there has been added a more prescriptive body of research that suggests the competencies a teacher *should* have to be a successful authority figure. Authority, then, is an important and fruitful concept for helping to understand power and the work of teachers. Yet, the educational literature has recently given way to other ways of approaching the issues of legitimacy in schools, including explorations of caring (Noddings, 2002), culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Ware, 2006), and the learning sciences (Hammond & Jackson, 2015; Dweck, 2008; Seligman, 2011). My contention is that authority is still highly relevant because it captures many of these other approaches and allows us to position them within structures of power. Authority as a concept offers a way to understand why humans at times give their allegiance to others, and why they might resist. In schools, where marginalization and disengagement are rampant, this remains a critical question.
As mentioned earlier, my interest in authority is borne from a curiosity about what happens to people as they experience the effects of institutions in our present times. Institutions, through the bureaucratic organizations that they give rise to, are systems of organizing power. In other contexts, researchers have studied how human actions are shaped by formal and informal expressions of power and culture, often with negative effects (Beckert, 2010; Evans, 2004; Portes, 2012). Institutions like schools are buoyed by a collection of symbolic and ritualistic myths that supplement the workings of power to establish legitimate means of leadership (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This has had a great impact on how the work of teachers is controlled and influenced, as well as how they exert their own influence back up through the channels of power, as Ingersoll (2003) explored in his book *Who Controls teachers’ Work?*

My study builds off the prior literature on authority and adds to it by shifting the focus from the examination of what authority is or how it is manifested in schools, to investigating perceptions of authority, especially in the context of structures of power. That is, I am interested in how teachers experience the many facets of establishing and navigating relationships of authority in the unique institution of schools, including when those relationships are challenged. Put yet another way, this dissertation is not so much a study of authority, but rather how teachers are changed by confronting authority.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate teacher perceptions of classroom relationships of authority. Authority is theorized here as a socially constructed relationship shaped by teacher efforts to establish legitimacy and student decisions to withhold or grant compliance, all bounded by structures of power within schools. This study, then, is guided by the following research questions:

- How do teacher descriptions of instructional practice reveal perceptions about the negotiation of authority in classrooms? For example, how can reflections on their work reveal efforts to build trust or draw on different sources of authority in establishing legitimacy?

- How do teachers understand their students’ decisions to grant or with-hold assent to participate in shared learning activities? What do teacher reflections on their practice suggest about the way they negotiate of authority in their classrooms?

- In what ways do teacher reflections demonstrate a (perhaps varied) commitment to creating a shared moral order with students? That is, how do teachers intentionally describe or unintentionally reveal efforts to co-create knowledge, purpose and community with their students?

- How are larger structures and relations of power – for example, disciplinary techniques of examination and surveillance, hidden curricula of normalcy and gender and race, bureaucratic hierarchy – apparent in teacher reflections about their work?

The design of this study is deeply informed by the epistemological perspective of Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 35-39). Their work, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, challenges the pervasive ‘positivist’ value system guiding traditional research and instead promotes a form of inquiry that rests on a fundamentally different axiomatic system. They describe five values that are contrasted with traditional research values. First is a belief in multiple and constructed realities rather than a singular reality that exists outside of individuals. The second value is both the
inquirer and the object of inquiry are inseparable; both interact and influence one another. Next is a belief in the context dependency of any inquiry, that is, results are not generalizable and are instead shaped by the specifics of the site of research. Fourth is a rejection of linear causality in favor of a view resting on multiple and simultaneous causality such that cause and effect are impossible to distinguish. Lastly, inquiry is inherently value-dependent and shaped by the decisions and beliefs of the inquirer.

As I write about my methodology in this chapter, I wanted to open with an epistemological stance. There is a great deal of subjectivity in this study; it is a work of interpretation. What gives it value and meaning is an intentional foregrounding of the words of my participants. While throughout I appear frequently as a mediator and interpreter, my primary goal is to put the words and perspectives of my participants alongside my research questions. Forming a philosophical foundation for this approach is the belief knowledge is situated and constructed through practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). My participants generated rich and valuable knowledge through their work, and I sought to approach central concepts such as authority and power not as causal forces or even educational goals but rather explanatory and constructed concepts that provide a guide for my own interpretative project. Below, I will also describe my own potential for influence as a researcher on the knowledge that is jointly created; the epistemology that is ‘created’ is a shared and negotiated result of the interaction between researcher and subject (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Studies of social life have multiplied the possibilities of what it means for something to be true; “truth” can viewed through a prism of objectivity, morality, or experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 14-16). Knowledge, then, is multifaceted and contingent on the process of determining what counts as knowledge. In education and especially in research about teaching, a
‘formal knowledge’ has been traditionally considered the skills and propositions that lead to successful teaching (with definitions of ‘success’ obviously up for debate). By shifting the question from “What is known about teaching?” to “What does the teacher know?” assumptions about what is valid and important can change dramatically (Fenstermacher, 1994). Writing about a range of ethnographic and sociological work, Rosaldo (1993) has argued for the foregrounding of subjectivity in social analysis. We must set aside the myth of objective research, with the stated aim of a search for objective knowledge; this approach grounded in Weber’s ideal of “passionate detachment” masks normative frames and delegitimizes other varied forms of knowing. Instead, there are many and varied forms of local knowledge that can help position us as ‘social critics’: “Rather than work downwards from abstract principles, social critics work outward from in-depth knowledge of a specific form of life,” (p. 195).

**Positionality and Performance – Pitfalls of the Study**

My own experiences as an educator have informed my interest in power. As a former teacher, assistant principal, and principal in the New York City Department of Education, I’ve both struggled with creating orderly environments and supporting others to do so. Now, as a teacher educator one of my main concerns is building confidence in teachers to “control” their classes without becoming authoritarian, and a large part of my interest is the strange sensation of being considered by my graduate students an expert of sorts in this practice. Over a decade of stories, memories, frustrations, and moments of elation are etched into my psyche. General impressions persist, like that of school as a battleground between teachers and administrators, or chaos being a lurking threat in the hallways. Walking into a classroom presents a different challenge as evaluative and coaching filters unsuspectingly take over my vision and perceptions;
I see lessons almost immediately in the four point gradation with the language of the Department’s chosen Danielson Rubric (Danielson, 2007) appearing in my ears without my asking. Without asking for it, my mind completes the sentence “you should consider doing…”

Beyond detailing strategies to deal with abstract concerns about validity, Maxwell (2005, p. 107) recommends considering specific validity threats to a project that might emerge from a researcher’s bias or influence of a researcher on the study site. If bias stems in part from one’s identity, then I certainly carry several identity traits that can place me in a certain interpretive position. No doubt the characteristics that are at first most interesting to others are those of race and gender and class. I’m male, a child of immigrants, ‘straight,’ and raised comfortably middle class. I take any resulting biases seriously because they are reminders that I don’t share the lived experience or embodied knowledge of highly relevant realities that inform my research domain - poverty, systemic racial discrimination, marginalization at an institutional level, and involuntary participation in crumbling social structures like schools.

Now as a researcher, this presents real issues in seeing schools and classrooms as complex cultural fields with multiple valid projects in the construction of meaning and purpose. Given the epistemological foundation I outlined above, there is a potential for moments of significance in the classroom to be immediately categorized as unproductive, unimportant, or deviant, and this in turn can impact how I ask my participants to interpret such moments. One example from my research will illustrate this; I was waiting to enter the classroom of Chiemeka Mulder, one of my participants. In the hallway, as students began lining up, one student named Chris was walking back and forth yelling “Shut up!” in a falsetto. No one seemed to be paying him any attention, but as he entered the room with the class he continued and I started keeping a tally of how many times he would say. My count got to double digits and I noticed myself
judging Chris as insubordinate and Chiemeka as negligent in not addressing the behavior. In my debrief interview, I asked him about it using a tone, almost accusatory, that could easily have been found in an evaluative conference between teacher and principal. After Chiemeka told me that Chris sometimes calls out, I said “You don’t address it, though” – a statement, not a question. As he paused to understand what I meant, I continued with my hard data, saying “He was calling out, I counted. Over ten times in a falsetto.” There are many ways to interpret this series of happenings from the classroom, including perhaps Chris as an outlier who is allowed some leeway for some reason or Chiemeka as recognizing in Chris some private need for expression. However, in this moment I didn’t allow space as an interviewer for these potential fields of understanding to emerge; a pre-set framework was imposed.

There were several times in the course of this study like this where, listening back on my recordings, I cringe at some of the phrasings and assumptions in my questions. It even persisted into my writing and data analysis. In Chapter 8 I explore the links between knowledge and power in teaching and I argue that teachers use their positions to define some knowledge as legitimate and others as less so. From a constructivist perspective, the meanings we make as unique individuals with specific contexts are all valid though often not aligned with “official” designations; however I had to catch myself (or have my advisor catch me!) unwittingly drifting into categorizing things like spontaneous applause or boisterous affirmations as negative or challenging moments. Towards the end of my study my interview techniques were less judgmental and allowed for teachers to present their own impressions; in the classroom of another one of my participants, Anita Basile, there had been an interactive note being passed back and forth between several students that had little to do with the formal class assignment. In my debrief interview with her, I can be heard catching myself from asking “Why didn’t you take
the note?” – which she had noticed - and instead leading with the much more open ended “What did you think about them having that note?” Anita then opened up with a fascinating explanation of her philosophical stance on building trust with students, respecting their privacy, and also investing them in her classwork (which I will describe in Chapter 8).

Another interesting challenge that I did not anticipate in undertaking this study was an element of performance in the responses of my interviewees. There were several moments where I was unsure if a participant was exaggerating, embellishing their stories, or telling me interesting anecdotes for my benefit. Complicating this further was the fact that I had been a teacher educator for many of them, someone who had observed their practice before and graded their assignments. Thus, there was a potential that the things that they shared with me were designed to make a favorable impression. One example of this was when Franklin Howard, a middle school science teacher, shared with me a dramatic re-telling of his actions when students were louder than he liked. He described a moment like this as his “button,” a type of switch that changed his behavior:

…my go to is I like to go to the locker and slam the lockers as hard as I can, and what I do in my head, I want to let them know that I’m a man, you’re children, and see how hard I smack this locker, and the sound, I look for the startle, they all pop up like “druuh,” total silence, and that’s my button.

Franklin narrated, complete with the sounds of the locker, the striking image of students being startled, the metaphor of a “button” to indicate him literally changing modes in response to his students, and him drawing a stark contrast between his authority as a man and subordinate position of his students as children. I will have more to say about this later, but I mention it here because in the moment Franklin shared this, I remember questioning myself if this re-enactment with its undertones of a forceful command of the classroom was played up for my benefit. Does this really happen? Does he want me to think that he is a strong presence in the classroom?
Obviously, I don’t have an answer to these questions, but what remains - and what is most relevant for this study in a study of teacher meaning making - is that in our interviews Franklin had begun to create an image of himself as one would resort to bold gestures in the classroom. Similar questions arose for me in our focus group, where six teachers engaged in a lively discussion about topics like lesson planning, formal evaluations, and how they handle challenging students. At one point, as the group was discussing the assignment of emergency substitute coverages – a topic I’ll raise in Chapter 7 – Sophia explained how she brashly rejected these assignments. When someone incredulously asked her “You can turn them down?” Sophia responded saying “Yeah! Hell yeah! Don’t give me three sciences to teach, don’t schedule meetings for every single free period…What are they going to do? Fire me? I dare them to.” Her response amongst fellow teachers shows her willingness to take on a stance of defiance; but I also wondered if this was her real take on being given administrative assignments or if her approach softened in her school setting.

Throughout this work, there will appear several moments where it is unclear how (though certainly not if) my judgment and positionality affected the responses of my participants. In general, they were candid, thoughtful, and highly reflective, displaying great intelligence and depth. I worked to give them as much judgement-free space to show their thinking. Given the degrees to which participants were managing my (and their co-participants’) impressions, I sought to draw from a variety of data sources in building my interpretation of their insights into the negotiation of authority.
Research Site & Participants

To investigate my research questions, I worked with a selection of teachers over the period of several weeks to create a full and contextualized portrait of teacher beliefs and perceptions around authority, power, and students granting or withholding their assent to learn. I used an initial interview with each participant, followed by an observation of their classroom practice and a debrief of that observation. I also conducted a focus group with six of my seven participants.

In the next chapter I’ll share more detailed profiles of my seven participants. They were all graduates of a Master’s program in teaching. They were also members of either Teach for America or the New York City Teaching Fellows, two different alternate route teacher certification programs that encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds to enter the profession through pathways that are different from the typical graduate teaching program. Teachers in this program, including all of the ones who participated, work almost exclusively in schools that serve what have been termed high needs communities – that is, largely minority and low-income communities. I am a teacher educator at this school of education and in the past I have worked with cohorts of first and second year teachers who are also enrolled in the our Masters of Teaching program. My work has consisted in training teachers in introductory pedagogical methods as well as introducing them to theories that can inform their practice and development of an educational philosophy. Many of the participants are my former graduate students, though they no longer have any affiliation with the Graduate School.

I reached out to teachers who had recently graduated with a Master’s degree were entering their third year of teaching. Participants were recruited from a subset of teachers who work in New York City district middle and high schools. I was no longer an advisor or
instructor for any of the teachers recruited to participate in the study. Participation was completely voluntary and there was no pressure to participate. Ten teachers initially responded, and seven teachers ultimately completed the study.

I focused on middle and high school teachers who work in what are commonly described as low-income schools (those that receiving Federal Title I funding ear-marked for low-income students), settings where teachers frequently encounter challenges in classroom management. Such classrooms provided an ideal setting to investigate the research questions because teachers must establish their classroom community in ways significantly different from elementary classrooms, relying on a mix of different incentives, relationships, and moral authority to invest students in the coursework. Approaches to developing strong classroom culture must also reflect a more nuanced balancing of dignity, positive reinforcement, and alienation as their students developmentally mature.

I chose to study the work of third year teachers who have recently earned their Master’s degree in teaching because such teachers are likely better positioned than beginning teachers to appreciate and recognize the varied forms of student assent (or lack thereof) in learning. While first year and second year teachers face unique challenges in creating purposeful and safe learning environments, including a significant learning curve in investing students in classroom learning and norms (Ball and Forzani, 2009; Lortie, 1977; Ingersoll, 2003), experienced teachers are more likely to have established a basic level or order and surface compliance. Subtle and difficult teacher strategies, like facilitating rich discussions, confronting real-world problems with multiple or no solutions, including student voice in decision making, and engaging in academically rigorous work, are all more likely. Furthermore, they have likely developed certain elements of their teacher persona and identity. Yet, it is also possible that maintaining control
and drawing on bureaucratic sources of legitimacy remain important to their work. Thus, investigating perceptions of authority relationships, including students' granting and withholding of assent to learn, are likely to be more nuanced and thoughtful.

I focused on district teachers, that is, teachers who are part of the vast and sprawling New York City Department of Education (DoE). This is significant because in New York City there is also a significant body of teachers who work in a diverse collection of Charter Schools, each with their own administrative structure. I am focusing on teachers in the DoE for several reasons. One reason is that DoE teachers have been the target of a range of recent city wide accountability initiatives that have changed the bureaucratic position of teachers, including increased instructional supervision with an accompanying tracking of data, modified school discipline codes that call for an increased role of teachers, and teacher evaluation measures that are tied to student testing. As noted in the literature review, such policy changes can potentially have an impact on the development of teacher-student authority relationships. A second reason is that the city wide school system as managed by the DoE represents a vast and sprawling bureaucratic structure that encodes a range of power relations. Such organizations are structured around relatively stable school hierarchies, systems of surveillance, and formalized arrangements of incentives and consequences (Metz, 1978; Ingersoll, 2003), which in turn can deeply influence the contexts in which teachers are seeking to establish trust and students make decisions about compliance or resistance. As can be seen from this brief description, the selection of research participants is not intended to be a representative sample of teachers or to support any generalizable conclusions as a result of the study. Instead, this method is an example of purposeful selection, an intentional choice that is designed to balance the study purpose, feasibility of research, and access to the site of research (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 87-91). The
deliberate choices outlined here reflect the importance of conducting research in a “natural” setting, that is, in a real-world setting that is rich, complex, and highly interpretable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 39).

A key element of ensuring an ethical study design is to develop and maintain a strong relationship with research participants and the study site (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 82-87). All interviews, school sites, student information, and observation data were conducted in a way to maintain participant privacy. All identifying names and details have been changed and obscured; I have given my participants pseudonyms. It is very important to me to respect the privacy of the schools where I conducted my research and thus identifying information about the schools – names of schools and educators who work there, the exact location, and other details have been obscured. However, it is also important to provide relevant context about the school environments in which my participants work; thus, I will be referencing generally some accounts that have been in the news and statistics about each school. I am numbering some schools and preceding each number with “MS” indicate middle school. This is not to be confused with any school in New York City that is actually named MS 3 (as is the convention for many schools in the city). I have given the high schools general names to reflect their thematic focus. The research was conducted over a period of about ten weeks.

Interviews and class observations were audio recorded. Participation by teachers was strictly voluntary, and any student whose family chose not to participate in the study were not included in audio recordings of the classroom observations. By participating in the study, teachers received a small grant of funding for classroom supplies.¹

¹ As stipulated by the New York City DoE research guidelines (New York City Department of Education, 2018).
Data Collection

Before describing the data collection methods, I’d like to make two notes. First, though the methods of data collection outlined below show intentionality in design and structure, this study in fact is informed by an “unstructured” approach, or one informed by the principles of “emergent design,” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 208-211). Such a design recognizes that there are insights or noticings in the study that I was unaware of initially; the way in which I asked questions, listened, or probed topics changed as my study proceeded. As Maxwell (2005) writes, unstructured approaches “trade generalizability and comparability for internal validity and contextual understanding,” (p. 80). This is in line with a methodology based in grounded theory where decisions are made to limit the effect of preconceived ideas (Charmaz, 2006). A second note is that the study questions and collection methods do not follow directly from the research questions (Maxwell, 2005, p. 92). I am interested in teacher perspectives on relations of authority and power, but at this time I do not intend to explicitly ask about these concepts.

The data collection methodology is based in grounded theory research. At its most basic level, this approach offers “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves,” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). Thus, there are certain structures in place yet the researcher continuously analyzes and reflects on the data as it is collected to consider what additional questions or topics would benefit from investigation. Simultaneous data analysis through various types of coding and memo writing allows for various theories to be advanced and guide the questioning (ibid). This method, and continuous data analysis in particular, is thus consistent with the principal of emergent design, where the specific context and interactions highlight themes and ideas that reflexively shape the inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 208-211).
The interviews followed a semi-structured format with room to explore certain topics or ideas in greater depth. Classroom observation were conducted by audio recording each classroom and taking field notes. Field notes allowed me to capture events, impressions, and interpretations found in the moment. There is, of course, a great deal of subjectivity in human research in general and classroom research in particular – what is recorded, what is noticed, what is left out, and the veneer of neutrality, are all examples of this. Furthermore, post-observation there is a great deal of subjective analysis and observation that will take place (Charmaz, 2006). The specific structure of the study is as follows:

**INITIAL INTERVIEW:** This interview asked teachers to describe their interest in teaching, their hopes for their classroom, reflections on their own identity, and their beliefs about how identity might intersect with their classroom practice. As part of this interview, I asked teachers to take me on a “classroom tour” and tell me about space they had created (See Appendix A)

**OBSERVATION:** An observation of the teacher’s classroom practice. An audiorecording was made, and I also took field notes of my observations.

**DEBRIEF OF OBSERVATION:** A debrief of the classroom observation & recording, with a focus on key moments where it was apparent that there were negotiations of authority taking place, or where a teacher may not have been aware of such processes. (Appendix B)

**FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION:** A joint discussion of their experience as part of the study. (Appendix C)

As part of the focus group discussion, I used two activities to generate discussion. First, I asked teachers to locate their approach to building classroom culture on the “Social Discipline Window” framework (Wachtel, 2003), and used their balancing of support and control to discuss their thoughts on authority. Second, I used a modified version of the School and Staffing Survey
(Appendix D) to get participants thinking about their influence in different areas of their school community.

There are several shortcomings to a study design that. By relying heavily on interviews, participants are asked to engage in a conversation structured around Western norms of discourse. Furthermore, not all information or knowledge is articulable and is instead a form of tacit knowledge. Additionally, my classroom observations are necessarily limiting in their scope; though I will be audio-recording the observations, there still exist numerous decisions about what is noticed, what is left out, and what I choose to highlight. The study is also limited in its scope because of the time period involved; a truly comprehensive understanding of the context of each teacher’s setting would only be achieved by spending time immersed in the community, and even then the picture would necessarily be incomplete. Finally, my concern in this study is teacher perspectives, a focus that is particularly susceptible to a variety of understandings as “generating an interpretation of someone’s perspective is inherently a matter of inference,” (Maxwell, 2005, 94). These are important limitations to consider and identifying them in advance allows me to think through what is gained and lost in the study design (Luttrell, 2000).

Data Analysis

My data analysis followed guidelines based in grounded theory and narrative inquiry. Grounded theory is a set of methodological and analytical practices that are designed to prevent predetermined theories or biases shape conclusions. For example, data analysis should occur continuously even as data is collected, and qualitative coding of interviews should allow themes and ideas to emerge rather than be based in pre-conceived categories. The point is that analysis should pay particular attention to the context, to who is acting, words or phrases that seem to
have particular meaning for participants, and the conditions under which certain ideas or intentions emerge or are suppressed (Charmaz, 2006).

Kathy Charmaz’s book, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2006) was vital in guiding my data analysis. I picked it up again after a few weeks of data collection when I was unsure if I was asking the right questions, listening in the right way, or even including enough participants; I was afraid of what Charmaz termed the “smash and grab” approach to data. I’ve lived with this data and had various quotes swirling in my head and the stories of my participants have been shaped and re-shaped. The grounded theory approach has empowered me to find new ideas and perspectives in the words of my participants. It has encouraged me to embrace an “emergent design” approach allows for insights of which I was unaware before the study began (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, pp. 208-211).

Starting from larger questions about power and authority were interesting, but I’ve sensed them getting in the way of noticing ideas latent in my data. Charmaz recommends a two-step coding process to foreground the data; first, analyzing the text of interviews on a fine-grained line-by-line scale, then finding larger themes. It is a somewhat arbitrary approach but it allows the researcher to treat the words and phrases on their own, to allow an analysis of ‘fragments of data.’ At this level generating codes directly from the text “simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data,” (p. 47). She has several technical suggestions, for example coding with speed, focusing on action statements, and using gerunds for the codes; these help use the participants’ words to see the data differently.

I want to share two examples of how I’ve used this coding process.
Example 1: “Just Going Along...”

Figure 2 is an excerpt from different parts of my transcript of my initial interview with Chanda. In coding the interview, I noticed that the theme of ‘just going along’ came up in two very distinct sections. First, she brought up the idea when discussing why she thought her eighth graders offered little resistance for a highly routinized and public evaluation that occurred at the beginning of each class. Students were checked for their uniform, for the cleanliness of the area, for their knowledge of the homework, and they did this all standing up as the teacher walked into the classroom. When I had a chance to observe this routine, it’s regimented and effective nature became clear. To Chanda, her ideas for why students would seamlessly go along with this procedure was a shrugging “they just do it.”

I saw a similar rationale and phrasing about thirty minutes later in our conversation when she began discussing her own experience as a student at an elite grammar school in Britain, and coming home to her mother. Her mother, an immigrant who spoke no English, still had a strict regime which Chanda had to follow. Yet, her explanation of why she followed it is devoid of any rancor. Similar to her eighth graders, the ‘just did it.’ Thus, coding and comparing data with data helped reveal an idea of just doing something, something where rules are accepted and internalized. This was a pattern from when she grew up, and now as a teacher at a highly structured school in a very different setting the pattern is one that she accepts and has bought into.

Example 2: Trusting Students.

The first time I noted the code “trust” was when Lydia discussed the brand new aquarium that was in her classroom. In later conversations, some of which are included in figure 2, I
noticed that the word trust arose, and in comparing data from different moments it seemed like this might be a potential larger theme. In fact, in the focus group, it came up several times. When Anita discussed trust and her students, the theme merged with another theme that I’ve coded multiple times, that of “leveling students,” or making a judgment about their abilities based on some larger academic designation. Anita here describes how she does trust her students, but it seems like she does so only because they are in the gifted and talented section and that she would not extend that trust to the ‘regular’ or low-level students she taught the previous year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think the beginning of class check is extremely important. Probably one of the most important parts of my class. The student is the one that does my check-off, I guess by the time they get to 8th grade, I am checking that the student already knows what’s to be done. Most of the time when the student says &quot;uniform, dress code,&quot; the boys will just start tucking their shirt in. I’m not going around saying…they’ll just do it…or, “No materials on the floor,” there is usually a bunch of kids that have already picked the trash up. They just know. That’s the thing with a school with so many structures and systems, everything is the same from 6th grade, I guess the 6th grade teachers probably get push back, but by the time they come to me, it’s just normal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Later in interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>home, doing homework, my mom would make me do extra work at home; I had to write my times tables up until 20 everyday, write a story every day which nobody read…writing, Do extra work! Yes! And she [my mom] would check. She had no idea what she was reading, but she’d check the date, and she’d check I did my times table, and check the date and make sure there is a story there. No! That was just the way…that’s what you do. I did try and cheat, I remember once, I went back and I changed the date from yesterday until today… and my mom found out and I got in a lot of trouble. My brother did it, my cousins…my mom has a twin and so those four cousins I’m really close to and they do they exact same thing, and so it’s just very normal for me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Codes |
| checking on students at beginning is most important |
| “They just do it” |
| They just know |
| Hidden curriculum - they just know |
| doing my homework because mom made me |
| “just did it” with ref to mom’s hw |
| trusting in mom though she couldn’t read |
| being evaluated/checked on |
| just the way it was |

**Figure 2**: Excerpt from transcript of interview with Chanda Roy.
Chiemeka doesn’t actually use the word trust but I coded it as such because by saying “They can’t even do that,” I detected a mistrust for what the students were capable of following.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Lydia and her Fish Tank**  
Well, right now right now, what they are allowed to do is turn the lights on and off in the morning and in the afternoon I don’t allow them to feed them  
I don’t trust them…we lost 4 fish in the first week  
So, I took back my control [oh, so they could feed them], I don’t know what was going on and I was worried about it, and come to find out the kid that was turning the light was turning off the filter…because I didn’t realize, so I called the guys up…apparently these fish are not cheap, but they are not as expensive as some other specimens, and they are freshwater which is more…than saltwater… | not allowing students to feed  
trusting students (or lack of)  
taking control back  
Worrying about class environment |
| **Anita and Drinking Water during class**  
I just I really struggled with like these confines of like raise your hands, and like this, and that, and especially since I have ADD and like in 6th grade all hormones were kicking in and then like all like, I was like why can I pay attention, I don’t know. So like, this year with my students who do have ADD or ADHD or just like the kids who like I see like I’m always like, “Go take a walk, just like Walk, go get water,” and like I’ve established that like they know that they can just ask me now, like “Can I get water?” Yeah, you don’ have to take a pass, just go and come back. These students I can trust that they come back, so it’s fine, like, they’re taking a walk down the hall and there’s a trust that they’re coming back and I think part of the reason why they don’t abuse that is cos I don’t, I think that’s something that’s not often in other classes. | struggling with Limits, confines, of school  
trusting certain students |

**Figure 3:** Transcript excerpts coded as Trust

So far, I’ve seen a similar emergence of the idea of trust in a few other places and I believe it might have the potential to have a significant place in my final analysis.

In these examples, there is something different than the literal words that teachers are saying. The first example has a through line of accepting arrangements with one participant’s
interview from her own childhood experiences as a student to now being a teacher in a structured school. The second example shows how comparing data to data reveals a common theme of ‘trust’ apparent in different settings, whether controlling a classroom environment, leading groups, or viewing students of different academic abilities.

Charmaz’s second phase of coding is to develop larger themes and concepts. Following this, I created codes like “Knowledge and Curriculum” as I saw many participant comments that were concerned with discussing what they wanted their students to know; this often wasn’t only about curricular knowledge but there were statements about how to act or be prepared for the real world. Participants also talked about modifications they would make to the curriculum and why they thought certain topics were important. As a result, this became the topic of Chapter 8.

Narrative inquiry provides a complementary epistemological foundation for my analysis. Though the term has many related strands and meanings (Riessman, 2008), my analysis is informed by the value placed on the interpretative understandings of participants; that is, rather than attempting to discover some larger truth through interviews, each participant’s process of interpretation is itself a type of knowledge that is valued and important for analysis. When I began this project, I wasn’t clear on how an attention to narratives would be relevant in my study, or even what exactly a narrative was. I had read a few of the descriptions about this approach, but it was only after a reading through my transcripts that I began to see how participants interpreted their experiences in schools through mini-stories. These accounts were not immediately apparent because they aren’t conventional ‘stories’ with clear plots or well-defined characters; still, as I saw them merging in repeatedly in the transcripts I began to appreciate how they could reveal was fabric of schools were interpreted through a teacher’s internal life.
Rosaldo (1993) asserts narrative as a unique and important vehicle for understanding the messiness of life. First, they offer a way to represent reality that starkly contrasts with scientific or objective descriptions. Without an emphasis on predictability or generalizability, they even question the notion of a single reality itself. Second, as a listener takes in a narrative they develop a “double vision” that shifts into and out of the perspective of the protagonist, both identifies with the narrator’s experience and takes a position of distance and judgment. He further argues that even time becomes meaningful only in the context of narrative. A narrative analytic approach can help organize actions and interpretations of actions to move beyond a simple recounting to understand how raw experience is transformed into meaning, and how experience is organized into a sensible narrative (Riessmann, 2008).

Thus, narratives serve to transfer meaning between people; elements of life both commonplace (time) and unique (an individual’s experience) come to life only through their retelling. They encourage multiple interpretations as they can take a variety of forms, often eschewing traditional ideas of stories like plot, characters, and climax. Rather than attempting to discover some larger truth through interviews, each participant’s process of interpretation is itself a type of knowledge that is valued and important for analysis. Narratives can reveal the complex drama of social life (Rosaldo, 1993, pp. 127-143).

I faced challenges in transcribing the spoken words of my participants into written text. Words are often unclear or missing, people don’t necessarily speak with punctuation apparent, and phrases can run into one another. They often start speaking in fits and starts, especially as questions were complicated and required thought. In transcribing these words, I’ve tried to honor my participants’ words while at times shaping their responses into a legible excerpts.
There is bias inherent in this process and I hope that the transcriptions do justice to their intentional meanings.

Schools, of course, are places of multi-layered complexity and teaching exists of the nexus of it all. Narrative analysis can take many forms, including analyzing the content, structure, and delivery of a narrative. For example, my participants often impersonated characters from their world, creating dialogue on the spot and taking on a different voice and tone. Characters can be presented as fully three dimensional, with varied and layered feelings, or lumped together into a monolithic entity. The speech of participants take on narrative elements, perhaps having a recognizable plot, sometimes getting swallowed up in utterances and false starts, and often surrounded by recognizable fragments of ‘entrance’ and ‘exit’ talk to signal the bounds of a story (Riesmann, 2008). I’ve come to see narratives as an act of active story telling, a way teachers make sense of the action and drama of their work in schools. They shape the impressions, or the outlines, of the teacher perceptions about the fields of power in schools.
In this section, I’m going to introduce my research participants as well as the contexts in which they work. Each of them provided me with a rich portrait of the schools in which they worked as well as their own fascinating backgrounds. Though I won’t make the connections explicit, this background information is vital for developing an understanding of their perspectives on power and authority in education that unfold throughout the remainder of this dissertation. I recruited current third year teachers who are employed in the New York City Department of Education as middle or high school teachers. I am a teacher educator at Relay Graduate School of Education, and I reached out to recent alumni who just graduated with a Masters in Teaching, many of whom I had taught or advised over their time in graduate school. From my outreach, ten people expressed interest in participating in the study, and I was able to arrange eight interviews and observations. Of these, seven people participated in the entirety of the project, and it is data collected from these seven that are used in this study. Six of them were able to make it to the focus group.

An interesting and surprising challenge in this project was the logistics required to conduct the actual research. With each teacher I had to arrange dates and times for interviews; several emails and texts flew back and forth, many went unanswered as teachers juggled their current jobs and their lives. On a few occasions, when a teacher wouldn’t respond for some time I would simply show up at their school and try to make arrangements in person. This process of arranging schedules and coordinating paperwork was time consuming, but it also provided insight into the way teachers approached their job, managed the demands on their time, and
interpreted the management landscape in which they worked. In all of my interactions, the participants showed a great willingness to share their experience, open up their classroom, and think deeply about their work.

There are some interesting trends when looking at this group of seven participants. Five of the teachers are science teachers and the other two teach social studies; none were a teacher of a ‘major subject’ (English or Math). This is significant because teachers of major subjects are the focus of a different level of attention from administrators who are concerned with state exams in those subjects. Math and ELA exam scores are frequently used as proxies to describe the quality of a school and thus teachers of these subjects are under greater scrutiny. Similarly, promotional decisions for students are often made based on student performance in these subjects. By contrast, teachers of science and social studies do not experience the same degree of administrative oversight or receive the same levels of support (this is true to an even greater extent in other subjects). Support may take the form of dedicated Literacy or Math coaches, multiple professional development opportunities, and readily available textbooks and curricular materials. All this support of course comes with greater restrictions on what and how to teach. Science and social studies teachers must regularly create their own learning materials and may not have access to the same level of instructional support. At the same time, they also enjoy the greater freedom that comes from less oversight. Students, of course, are aware of these

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
<th>TEACHING SUBJECTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Franklin Howard</td>
<td>MS 1</td>
<td>7th Grade Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia Rosario</td>
<td>MS 2</td>
<td>7th Grade Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chanda Roy</td>
<td>MS 3</td>
<td>8th Grade Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia Elmassi</td>
<td>Medical Professional High School</td>
<td>Anatomy Computer Science Physics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chiemeka Mulder</td>
<td>MS 4</td>
<td>7th Grade Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige Rhodes</td>
<td>Vocational High School</td>
<td>9th Grade “Living Environment” AP Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anita Basile</td>
<td>MS 5</td>
<td>6th Grade Social Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Participant Information*

2 Indeed, I will be describing a few schools with these measures below
dynamics and can sometimes be observed taking the “major subjects” more seriously by paying more attention or devoting more energy to their grades in these classes. All of this is to say that teachers of social studies and science face a different type of challenge in establishing their legitimacy with their students, and in making their voices count with colleagues and administrators. As Sophia, a high school science teacher whose classes were not tied to any state exam, remarked when discussing her approach to planning, “I mean, with my classes since I don’t teach a Regents\(^3\) class at all, I pretty much have freedom to do whatever.”

Five of the seven participants were middle school teachers. One high school teacher, Paige, taught a 9\(^{th}\) grade science class that culminated in a Regents state examination, and an Advanced Placement class. Sophia, as she indicated, taught three high school science courses that were designed to fulfill a science credit but had no state exam attached. The middle school teachers I observed taught 6\(^{th}\), 7\(^{th}\), and 8\(^{th}\) grades. Both in the focus group and in the individual conversations, there were significant differences in the way teachers described establishing their school culture based on if they taught middle school or high school. A general consensus seemed to emerge that middle school students demanded greater structure because of their developmental level. And, furthermore that high school students could responsibly enjoy a great deal of choice. While the discussions around class cultures made note of the grade level, my observations revealed similar occurrences at all levels. For example, teachers at all levels used points and checks to keep students in order, used signals to call students back together (or didn’t), and had regulated policies for procedures like getting materials or going to the bathroom.

One characteristic that all of the teachers in my research group shared to some degree was that the schools in which they worked served a heavily minority population of students, most

---

\(^3\) By “Regents” she means the New York State Regents Exams, the mandated state exams for major high school subjects.
from families who were classified as “low income,” and the schools were all at some stage of organization upheaval. Three of the schools had significant scandals that had been in the newspapers over the previous year. Many schools showed poor student achievement on standardized tests. Four schools were being led by new principals hired in the past year. This is not to imply that the school sites were completely dysfunctional. Rather, my research participants worked in settings where the bureaucratic structure was confronted with strains such as high teacher turnover, a (real or perceived) lack of resources, and an inability to service every student as they wished. These systemic strains were interpreted, absorbed, and configured in different ways depending on the unique contexts of each school setting.

There were other trends in the participants. Many of the participants shared some version of the statement that “I loved school,” or “I was a good student,” with parents who emphasized school in the home. Perhaps relatedly, the group also contained a range of immigrant stories, with parents who arrived in the country and began working long hours to provide for their families. Many didn’t express a clear desire to be a teacher until late in college or even after earning their undergraduate degree. Part of this is the nature of my sample; every participant was a member of the New York City Teaching Fellows or Teach for America, two programs that take non-Education majors and place them in schools to be teachers. Still, it is interesting to hear some of the factors that led teachers into the profession. The participants come from a range of economic backgrounds and for some becoming a teacher filled a need to find a paying job and pay down college loans. There were family and life considerations, and in a few cases luck. One uniting factor was the participants were clearly dedicated educators; they were teachers who brought care and intelligence to their work with students.
Franklin Howard, MS 1

Franklin is a third year science teacher at MS 1. He is proud of his school over the past three years that he has been there. For my first interview with Franklin, I walked up to his school on a mid-fall Friday night as the sunlight was disappearing, the familiar squeals and giggles of a recess playground in the background. Heading towards the main entrance, I caught a glimpse of Franklin playing an intense game of concrete soccer with a group of students who were in his after school program. Thin, athletic, endlessly energetic, and very charismatic, I was impressed to see Mr. Howard - Franklin - giving it his all on a late Friday after a long week of teaching. And, he was committing to next spend more than an hour with me talking about his work.

After putting away his supplies, signing the proper forms, dismissing his students, and clocking out on his timecard, we finally said hello. He insisted on introducing me to everyone in the main office; he thought we were going to conduct the interview in a bar but I asked to see his classroom so we trudged up the four flights of stairs. Along the way, he stopped a descending student to give a mini-lecture on a nuanced basketball technique, and said hello to at least three other teachers. The whole trip raised some of the troubling issues inherent in my methodology: as the researcher I was taking control immediately of the location and bounds of the interview. As a participant he seemed to be performing his role of teacher in his work environment. When we entered his classroom - or rather, one of his classrooms, as he is a traveling teacher - his tone took on a more direct, personable, and serious note as we launched into the interview.

As can likely be guessed, Franklin is quite sociable. Several weeks later when we had our focus group, he took the lead at various points in the discussion; indeed, it felt like the focus group officially began only after he arrived and boisterously announced himself saying to the
laughter of my participants “My name is Franklin, aka A+ 100.” He also took over the recording
device at a few key points, insisting on turning it on when I thought the session was over and
catching the ‘juicy’ bits of our conversation. At another point, he seized the role of facilitator
and asked one of the more insightful questions of the evening about teachers and their response
to the most disruptive situations.

Franklin is also something of a provocateur. In our interview I noticed “White
Supremacy” written on the white board in his distinct handwriting. When I asked him about it
later, he explained the different thoughts he wanted to evoke in his fellow teachers:

Yes, absolutely, [that was] very intentional. If you’re a teacher, when you see the word [is meant]
teachers too? “White supremacy,” it just crosses you…there are two things I want you to think,
Yo, somebody is teaching you about real world issues. One. Two: Wow, it’s so systemic, “Am I
speaking about White supremacy to my kids?” It’s a huge issue. “Maybe I need to speak about
and tie this into my lesson.” And the 3rd one is more like an egotistical one, “That’s probably Mr.
Charles, I wonder what he was teaching his kids,” and I want you to formulate an emotion about
me. That’s a bigger picture, I don’t just teach science.

Apparently, he had written the phrase on the board during a previous lesson a few days
prior and wanted to leave it up as a sort of unconscious challenge to his colleagues.

Franklin is Haitian-American, though he later also described himself as Pan-African. His
parents are both immigrants from Haiti and he was raised mostly by his mother. His mother, of
whom he is very proud, entered the country and was able to become a nurse and eventually
purchase a home in the Bronx as part of a government program to subsidize home ownership
among the lower middle class. “I think I had a really good childhood,” he says of his time
growing up. Still, he grew up in a neighborhood that had its share of poverty and heartache. As
he describes it, “I wouldn’t say in colloquial terms that I’m hood but I definitely grew up in the
hood,” meaning that his childhood was somewhat sheltered and he was a “self-proclaimed nerd”
aware of the presence of gang violence and drugs in his neighborhood even as he was kept at
home. He was kept from some of the more harsh elements of his neighborhood and was a good enough student to get accepted to a high school in Manhattan. He found athletics and it became a defining part of his identity, particularly basketball: “Ball is life. I love sports and school…sports was my life, that’s how I ended up in orthopedics. Sports was the only way I felt like I could fit in socially.” In college, as he indicated, he pursued a degree in orthopedics and became a licensed athletic trainer. However, the pressure to pay off student loans pushed him to find a job and he was encouraged by some friends to become a teacher.

After joining the New York City Teaching Fellows, a program that trains and places individuals into teaching positions, Franklin was placed at MS 1 in the Bronx. For decades MS 1 had been a successful and important part of a middle class neighborhood, but this was followed by several years of decline. It is a relatively large middle school with enrollment in the mid-600s and large populations of English Language Learners (ELLs) and Special Education students. Recently, it has undergone significant transitions and turmoil, including allegations against the principal of cronyism and bullying along with a few salacious exposes. At the same time, while contending with high teacher turnover and low student test scores it was placed on city and state lists of failing schools. Franklin however, seems to relish the background of his school:

My school is probably the worst performing middle school in all of New York City, we were about to close down until our principal came in, and since then, we’ve changed the trajectory of the performance of the school.

While the last point is debatable, the school has recently been recognized for improvement. He describes strong relationships with his colleagues and he feels very much like he’s a leader among his grade team. For example, he served as the teachers’ union representative the previous year and prides himself on the strong working relationship he had with the principal as a result.
The first time I met Lydia was on a Saturday over two years ago. She was both a first year teacher and a first year graduate student then and she was at a Saturday study session to get extra help on one of her assignments. She asked thoughtful questions and yearned for quality feedback as she worked through her project. One year later when she was in my graduate class, the pressures of being a new mother, separating from her partner, working in a troubled school, going to graduate school, and trying to get certified, all seemed to combine in an untenable mix. She persevered, however, and while she vented frustration about a number of things and broke down on occasion, she never once complained or blamed her students in any way. She exuded a fierce compassion, more than tough love, for her students. She unashamedly advocated exerting control in her classroom, and one thing we had talked about in the past was that perhaps she was too controlling – literally doing the cognitive work for her students at times. As we sat down to talk, what emerged was that underlying her belief in the need for control was a passionate belief in the potential of schools to foster autonomy and independence.

I conducted my first interview with her on a professional development day; there were no students in school but several trainings were in progress. She took the initiative to excuse herself from the training to talk with me and show me her classroom. Her biggest concern as we started was that her posters were not properly laminated; the presentation and organization of her room was very important to her.

Lydia was born in New York City and grew up for much her life in the Lower East Side. Though it was a poor neighborhood, her mother was able to secure a seat at an elementary school in a nearby wealthy neighborhood using methods that Lydia hints at were likely unofficial. The experience was transformative. She spoke at length about the teachers there and the welcoming
classrooms, and the positive feelings she felt stuck with her even as she changed schools in the coming years. “I loved school,” she said, “No matter what school I was in, I just always loved school.”

She was a good student and earned acceptance to a college in upstate New York. The experience was the first time living away from home and the New York City environment, and the first time she came to understand her identity. But she also recognizes that her identity is more multi-dimensional:

Yeah, I identify as Latina, that's a big part of, you know, I also identify where I grew up, and I grew up several different places, so, um, I identify as woman, for sure. And, you know, minority, for sure, and, all of those things. And now as a single parent, for sure...

She was the oldest member of my research group, and after college studying criminal justice she spent a few years working in private sector for a cosmetics firm where she was quite successful and received several promotions. She got pregnant and gave birth to her daughter just as she was being offered another promotion to an executive position. Faced with the decision of accepting a demanding and financially rewarding job with the equally demanding responsibility of becoming a parent, she made a choice:

I ended up working for a prominent makeup corporation, and I was doing really well actually, and right around the time when I decided I wanted to do something else, because the schedule was crazy and I had just had a baby, they wanted to give me a promotion but that meant more responsibilities, and I would be home a lot less, and I wanted to be home more, I was kind of at a crossroads, my mom came across an application for Fellows, and she said “I think this is something that you can do, and it can give you the life that you want.”

Now that she was teacher, she felt like she was in the place she was meant to be. “I guess I’m a full circle,” she says, referring to the fact that several of her family members have had long careers in education. Her father was a paraprofessional, her sister-in law was a teacher, her brother worked in school support and her half-brother’s mother was a Principal. Reflecting on
her journey from loving school as a young student to now being a teacher, she felt satisfied:

“When I was kid I wanted to be a teacher.”

At MS 2, she was a skilled navigator of her school’s complex environment. The previous year, the school’s principal was featured in the tabloids for a series of scandals that likely placed teachers in an awkward position of having to choose allegiances. It was a school where 37% of teachers surveyed reported that they trusted the principal, and even fewer (15%) reported they trusted other teachers. “My school is such a mess,” is how Lydia described it. In fact, there was a history of dysfunction at this school site, as it occupies the building of a large middle school that was closed for persistent failure. It has since been re-opened with three new smaller schools, one of which has found success. MS 2, however, has had low enrollment and 62% of students reported feeling safe in the hallways and common spaces. The flux and change was evidenced by the three principals the school has had in the past five years.

One of the ongoing conversations that we had been having was whether she should stay at her school or find a position at a different, more supportive school. However, she often mentioned the pressure of being a teacher who hadn’t yet earned tenure and wanted to make sure she earned the full security that could be provided by union regulations. Moreover, she expressed a strong allegiance and connection to her students and couldn’t quite justify leaving them after such a short time. In discussing her beliefs about the purpose of education, she described a responsibility to prepare students for the realities of a harsh world, and this served as a rationale for many of her decisions as a teacher. Her professional background, life experiences, beliefs about schooling, and her savvy ability to survive in a complex school made hers a fascinating perspective to explore.

_Chanda Roy, MS 3_
I was surprised Chanda agreed to participate in this project because when she was my graduate student the previous year, she appeared cool to the prospect of learning about teaching. She openly expressed dissent about our teacher preparation curriculum, was skeptical about the strategies we discussed around rigor and class culture, and seemed to view our work together as not relevant to her work. I couldn’t have misread her more; over the course of interviews and discussions as part of this project, she was engaging, warm, and genuinely interested in the questions of this project.

She is soft-spoken, grew up in London, and identifies as Indian. Her background is unique; growing up outside the United States gives her a different perspective on schools, and her identity as a minority is more complex than simply being a different ethnicity. Growing up, her family emphasized education greatly and she ended up attending an elite grammar school in Britain. She was always considered smart and she always wanted to be a teacher, a desire not universally supported among those with elite backgrounds. However, for her school has represented a sense of possibility, especially coming from an immigrant family that was very much the ‘other’ in Britain. Her mother, in particular, is a source of inspiration and is referenced on a few occasions in this study; she (the mother) moved to London without finishing high school, couldn’t speak English and faced the limitations of her background. Yet, she emphasized studying and pushed her children to do extra academic work. Here is how Chanda described her mother:

[My mom], because she didn’t finish high school and then she moved to England, and she knew no English, life was very hard, very hard for her as someone who didn’t speak the language and had no qualifications. And, she felt it in terms of trying to get a job, and at work, but also annoying family members who were always horrible and so…she decided that all she cared about was education and all she wanted was for my brother and me to actually go to college. The only thing she said was I don’t care what you study but you need a degree, and that was my life.
The emphasis on education created a set of expectations that made school and school work seem normal; Chanda doesn’t express any frustration or resentment about the focus on schooling. She was accepted into an elite all-girls grammar school – equivalent to a 6-12th grade school – and was challenged to pursue careers with more prestige. Still, Chanda seemed to know early on that she wanted to be a teacher:

When I was very young I always wanted to be a teacher, my mom says I used to teach when I was very small. She when would read books to me I would try and read them back to her. But in 6th grade my teacher said “What do you want to be?” I said a teacher, and she said “No Chanda, you’re too smart to be a teacher, don’t be a teacher,” and so I went into [my grammar school] thinking I’m not going to be a teacher because I’m too smart to be a teacher.

Yet, she did become a teacher directly after college here in the United States. She joined Teach For America and was placed at MS 3. Her motivations for being a teacher can be found deep in the sense of unjust restrictions that were placed on her mother because of an arbitrary language. Being intelligent was irrelevant because her mother, who couldn’t overcome the language barrier to access society. For Chanda, her desire for her students to be free of systems of oppression is more important than the pressure she felt from other close family members:

…now that I think about why I’m a teacher because one day [my mon] was in the kitchen making food, and I was talking to her, and I said “Mom, my life philosophy is that there is nothing that you can’t do.” And I said, anything a man can do, I can do. And I was going on and on…She turned to me and said “you can do anything because you know English and you can read and write, but for me….there is a lot that I can’t do because I don’t know the language.” And then, at that time it did not hit me, but … when I started thinking about it, I thought that that is true….and so I think that is what lead me there. I don’t want anyone to have that ceiling just because they don’t know a language.

Her discussions with her mother, taking place in the kitchen and surrounded by food, show the limiting bounds of her mother’s world as well as the inspiration to help others not face these restrictions. Joining Teach For America in particular seems like something of an accident as, being ignorant of the various pathways to becoming a teacher, she didn’t realize there were other routes to becoming a teacher. Still, as can be seen from her comments above, social justice
is an important source of motivation and informs her work as a social studies teacher and her connection with her students. When discussing topics like the post-Civil War reconstruction and the Jim Crow laws of the American South, she wants her students to see the solidarity found in the experience of being an other:

> With my units...it’s always white and people of color and so the conversations we have...because they think the people of color is just black. Because we don’t have any white students and talking to them about how you’re Dominican, you’re Puerto Rican, you’re Mexican, I’m Indian, but in terms of what we’re learning they are all one.

MS 3 is a small middle school in the Bronx and likely the most organized and together of the schools in this study. It is a place where things just seem to work; people respond to emails, the schedule makes sense, the transitions between classes are smooth. It appears as an efficiently operating machine. The Principal, who is in her first year after the retirement of the previous school leader, was welcoming and introduced herself directly to me.

Still, it is not without its challenges. It has a high population of special education students, and its low student enrollment means that there is a very tight budget. Chanda mentioned that she must get most extra supplies – like colored paper – through outside donors and the school’s website even contains a prominent call for donations. One of those challenges is space; the three hundred or so students are crammed into a part of one floor and some 10 classrooms. The whole space is tucked into the fifth floor of a towering building made to seem taller because it’s on a hill. Teachers seem to get along with one another – 100% of teachers surveyed responded that they trust their colleagues – but part of it is they have no choice. Classrooms are shared among multiple teachers, the students stay put in their classrooms in static sections while the teachers rotate through. In fact, our first interview took place at the end of a long hallway, near the teachers’ bathroom, and the recording is punctuated by the sounds of
teachers coming and going in the near distance, the creaks of doors opening and closing, and the familiar background roar of a school.

*Sophia Elmassi, Medical Professional High School*

Sophia is a brash, confident, and smart educator in her third year teaching. She teaches computer science, physics, and anatomy to 11th and 12th graders at her high school, extremely proud of her immigrant background, and of the students she works with. She exists with a fierce passion for serving her students but also an air of irreverence for the system in which she works. All of this can combine to create certain contradictions in her narratives, a fact which she seems to happily revel in. For example, she is a former student of a high performing charter school that she gleefully loathes, at the same time she often shares her appreciation for the education she received. She aspires to be an inspirational and empathetic teacher, yet she often describes a nonchalance about the profession of teaching and even seems to have fallen into the job.

Sophia’s family is from Alexandria, Egypt, and moved to an urban center in New Jersey when she was young with her parents and three sisters. Growing up, her father worked as a driver before suffering several heart attacks. With her mother staying at home, the family lived in poverty in a neighborhood populated with other immigrants, mainly Latinos (she often is confused as Latino). One consequence of this is that along with her sisters she had to work from an early age; she was a tutor for others until the age when she could work officially, then got a job at the Burger King up the street from her school. Working while in high school meant that she had to be hyper efficient and complete all of her class assignments during school breaks.

She had always been a good student, and she remembers the expectation and pressure she felt from her parents to do well in school:

Oh no, we would get in trouble if we got below a 95. I think I got a 92, and man did I - I don't know if I should say…let’s just say, um, you know, a rubber slipper here and there,
a wooden spoon. Honestly, growing up, I was just, I had to be the top student, I had no choice because my parents were just like “we didn’t come to this country for no damn reason.” It was fine, I don’t think school was hard. I remember middle school and high school all I did was actually do the work and I got straight A’s

But perhaps the defining feature of her childhood in New Jersey, one that she returns to several times, is that she and her twin sister attended a high performing charter school. The experience informs her teaching practice, her approach to students, and her stance on rules and their enforcement. In middle school she was the valedictorian, and as she describes it she was on track to become valedictorian in high school, as well, when an incident derailed that trajectory. In high school she began to get suspended for a series of minor infractions:

I got suspended I think a total of 5 times my senior year and I didn’t open my mouth I did not disrespect my teachers, at all. You don’t have black socks, like if I’m wearing these boots and it’s not black, you get a suspension. You don’t have a belt, it’s a suspension. You refuse to tuck in your shirt it’s an in-house suspension. Or a suspension.

Around the time these suspensions happened, her family’s home had been robbed and most of their clothes and possessions were taken. They were living in a state of uncertainty and couldn’t meet the exacting demands of the school’s uniform policy.

By my senior year, they were just like, every time I would tell [my parents] “Hey, I'm suspended,” they were just like “What’s new?” They literally just gave up, because it was getting to the point where like it was so bad. Like my parents couldn’t afford 50 pairs of socks for all, for me and my twin sister to wear like black socks every single day, like they can’t do that, we can’t get new uniform pants…it was not in our budget at all.

More than the policy, the practice of being singled out and humiliated took its toll, and after last suspension as a senior she and her sister simply didn’t return to the school. The family was able to enroll the two girls in a large suburban high school, and the freedom of the school seemed to open up the possibility in her mind that school could be something different.
In college she was studying to become a medical student and eventually a doctor, but when she enrolled in a class to fulfill and elective credit, an incident took place that sparked her interest in education:

I was the only minority in the class. I was like, alright, cool, this is normal. And then we start talking, and this woman says “I would never want to teach in this urban school because the kids are too ghetto and I wouldn’t want to walk through metal detectors every day.” I raised my hand calmly, I was eyeing the professor…and then I looked at her into her soul, and I was like: “We do not want you there, so stay in your suburban neighborhood and educate those kids.” And then she got so hurt about it, and I’m, like, “What? Why are you mad, you’re literally categorizing kids that come from urban neighborhoods, like, you don’t even know me and you wanted to stereotype me without even knowing!”…I was pissed. I was so angry, I was mortified that a future educator who is going to be highly qualified is going to go into the system thinking like that….I was like “Aight, let me just keep that in the back of my head just in case.”

Still, she seemed to have fallen into education. As her senior year in college was wrapping up, she saw an email advertising the New York City Teaching Fellows and put together a hasty application. As she advanced through the interview rounds, the possibility of becoming a teacher increased and as she graduated, she found herself accepted and in the training program to start teaching in a matter of weeks. Her parents weren’t thrilled. “My dad was so disappointed,” she says. But it seems to have become the family profession as two of her sisters also became teachers.

As I talked with Sophia in her classroom during one of her prep periods, students were darting in and asking about an upcoming club meeting or asking for small favors. Her classroom was a sort of meeting place for the social life of many students through the clubs that Sophia ran. She founded and leads the Black Lives Matter club, she was organizing a performance of some sort that required a rehearsal, and she was leading an equity project at her school. Medical Professional High School (MPHS) is a small high school – about two hundred eighty students – housed in part of the basement of a large high school campus in a busy Manhattan commercial district. It is a themed high school peripherally concerned with the medical profession. Students
ride the subway in from the outer boroughs of the city to attend, which accounts for the generally low attendance at the school. The small enrollment raises other issues; with limited resources teachers have to take on multiple responsibilities. That’s one of the reasons why Sophia has three different courses to prepare for as the school simply does not offer enough courses to fill a high school transcript.

Her background is very present in her descriptions of becoming a teacher; she draws on her childhood and her experiences as a student to put together a vision of inspiration for the purpose of education, far removed from typical descriptions of academic preparation and college readiness:

[My students] live in a society that wants to get rid of them so I need to teach my kids how to hold [others] accountable, how to have them empowered, how to speak their truth without any type of hesitation, so I think that’s the purpose of school.

*Chiemeka Mulder, MS/HS 4*

Chiemeka was born in New York City. At a young age, along with his mom and his middle brother, he moved back to Nigeria to attend school. There he attended private schools and was supported with private tutors. By the time he returned to the United States at the age of ten, he found himself both labeled an ESL student because of his accent (though he was fluent and educated fully in English) and more academic successful than his peers. His success was partially a result of parental pressure. “Pretty much, my mom tells me all the time, ‘The reason we came out her [to the United States] was because of education, education, education, education, education.’” Though he was timid and conscious of his accent, school also came easy to him and he found that he didn’t need to put much effort into succeeding.
He was always deferential in his communication, thorough in his work, and sincere in his effort. His firm belief in the importance of respect showed up again when I asked him about his thoughts on the purpose of education:

I would say the purpose of school is to prepare students for college…but, it’s also to teach them how to be part of society. I think that’s the biggest one. Like, how to behave in society when you’re just like, it can’t really be all about yourself. And, you will have authority figures, it might not be as a teacher, it might be a boss, it’s going to be somebody, and you got really know how to be…show respect while working with other people.

This ‘mission statement’ of sorts is one I’ll come back to later as it is very informative of his larger approach to creating a classroom culture. For high school, he attended a new charter school in New York City, where the structure and order, as well as the sense of community, appealed greatly to him:

My high school was like that’s where I had the break out year, coming out of my shell type thing. I was pretty smart there, but I didn’t study, one thing I should have did was study, it was just like, I could just pass everything without studying. Like I take a test, and I’d might get a C or something but I was ok with a C, I didn’t feel like studying, but I didn’t get an A.

As part of the first graduating class, he experienced a group of educators who were figuring out how to create a school community. The way the staff interacted with each other and with students demystified the reverential aura of school had and created a sense of joy, care, and camaraderie, and even though the Principal was soon indicted for a financial scandal, it remained something he valued as a unifying, free-wheeling experience:

I loved school. My school was like really dope, you know charter schools you have like younger, my teachers were like 24, 23, you know, they were dating each other, just like fun, funny, and…yeah, they wasn’t like hiding it, you walk past the bar, and [see them] drinking and …it’s just like, “ok”. They were really, really, really, cool. Some of them it was probably like their first year teaching anyway. It was a school where…if you didn’t come, you like missed out, like you feel like you missed out on something.
His own family’s expectations around education made him prepare for a career in medicine, but he wasn’t engaged in college until perhaps too late. After graduating with a degree in biology, he became interested in education somewhat accidentally through his work as a school paraprofessional. Unenthusiastic about biology, he was somewhat adrift, considering enlisting in the Navy and applying to a variety of jobs. He only got the paraprofessional job as a place-holder while waiting for other interviews. He was assigned to work with a variety of schools in what is known as “District 75,” a district serving students with a range of special needs. The experience transformed his outlook on students and caring:

[District 75] was crazy, but, it kind of like opened me more to like caring about kids, cos, it’s like, wow, you know. A lot of kids really are going through a lot, and the parents must be going through a lot because we have them for this amount of time and it’s a lot of work, you have them basically forever. Because you know I’ve never really been around kids that had autism for that long a period of time, or wheelchair bound, where you have to wipe their spit every minute, for that long period of time, and I'm like, wow, somebody really has to do this every day, or change a pamper, you know, it was just crazy, you know me changing pampers for a 16 year old kid was really different.

He was soon transferred to working with in a General Education setting, and by chance was given the opportunity to lead a small group of students:

One of the places that I went that made me want to be a teacher was in [this] school and, it was 2 teachers, I don’t remember their name or anything, and they basically had me have a group to myself, as a para you don’t really have to do that because I would have the 1 on 1, so you wouldn’t really give me a group. So they had me teach a group of kids. That’s when I really fell in love with it, like, “This makes sense.” So I went Teaching Fellows, all that good stuff.

He was placed in his current school, MS/HS 4, a small 6-12 school, where he works mostly in the middle school. The school is located in a part of the Bronx filled with housing projects, train tracks, and warehouses, and it always seems on the border of chaos. Though I had been to the school many times in the past, I had forgotten the nervous and electric energy that swirled both in and out of the building. When I arrived for my first interview with Chiemeka, it
was dismissal time and as I approached I saw the tell-tale signs of a fight bubbling. A student staring daggers into the distance, peers circling and making comments both supporting and egging him on, an adult playing the part of level-headed mediator, offering reasonable adult advice. A strange buzz. While checking in at security, the buildup broke as the student tried to bum rush the entry and search out the unidentified target. A guard, however, expertly blocked the door, and once the dust settled I entered.

The building is shared with a high performing charter school whose bright branding and ordered functioning seemed like an accusation. MS 4 is a newer school that had replaced a failing middle school, and it has its own feeling of comfort. The main office is bustling, the teachers seem to know every student, and the hallways, though lively, are also alive with energy. There are copies of an inspiring student-produced literary magazine filled with poetry, and recently earned trophies shine in a display case. It was a place that Chiemeka spoke of alternative tones of affection and confusion, and that informed positioned him as interesting participant

**Paige Rhodes, Vocational High School**

Vocational High School is an older building, constructed in the early 1900s on the site of an old municipal utility facility. The utilitarian spirit is apparent in every aspect of the school, it is stripped to the most necessary and functional elements. The entrance area is mostly unadorned, the hallways are bare and simple, and classrooms tend to be have a few instructional posters and signage and nothing else. Ms. Rhodes’ classroom, by contrast, is flourishing with living and growing things in every corner. “I'm really big on life,” she says, as she takes me on a tour of her classroom. There are all sorts of flora and fauna, including a hamster, madagascar roaches, a praying mantis, a cocoon for future domestic beetles, flowers, growing radish seeds,
Two aquariums. Most of these creatures are taken care of by students, and their presence reflects what Paige values in a classroom space and in her own life.

When I was younger...we had a lot of pets...I was going to be a vet. And at a certain point in my life I just decided I could never euthanize an animal, I just feel so, I have such a strong sentiment for all animals and I just couldn’t do it.

The way she speaks about life is similar to how she speaks about her students—as something that is necessary and vital. “I love my kids,” she says several times in our interview. As a teacher, Paige operates with a strong sense of mission and justice. She takes her work with students seriously, including the mundane aspects like ensuring a clean room to the more exciting events like running a dissection lab, because the project of creating a classroom community means has deep significance, an act of importance in. “I feel obligated that students have an understanding of the world,” she says at one point. As I’ll demonstrate later, she believes deeply in her connection with students and the lasting value of what happens in her classroom; it comes across as a vital act of nourishment and growth.

Her sense of purpose as a teacher seems odd within the environment of Vocational High School (VHS), a so-called “Career and Technical” high school serving about eight hundred students. The purpose of such schools is to offer students the chance to earn a certificate in a range of skills-based trades that they can use for immediate employment or potentially for acceptance to college. The school is overwhelmingly male; in the class I observed, there were only three girls out of some 25 students. VHS is currently on state lists of schools in need of improvement, and represents many of the struggles common to such schools. Many classes are over-enrolled, there are students with IEPs who do not receive the services they need, or have clear needs that are yet to be registered. In Paige’s class, there was one student who stood out clearly to me as on the autism spectrum, an observation that she confirmed in our debrief.
interview, yet received no official services. Paige teaches 9th grade Living Environment and a
section Advanced Placement Biology, but also runs a series of clubs and is the leader of the 9th
Grade Faculty Team. This represents significant responsibility in a school where, as Paige relays
it, many teachers don’t display the same level of commitment. She portrays it as a school culture
where teachers are left to do their work; “My classroom could be on fire every single day and
[administration] would have no idea,” she says. It also seems like the largely veteran faculty
prefer it that way and have absorbed an indifference to their work. She shared an anecdote from
earlier in the year when her hamster had somehow escaped its cage and she (Paige) had been
asking other teachers for help in locating the pet. It was found several days later scurrying across
a classroom on the floor below her:

People are just so nonchalant about things here. Some people are like “Oh man, I’m
going to keep an eye out,” but the people were just like, “Whatever.” Like, the teacher
who was in his room, I went to apologize to him for causing him a disturbance, and he
was like “it’s fine, I have mice in here.” And…I guess, he didn’t care. No one does.

Paige, by contrast, cares very much. Her classroom, with its numerous class pets and
plants, is warm, inviting, and familial; it’s clear that students feel at home in the room. There are
board games stuffed in one closet, a student-created anime character on the whiteboard, and
students buzzing in and out during our interview. She opens her doors during lunchtime to
dozens of students because she feels the lunchroom “is a very volatile place.” Twice a week she
runs different clubs, an anime and an art club.

The general indifference that she sensed from her colleagues can sometimes provoke
frustration. For example, an important act that she engages in is feeding her students; she has an
entire close dedicated to snacks procured through a standing monthly online order, and she feeds
her students during clubs and whenever they ask. Some of her colleagues apparently question
this arrangement:
For afterschool, kids know they can come, and if a kid is hungry, you’re not going to be learning anything if you’re hungry. Adults are like…they’re like “Why do you feed them?” I’m like…“Why….have you ever been hungry in your life and felt that feeling? How could you expect a child to like have the capacity to learn when they are legitimately hungry?” And kids don’t abuse, like…people ask me “Don’t kids take too much?”

The fact that adults would even ask such questions is a source of frustration. It spills over into her feelings about how the school is underserving her students academically as well: “I feel angry for my students, and I think part of the reason admin doesn’t engage with me is because I’m very clear about how I feel about what’s right for students.”

Paige is aware of her unique situation as a young educator without family obligations of her own. Paige is from Phoenix. Her mother is Mexican and her father is “from the Eastern United States,” but only when I bring it up does she consider that she is Mexican or Latino in any way. Being Mexican, or white for that matter, are not something she views as overly significant to her role as a teacher of largely students of color: “It’s not like a super prevalent part of my, it is an important part of my identity but not a part that plays out in the classroom.” Later, I’ll explore the way Paige perceives the impact of her age, education, and gender. More than any other teacher in my group, Paige played on these aspects of her identity to connect with her students and establish her authority in the classroom. Still, her reflections on growing up between two identities reveals her thinking about the expectations and outlook on education that her parents held:

Sí, yeah, hablo un poco de español, pero no bueno. The kids always make fun of me, like “Miss, you’re a gringa!” I’m like “Yeah, I am.” But, yeah, I do [speak Spanish]. My parents, I didn’t speak Spanish growing up in the household very much except when my mom was yelling at me, because my dad doesn’t speak, I mean he does now more, he spoke English at home, and I kind of feel like a lot of Puerto Rican families and stuff where there is a weird stigma, my mom was like very weird about us speaking Spanish
Her parents were insistent on Paige being successful in school, which includes having what were perceived to be the skills to be fluent in the languages of the institution. She was a good student who earned good grades and stood out academically, but she also remembers the pressure from her parents to be successful. She remembers her innate curiosity and love of reading helping her greatly in school. But, she attributes her success to her ability to follow rules: “I would say, like, more than anything I was just a compliant student and I always did what I was told.” Part of this was bred through a strict household where a failure to follow rules was perceived as dangerous:

My parents had a paddle. I mean, just like a lot of my kids, that’s just the way it was, not that I would do that necessarily to my children, but I was like terrified, and I’m not now, and I love my parents, but I was terrified of making mistakes and not being compliant.

In high school, while she continued her academic success, she also felt the pressures of a rigorous International Baccalaureate curriculum with a long schedule that had her at school for twelve hours a day:

I graduated with like 39 college credits, it’s insane. The amount of work and the pressure, I imagine it’s similar to Stuyvesant⁴ and places here, I imagine it’s a similar level of pressure where it was just too much. And I did not enjoy high school.

This translated into decisions that she now describes as “risky”. At the end of her time in high school, she was involved something that was serious enough that she didn’t want to go into detail, but despite a full scholarship to in-state colleges, she took her curiosity and academic preparation and left for university in Colorado.

In college, she worked towards a double major that prepared her for medical school. Every summer, she worked at a summer camp for students with chronic illnesses and got the

---

⁴ An elite ‘specialized’ high school in New York City, with admission granted only through an examination.
experience of being an educator, “a good melding, because I love kids and I love science.” But it was a job working at a doctor’s office that steered away from medical school toward teaching:

I saw so much inequity in how the white male doctors were treating patients of different like identities. I just couldn’t handle it, I cannot address these systemic... problems as a doctor who can see patients for so little, and like the way I was treated at the office was very negative, too, because of the fact that I’m a woman, and it was just like a very weird experience for me and it turned me off so much

Education, then, became a pathway to explore and address, through action, the injustices she had seen in her college work experience. Still, after being accepted to Teach for America, she still only intended to teach for a few years and then return to medical school. Her plans have since changed; in her third year teaching, she envisions a longer commitment at this current school because of the very strong connection she has built with her students. She wants to see them graduate and even mentioned the possibility of starting her own school.

Anita Basile, MS 5

Unlike my other participants, Anita reached out to me and volunteered for this study. When we first spoke on the phone, participating in the project seemed like an important exercise for her in becoming a better teacher and understanding why she was there in the first place. I met her for her first interview on the day before Thanksgiving and we stayed talking in one of her classrooms – she is a traveling teacher that works in four different rooms - until well into the evening and the rest of the building was almost completely empty. She is thoughtful, reflective, and, as a third year teacher in a school with a fascinating dynamic, endlessly interested in her strange situation. As we wrapped up our first interview she described it as “probably the best therapy session ever.”

Anita teaches 6th grade social studies, which represents a new grade and curriculum. Though this is her third year teaching, it’s only her second at this school. Why she left her first
school was vague, but what is clear is that her first year at MS 5 was challenging. Last year she taught 7th grade social studies, including a self-contained classroom though she is not certified or trained as a special educator. It was a very difficult experience with several classroom management challenges (including a group of children she called ‘runners’) a co-teacher who was fired mid-year, and sporadic administrative support. I’ve had the chance to witness some of what that environment must have felt like as I waited at the school. The ‘waiting room’ is a comfortable bench in the hallway outside the main office, a perfect viewing spot for the students who appear to frequently eject themselves from the classrooms. They usually enter the hallway, raise a great deal of echoing noise that eventually prompts an adult to step into the hallway and meet the situation with more yelling, and the trudge back to bang on the door of a classroom and demand re-entry.

MS 5 is a larger middle school with about 1100 students. Anita’s experience last year took place on the 2nd floor. When we first met, she started by giving me a quick tour of the building and I realized that though I had been to the school before I had never been above the 2nd floor. This is significant because MS 5 is quite literally a tracked school. This tracking is not hidden behind shared student schedules or teachers working across student groups; it is instead separated into three distinct ‘houses’ that are physically segregated and have their own group of teachers. The Star house, located in an annex building, is the most selective house and draws students from a wide geographic area with the goal of preparing them for admission into the best city high schools. The Gold house is a non-screened neighborhood ‘mini-school’ that takes students from the area; this is where Anita worked last year and it is located on the 2nd floor. This year, she works in the Eagle house, also a selective house but with slightly lower standards than the Star house. I didn’t know about any of this when I visited and as we ascended to the
fourth floor where Eagle is located, I had the sensation of walking into a different school: calm, peaceful, well-lit, welcoming art work on the walls.

Though the house names are somewhat euphemistic, Anita expressed that teachers and students are very aware of the differences extending across the school. For students in the Eagle house, they are given a message of exclusivity from their beginning in sixth grade:

Ms. Tyson [the Assistant Principal] gave this whole speech about “you were chosen to be here,” and, [the students] are conditioned with very high expectations. And that’s not how students in Gold are treated. And that’s something that we speak, that was spoken about in Gold, like none of this is a secret.

The students in more selective houses also get certain impressions of their peers in Gold house which they then extended to the teachers who worked there. Anita experienced this when she was assigned to be a substitute teacher in the more ‘advanced’ houses:

It’s just, like, talk. When I would go and sub in an Eagle or Star classroom last year…I’d walk in and introduce myself, and immediately when I said I’m from Gold, everyone, there is like fear in the kids. And, they think I deal with delinquents…therefore I must be the toughest person in the world. Neither of which is true, obviously

The school seems to be doing moderately well on most official academic measures, but there is also a wide and apparent gulf in performance between the students in the different houses. Students enter the school at vastly different levels of performance, and their experience at MS 5 leaves them in considerably different places by the time they complete eighth grade.

The previous year, a small tabloid sensation took place involving racially charged incident between a teacher and students. This incident, her placement in a special education classroom as an unqualified teacher, the school’s tracked structure, all combine to create a sense of uneasiness and distrust. “It’s really messed up,” is how Anita describes it. The most recent school survey indicated that only 49% of teachers trusted their principal. Anita had her own
perspective on the administration which will be shared later, but at one point she provided this analysis:

…[It’s] more of a story this school needs more bodies…It needs so much and that’s also…it gets frustrating because I sometimes feel like if havoc isn’t breaking lose there is no attention, but then at the same time if havoc is breaking loose, there is no attention.

After a trying two years, Anita’s current experience as a 3rd year teacher in the Eagle house is interesting. She is clearly more confident, assured, prepared, and in control of her work. Many of her cherished ideas from her own philosophy of education – student choice, the importance of critical thinking, trust, culturally responsive teaching – are all being expressed in her work.

Anita’s own background represents an interesting journey into education. She was raised in the outlying wealthy suburbs of New York City and attended private Jewish Day Schools. The experience was memorable for the caring teachers and close community that developed among the small school population. More importantly, there seems to have developed a sense of belief that she remembers fondly:

I went to a private school, so it was privately funded, um, which also meant that like there was a lot of like, there was a lot of freedom in what the kids could do. Um, and before like I was able to comprehend the politics of that, I loved that. Like I loved the community that I had in my school

At the same time, she also remembers struggling with learning and having been diagnosed with ADD. This had a major impact on how she performed in school and she remembers having to work extra hard to get strong grades, including seeking out teachers for extra help and advocating for more time on exams. Attending school with the children of affluence showed her the possibilities of free exchange in the classroom, of a strong community, and of high expectations for students. She suspected that she likely would not have gotten good grades if she didn’t have parents and teachers who expected it of her. As the same time, she also
saw an “obnoxious” side of students, for example when others would brag about using
prescription drugs to focus in school. As I’ll discus later, these reflections on what an education
could look like all influence her current philosophies of teaching. It has also helped her come to
terms with her identity as a white Jewish woman and her perceptions of the privilege that carries:

I grew up going to Jewish day schools and there was this like this rap group that came to
my school called Bible Raps and they had this song called “I’m not White, I’m Jewish.”
And it’s like really catchy and growing up me and my friends we joked around about it,
but as I began to explore that I honestly, I don’t know, I don’t really like that because I
think that when Jewish people say that they’re not white they are hiding away from the
fact that like walking down the street if I’m not wearing a Jewish star, I’m white. And I
carry that privilege.

After high school, she attended college out of state and studied psychology and politics.
She was considering going into private practice or working in international aid, but neither
option appealed to her. She was contacted by a recruiter from Teach For America and the
mission of the organization resonated with her; and so, she found herself teaching at a middle in
New York City out of college.

It’s hard to pin point her opinion about teaching; she never shared that she always wanted
to be a teacher, or that she loves teaching now. And while in some ways it seems that she’s
fallen into teaching, she is certainly not indifferent about her work and shows a great deal of
commitment to her work. For example, she runs two clubs, the student council and the debate
club. Both require a great deal of coordination and seem to be under-supported administratively.
For the debate club, she doesn’t receive any compensation for the weekly after school practices
and there was some uncertainty about being paid for the weekend competitions; but she still
carves out time to be with these students:

I personally don’t really care, like if they were going to pay us for Saturday I was going
to be like “That’s messed up.” But it’s an hour after school, it’s not that much time, and
like, there is really not that many after school activities.
She is frequently staying late after school to plan her lessons. She values her relationships with her co-teachers; for example, one teacher interrupted our interview to deliver chocolate, and she clearly had an easy rapport with another co-teacher who was cleaning up the room during another part of the interview. Yet, she also seems to display a sense of futility about her work; during our interview I asked multiple times if we should close the door for fear that some of the statements she was sharing were probably best kept private. At another point, she seemed to acknowledge that the way she was working was not sustainable. Her statement on the matter reflected the toll of working in a challenging school where she felt her work was perhaps not having the impact she had hoped, and where she questioned the value of a long-term commitment to the bureaucratic structure: “…it’s just like there is a lot of work to be done and I think that I do feel like I’m working towards something but at the same time it’s really frustrating. I can’t do this for 20 years.”
CHAPTER FIVE
“IN IT FOR ME:” ORDERING CLASSROOMS IN SUPPORT OF AUTHORITY

When I asked my participants to share with me their idea of the purpose of education, their responses showed an idealistic belief in what schooling could provide for students. “I would say the purpose of school is to prepare students for college,” answered Chiemeka, echoing a common refrain in educational circles. Anita said the purpose of education was “building a well-rounded person.” Chanda described the expansionary potential of education to “help [students] understand that it’s not just them or this tiny part of New York that they live in. That everything that happens is impacting random people across the world.” None of these responses included an allusion to wanting to control students, inhibit their movements, or restrict the possibilities of agency; yet control was an unavoidable element of their work as teachers within the institution of schools. This chapter looks at the ways teachers intentionally and thoughtfully controlled their classroom environments. Control, in this sense, moves beyond the often negative and oppressive connotations; while it certainly aids in creating order, teachers used their decisions around control to align with their greater ambitions for education.

In contrast to typical descriptions of power as a brute force that unflinchingly and mercilessly compels actions in service of some institutional goal, or descriptions of authority as stern and demanding voices that issue commands, the creation of an ordered classroom started with mundane decisions around the use and arrangement of classroom resources, specifically, time and space. While teachers were beautifully eloquent about the larger purposes of school, they paid considerable attention to such decisions and the topic took up a significant portion of our conversations. Creating an ordered environment was more than the straightforward organizing of desks or learning materials, or the segmenting of time in a lesson; it was also a
manifestation of deeply held beliefs about what a classroom should look like and how students could be made to feel as they participated in learning. A picture emerged in our conversations of teachers fully believing in the importance of structure, and fluent in thinking about the various methods of maintaining control through their arrangement of the classroom environment. At the same time, the teachers showed themselves able to reflect on more fundamental sources of their visions of a classroom grounded in their identities, memories of schooling, and background.

Authority is a relationship of allegiance that is voluntarily given in exchange for peace, direction, and safety, and relies on a trust that the environment will provide security (Sennett, 1980). These decisions around the ordering of a classroom, then, were an important part of teachers seeking to establish stable relationships of authority. An interesting theme is how concrete decisions about tangible issues like seating arrangements or pencil distribution came to represent larger messages about choice, faith in students, and care. Most fundamentally, however, the important part of a relationship of authority is the relationship, and teachers here described how in creating environments of safety they were really speaking about building trust. This chapter is an exploration of these themes, and along the way I hope to highlight how parts of my participants’ identities and background, as well as their visions for education, crept into their work in classrooms.

Controlling Space and Time in the Classroom

The teachers in my study group had given considerable thought to how they wanted their classrooms to be structured. Though they were concerned with order, this is not to say that they expected or even desired fully regimented lessons; rather, they had thought deeply about what it takes to create the conditions for safety and learning in their classrooms. The varying ideas that
they shared about order showed a sophisticated ability to mold time, space, and movement in their classroom environments. These efforts were part of a larger project to educate and empower students.

Each teacher gave me a fascinating and detailed tour of their classroom space. Their personalities, desires, and hopes as a teacher was often reflected in the way the walls, materials, and desks were all presented. In almost every tour, one of the first topics to come up was the teacher’s rationale for a chosen seating arrangement. Lydia, for example, had gone through many configurations of the desks before settling on a bent row shape of her classroom. This allowed students to work in groups while still directing them to the front of the class. It also allowed her to freely move around the classroom and monitor student work or answer questions. Every week on Friday, she changed the seating arrangement so that students always were sitting with new classmates and could also be given different group roles:

I do it to keep them on their toes. I also do it so that everybody gets to know each other, and that’s why by now, we’re mid-November, everybody really knows each other, and even those people they may not be the best of friends, maybe they don’t want to sit where they are sitting, but you know what? They’re going to learn to at least respect one another.

Lydia viewed her control of the seating chart, and specifically it’s shifting nature, as a way for a hint of uncertainty to grow amongst her students in a way that reinforced her authority as the person in charge. On the day I observed her lesson, a student asked in the middle of the class if the assigned seats were going to change. Lydia later revealed that this student was sitting next to her new boyfriend and was nervous that the new relationship would come to an end once seats were moved. But this uncertainty also had a community goal behind it by creating some comfort amongst her students and pre-empting the strife that can develop between classmates who don’t know one another well. When she shared more about this strategy during our focus group, no one was surprised that the seating was so highly controlled, but they were impressed
that Lydia made the effort to shift seats weekly. Her plan even involved a common bit of purposeful manipulation where she allowed students to choose their seats on the first few days of school so she could notice alliances among students, then she shuffled the seating to separate talkative groups.

Chanda, similarly, had thought a great deal about the way desks in her classrooms would be arranged. Because she shared all of her classrooms with other teachers, she had collaborated with her colleagues to find the best desk arrangement to minimize distractions and maximize learning. With one class, the teachers had decided to shift the desks from rows of paired desks to rows with desks clustered in groups of three, two and one, “just because they’ve [students] been very chatty so I’m trying some other styles.” The most “chatty” students were isolated in the lone desk to minimize talking. When I observed her class, she had given a student named Lawrence the teacher’s desk in the front corner of the room as a place to sit so he could spread his things out, and she later explained this decision because he had severe ADHD and couldn’t focus with the clutter.

Chiemeka also used the location of student seats to minimize distractions, though on the day I observed him his present arrangement wasn’t working as well as he hoped. One student, Jose, was repeatedly getting out of his seat and peering out the window at the traffic. When I asked Chiemeka about this student, his first response was “I want to move his seat so much.” His initial reaction to an issue of student engagement and distraction was to consider the spatial location of that student. Sophia’s high school classroom had perhaps the least organized grouping of desks, yet she showed herself to be constantly thinking of how the desks should be arranged. “Well, the groupings, I’ve been playing around, literally, for the past 3 years. Just ignore that part,” she said, pointing to a box of pig fetuses for a dissection lab. The desks, a
cumbersome standard model of chair and writing surface welded together, were clustered together in a sprawling group of seven or eight desks. “The reason why it’s like this,” she said, “is I originally had it groups of three. But I had one activity in my anatomy class where I needed long tables like this, so I kind just improvised.” The result was a collection as close to a conference table as one could get with this model of desks; Sophia adapted around the limitations of her room to create the conditions for the classroom she wanted, one rich with discussion that didn’t isolate students. The grouping of desks was particularly valuable to support one of her important elements of instruction, discussion:

Just because conversations within the table are much richer because you don’t have your typical, like, okay, these two are the ones who are talking. It gets a little loud but it doesn’t matter, because they’re actually talking… I want [the desks] to be like this so that they can actually have good discussions because we’re talking about momentum, I want them to talk about their observations, so that kind of stuff.

The resulting noise is something that Sophia doesn’t mind. In fact, it’s something she desires. Talking, often highly regulated in classrooms through long periods of imposed silence, is a quality that Sophia described to our focus group as one that she actively seeks, even when it is spontaneous in a whole group discussion:

The thing is, how can I say this? If students call out constantly, I’ll get annoyed but if they call out here and there because, like, sometimes, it gets really interesting, and it sparks a memory of this thing, a type of fracture that they saw, like, “Oh, Miss, Can I ask you a question?? They get really, really, excited and I kind of dig that. So that’s why I’m not like, “Oh my god, shut up! Put your hand up!” I’m not that kind of teacher just because I don’t want to shut down their curiosity.

The groupings, then, represented an effort by Sophia to arrange her classroom in a way that allowed students to talk. Working with a different arrangement wouldn’t support the type of class culture that she wanted, and she wouldn’t be the teacher she wanted if she was constantly enforcing norms of quiet. She welcomed the freedom for students to express questions,
curiosity, and excitement, even if it meant things get a bit loud. And while talking was permitted, remaining isolated is something that she used her authority to prevent. On the day I observed her classroom, Sophia let students sit where they want – as she generally does – as long as they are in groups. The groupings tended to be self-organized by gender, and on this day a student named Henry went way to the back and sat alone – with me – at a cluster of tables. As the lesson turned to a review assignment labeling bones on a diagram of a human skeleton, it became clear that Henry was completely lost. Sophia came over midway through and gently directed him to another group of girls where he could start catching up. While he was reluctant, he eventually moved, took out a worksheet, and started to fill in his model. Sophia was allowing her students a freedom to talk, a freedom to choose one’s seat, but she was denying her students the option of remaining apart.

Arranging desks in a way that promoted student conversation was an intentional break with Sophia’s own schooling. As I described earlier, Sophia had attended a high performing charter school in New Jersey, and though she earned good grades the experience had left her with bitter memories of her experience as a student:

I felt so…I felt locked up in that school. Every time I went, I felt I was going to prison. Worse than prison. God forbid you talk during the transitions, you get points off. You get detention. It’s not like “Oh you shouldn’t be doing this, this and this.” No, it’s “Five points off!” Literally pointing in my face, yelling at me. Oh, I got yelled on. And, the thing is, I was a very obedient child.

Sophia spoke at length of the harsh treatment she felt she had received, particularly a lack of empathy for her family’s living conditions and the enforcement of disproportionate consequences for minor infractions like not having a proper binder. But the impression that had stuck with her the most was the feeling of being unable to express herself: “Yelling out…or talking out, or having your curiosity sparked and you just yell out an answer or something, you
get in-house suspension for that,” she explained. Her arrangement of the classroom, then, was more than an effort to foster collaboration, but a philosophical statement about how students should be treated in class, and how she wanted students to feel in her classroom. It was a rejection of her own experience of schooling.

Sometimes students moved their seats voluntarily, and teachers could decide whether to accept and contest these choices. In Paige’s class, a student named Helen had moved seats on her own as the class transitioned from independent work to a group game. “Helen sometimes sits there when she comes in because she likes to do the Do Now there, because it’s quiet, but she moved next to Ryan, which, that’s really her assigned seat.” While there are assigned seats, Paige seems to recognize that students have their own preferences which can vary throughout a class period. Her approach to assigning seats allowed for student agency and also incorporated her own beliefs about providing a safe environment with considerations of the gender dynamics in her room. Helen was one of only three girls in a class of over thirty; thus Paige had thought deeply about where she wanted her girls to be positioned. “They’re in spots strategically,” she said, referring to the girls in her class:

Like, one of the students in the back corner, the young woman who’s sitting in that table, she’s been having a really hard time because they are teenage boys and they don’t have, like, all the human skill they need yet to understand. It’s not like they’re blatantly being disrespectful, but they just don’t necessarily have the capacity to understand her emotions at the age, I feel like. She’s been having a really frustrating time, just in general.

The spacing of her students was important to Paige; she sought to mitigate the potentially harmful interactions she perceived boys might initiate with girls. Her spatial arrangement could provide a buffer against boys’ inability to empathize because they don’t have “all the human skill they need to understand.” Paige felt that the dynamics of gender were powerful enough that she needed to take measures to contain the male students; even though they’re not “being blatantly
disrespectful,” they are clearly doing something less blatant to make one student have a difficult experience. “I’m, like, very protective of [the girls]” she explained. With a classroom full of boys, she wanted her loudest students to be far apart and she wanted her three female students (one of whom was absent on the day I observed) to be protected from the most immature students. Paige saw her boys as very energetic, and though she mentioned that she frequently changed seats, seating wasn’t always a solution. Her reflections on the lesson I observed showed both her belief in the value of grouping to support engagement, as well as the limits of seating. Her lesson involved a lively and joyous game of “memory” where students had to match a vocabulary word about cell biology with its definition. At one table, I observed five boys quickly turn the game into a boisterous affair filled with playful insults, whoops of laughter, challenges, and a semi-serious bet that would require the loser to admit that the superhero Flash was in fact better than Spiderman. Their interactions filled the whole class with noise and energy. Paige described this in her reflections on one student from the table in particular, Joseph, who along with his friend Anthony, had been a source of much of the noise:

I don’t know, it’s not always that his energy is not productive. A lot of times he has a lot of very productive energy and my classroom is always a little bit loud. I think he looked up one time when Anthony was making a crazy noise but they were just legitimately engaged in the game. Like, he was like “I got my cards!” and I think there is something productive about that. It’s hard, though. They’re just one of those pairs, no matter where I put them it becomes worse. Today they had a rough day though.

I got to see firsthand the rapid fire exchanges and bursts of laughter that Joshua and Anthony shared. There were indeed “crazy noises,” and they were also quite engaged in learning the vocabulary. Still, their noise is a problem for Paige and she later described both students as having a “rough day.” It was an issue that couldn’t be solved by moving them because “no matter where I put them it becomes worse.” Paige thus sees her classroom as a gendered space
where boys naturally take up a more room and have an energy that needs to be harnessed; meanwhile, her girls need to be protected and shielded from the male energy in the room.

If seating was an important way teachers managed space to create order, another domain was the organization of materials. Teachers made intentional decisions about where they kept frequently used materials like pencils, papers for passing out, and lab supplies. As they took me on their classroom tours, many teachers elected to show me how their materials were organized and proudly showed off their various tubs, cubbies, and cabinets they maintained. This concern with materials extended to the way wall space was decorated. Because every classroom at Chanda’s school was shared, she had been assigned to arrange one room and she did so with inspirational quotes, an organized classroom library, and academic sentence stems that could be used in her instruction. Lydia also proudly showed off the many decorative touches in her room; the first thing she mentioned to me when we met was the anchor charts that were hanging and that she was hoping to get laminated soon. Her whiteboards were neatly apportioned into different sections and the day’s goals, called a “learning target,” was clearly spelled out (Figure 4). There was also an agenda showing the plan for the day and reminders about how to properly put the heading on one’s paper and the day’s homework. She listed the “team roles” for students in their groups of four, titles that changed every week with the seating chart (Figure 5). Each desk had a laminated “accountable talk” card posted on it with sample sentence starters such as “That’s a good point,” or “I kind of disagree because…” that students could use in a discussion (Figure 6). She also showcased two cell biology themed shower curtains that she had hung over two closets that had lost their door, part of what she described as her desire for a “cool, warm, environment, somewhere where [students] want to be.”
**Figure 4:** Section of whiteboard with the team roles for students, roles that changed every week as the seating chart shifted.

**Figure 5:** Whiteboard in Lydia’s classroom with agenda and the day’s learning goals.
Lydia’s classroom design wasn’t just a product of her first few years teaching. The idea of a classroom as “somewhere where students want to be” was consistent with her earliest memories of schooling. Lydia, who at another point described herself as “Latina, but indigenous,” grew up in the Lower East Side of New York, which at the time was a low-income neighborhood. Through some sort of efforts on the part of her mother to work around of the system of zoned schooling – “I won’t say how I got there, my mom had to do some stuff,” is what she had to say about that – Lydia attended a school in the wealthier Greenwich Village neighborhood:

One of the schools that I went to when I got out of my neighborhood… the school had just opened. And we called our teacher by their first name, and that was the first time I had ever been exposed to that, and I thought it was so cool, and all the teachers were young, and hip, and I thought they were so cool.

The experience of being surrounded by young teachers with an air of “cool,” where you could call them by their first name, was a different experience of school. Attending this new school was a way she “got out” of her neighborhood, “there were quite a few kids that we got bused in from the Lower East Side,” she remembers. Elements of Lydia’s future classroom can be heard in the way she described a specific room where she received special reading instruction as a child with a teacher, Ms. Laura:

Ms. Laura was laid back, and very calm, and she had this very refined way about her. I felt very at ease with her, like, even when I got pulled out. I never felt awkward…I thought I was in a special club. We used to go into another room and just read, we had our own books, it wasn’t like we were reading together, everybody was reading something different. The room was really cool, too. It was, like, pillows on the floor, and carpeting, we used to go in there, and you’d read by yourself for a while and we would come back together, and we’d talk about what we read.

Figure 6: “Accountable Talk” placecards taped to each group’s table
Lydia fondly describes this room from early education, a place where the teacher is calm and cool, “refined,” where as a student she felt welcomed and part of a community but also valued as an individual who could read “our own books.” The feeling of reading for joy is mixed with details about the actual room – the carpeting, the pillows, and a place where students could sit on the floor. Lydia’s current classroom doesn’t have carpets or pillows (though, as we’ll see, she does have a fish tank), but in the way she organized space, asked students to sit with one another, and included neat signposts on the white board, she was fulfilling a vision that had been set in her mind for some time.

The walls and materials in Sophia’s classroom were a continuation of this statement. In the back of the room were crates of pig fetuses for a future anatomy dissection lab. Just above them were a series of inspirational quotes that she had chosen from a variety of activists like Huey Newton, Angela Davis, and Rosa Parks (Figure 7). “Those are, like, my ultimate top six favorite quotes of all time,” she said, and as we’ll see Sophia used the power of thought-provoking quotes to build community in her classroom. On a wall of unused lockers, Sophia had posted collages that students had made “on who they are and who they want to become,” (Figure 9). And, adorning a model human skeleton in the front was student-illustrated coffee cup with her name on it that a student had added right next to a portrait of her that another student had made (Figure 8). All around Sophia’s classroom were reminders of the value of student voice and ideas subtly magnifying her philosophical belief in the importance of discussion, perspective, and student-centered ideas. Anita, who didn’t have a classroom, gave me a tour of all the posters and maps in one classroom that she had purposefully chosen, including a poster from the recent Woman’s March that she felt added a culturally responsive message to an otherwise lacking school environment. Then Anita gave me a tour of her travelling cart, a
standard supply cart on which she had carefully organized textbooks, handouts, her laptop, and school supplies. By contrast, Chiemeka didn’t think deeply about the environment and only recently had begun to see the value in considering it: “I don’t really have that mindset of decoration,” he explained. Even his description of the materials on the wall and other displays as “decorations” suggest that he hadn’t fully valued the power of the classroom environment to communicate messages of welcoming, safety, and care. He used instead a minimization of the work and value that other teachers had invested in creating a classroom environment; Chiemeka was slow to realize their importance. Eventually, he began to hear from his students: “They used to always complain, but it was more like, my mind doesn’t go there with decorations, so I’m trying to be better with that.” Hearing from his students and seeing what they noticed opened up

| Figure 7: Inspirational quotes that Sophia placed prominently in the back of her classroom. |
| Figure 8: Artwork – including a modified coffee cup on the human model - by Sophia’s students prominently displayed next to her teacher desk. |
a new realm of the classroom world that he could control. When he finally realized the impact, it spurred a commitment to improve and his room did indeed have a handmade sign for lab safety rules.

While materials and decorations are important, maintaining cleanliness was also a major concern. This was part of Chanda’s routine at the beginning and end of the class; she had students stand up and check their spaces for any stray scraps of paper and any other garbage. Lydia emphasized how critical a neat and orderly room was to her: “I’m real OCD about cleanliness, so the kids already know, I’ve been training them since day one.” Not only is cleanliness of utmost importance, she wants her students to be in on the work of maintaining a clean classroom. She described her method for ensuring cleanliness:

I tell them, every time they come in, I do spot checks, before every class is dismissed, we stop 5 minutes before they have to look around their desk…It gets messy and I don’t mind that…if we cut something up and we get papers, you’re cleaning that up, I’m not here for that, I’m here for instruction, and I also think it’s good home training.

When I observed her class, I didn’t actually see this routine. Still, her wording is interesting, using phrases like “good home training,” and “training them since day one.” They
reveal a connection to deeper beliefs Lydia held about her role as a teacher in preparing students for life: she believed that it will better prepare students for life at home, but more importantly for society.

Well, in my class, it’s not just getting ready for college, it’s also like just knowing simple things. Like, some of these kids, they’ll walk up the stairs with you, open a door, and slam it in your face. And it’s not that they’re trying to be rude, it’s just that nobody every taught them to, like, say “Good Morning” to their teacher or an adult, or hold the door for an adult. They just don’t know, nobody ever taught them those things. Things like preparedness, things like being on time, they just don’t see that. Nobody is teaching them that, when they get out of school, maybe they know how to do a math problem, or how to solve an equation, but they’re not going to know social cues. They’re not going to know to be to work on time, and that’s not going to help them.

Insisting on cleanliness is part of a larger purpose for Lydia, one that sees her role as greater than a teacher of content. In fact, in our discussions, we rarely talked about her subject area – science. Instead, as a teacher of minority students from a low-income Bronx community, she sees her role as almost parental. She repeats that “nobody ever taught them,” casting herself in the powerful role of a source of knowledge about social cues. Later, she explained it this way: “A lot of my students’ parents are super young. They don’t necessarily have the same values that my parents did, and I’m trying to bring that back to them.” Her own background as a rising young employee in a Manhattan cosmetics firm informs her confidence in taking on the responsibility of this home training in such cues. She perceived her students as ignorant of many of the norms of middle class society – “it’s not that they’re trying to be rude, it’s just that nobody every taught them,” – and her own background can help fill the void. It also further validated her authority with students: “I think it’s funny, some of the kids didn’t know that and I actually shared it with them this year and they’re like ‘No way, Miss. You used to do this, this, and that?’ I’m a jack of all trades. And they like that.” She ended by taking on the perspective of her students: “‘She’s different, she’s so different than my other teachers.’” The cultural capital for
success in the work world are often conveyed at home (Lareau, 2003), but as Lydia viewed her students coming from home lives where no such instruction was taking place, she saw herself as fulfilling that role by insisting on things like cleaning up every day. Skills that are essentially the values of the corporate workplace – preparedness, punctuality, pleasant non-threatening greetings, and, of course, cleanliness – are central parts of a curriculum she independently created as a teacher.

Paige’s classroom was a truly unique space to visit and her intentional decisions communicated her values, her outlook on teaching, and her belief about students. “I’m really big on life,” she stated as she proceeded to take me on a tour; fish, hanging plants, insects, a hamster, nascent praying mantises and multiplying cockroaches were occupying every corner of the classroom (Figure 10). Students were largely responsible for maintaining these living things and on a board was a list of various student jobs. Though she used the word ‘life,’ there were other ‘non-living’ things in the classroom that pointed to the spirit she wanted to foster within her classroom. Drying art projects, doodles on the whiteboard, a closet with emergency hygiene supplies for students and another with snacks, all filled the room with a vitality and sense of care. Her room seemed less like a classroom for learning – though it was that – than a place for students to be cared for. Her approach to classroom materials was also a demonstration to how she had grown as a teacher and used her decisions to empower students. She pointed to a large bookshelf filled with various close-able clear plastic tubs. Each tub was legibly labeled with things like pencils, glue sticks, or scissors (Figure 11).

I love, just, every time I look at it I think back to my first year teaching and I think I was doing too much. Like kids would ask me for pencils and I would always have them in my desk or whatever and I would have to get it and, like, ten minutes into class a kid would be, like “You never gave me my pencil!” It was a disaster. But now the kids know if you need a pencil…you can get it for yourself, and I think it’s gotten rid of some of the issues of students using that as a, like, a crutch or an excuse to not do what they’re supposed to be doing.
I observed a student taking advantage of this feature when Helen got to retrieve a highlighter while the class was reading and annotating a short piece. When I discussed it afterwards with Paige, she said she hadn’t even noticed and was proud that this kind of empowerment had taken place. But the self-regulated materials procedure she had instituted also gave rise to problems with overuse, a fact that as a biology teacher she leveraged as a learning moment. When I first visited, the pencil tub was empty. She used this as a way, rather than punishing students, to teach about the “tragedy of the commons:”

So I used that as an example of…it’s like, ‘listen you guys, this is what is happening to the Earth’s resources, you didn’t manage your resources, no more pencils for you….but pencils have just become, and so I told them, we had expectations, no one is mad at anyone, it’ just the way life works. We use the pencils and the pencils are gone.’ I'm going to get them more eventually.
Paige had designed her approach to materials as more than a way for maximizing efficiency in the classroom but also a unifying mechanism and a way to teach important conceptual content about community building and resource use.

The use of class materials, the organization of wall space, and the arrangement of desks, are all ways teachers make decisions about classroom space. Time is another important element that teachers control and it was mentioned several times. “Everything is timed now,” Lydia said, describing a change in her teaching practice. Several lessons had a visual timer projected onto the screen, and teachers frequently interrupted independent or group work to call out reminders of how many minutes were left before the next transition. Chiemeka made a show of the timing of an activity as he leaned into his smart watch and said, “Siri, set a timer for two minutes.” Reflecting on his lesson afterwards, he was most frustrated about the timing. “I just lost ten minutes,” he lamented after describing how he needed to come from a different classroom, the
entry routine took longer than expected, and he had to set up his laptop and projector before the start of class.

But even as teachers showed great concern with time, they also had to flexibly meet the myriad challenges to the limited time they had with students. These minor fluctuations to time threw off the broader plans teachers had for their lessons as their days were interrupted frequently by holidays, assemblies, in-class visitors and phone calls. The ending of Paige’s lesson was completely thrown off because the school bells had been inexplicably shifted to ring four minutes early, a number that Paige was able to precisely identify as she reflected on how she needed the extra time. Lydia had eight such interruptions in the lesson I observed. To accommodate, teachers spoke of shifting topics to different days, shortening lessons so that they could cover a subject, or even skipping a lesson to catch up. They all taught multiple classes of the same subject and having these classes synced was important so that one group of students didn’t get too far ahead. The scheduling of “double periods” – back to back periods meant to give teachers extra time with students for lessons like labs – posed a special pacing challenge that teachers met by stretching out lessons. Lydia’s lesson on atomic structure that I observed, essentially a reading worksheet with questions, was administered during such a double period. Her students were mostly done with about twenty minutes left. Not wanting to leave a void, she quickly filled the empty time with a whole-class review of her exit ticket, the small worksheet she gave to summarize the lesson. In her mind, the extra time was a happy surprise: “It just never happens…it was kind of cool that that actually happened.” The extent to which teachers must adapt to shifting schedules and malleable time limits underscores not only decisions they make to manage time, but also how much the use of time is out a teacher’s control, a topic I’ll return to in Chapter 7.
The control of space and time in classrooms was buoyed by the enactment of various routines. Routinizing classroom life is a way to systematize the procedures that take place, maximize time, and ideally remove the teacher from having to give constant corrections and reminders about rules and expectations. Every teacher in my study described routines that they used, sometimes at length and in great detail. Paige’s class, designed with a stated belief in empowering students and fostering student choice, had an organized and mechanical system whereby students would grab their notebook, organized by number, from a bookshelf as they entered the classroom, and returned the notebook to same spot on the way out (Figure 12). Her detailed explanation of the entry procedure shows how her thinking of a simple moment like the beginning of class involved complex decisions:

This right here, when students first walk in, is their notebook shelf. So, all students, all five classes, they have a number as well assigned to them. I had a problem with students losing notebooks, or, like, I had them in buckets last year and it took a long time for them to find their notebooks per period. And so when they come in, they see number two and they are always number two and they grab their notebooks and go sit down and immediately start their “do now.”

Entry is one of the most critical times in a lesson, and Paige’s system has evolved with time to make a routine that allows students to quickly enter, find their learning material, and keep their materials organized throughout the year. As we’ll see in Chapter 7, her decision to use notebooks instead of worksheets or binders is also an intentional choice to resist what she sees as deep-seated ideas of learning ingrained in schools. As students exited, they were also asked to select a bin in which to place their exit ticket based on their self-assessment of their learning from the day’s lesson – one bin was for “Mastery” and another was for “I need help.”

Chanda’s entry procedure was also quite detailed:

As soon as I walk in they’re working on their “Do Now.” They have their packet in their binder, so the first thing I say is “We’re on day 22,” or whatever it is, silent, the first five minutes is just silent. And then we do the “Beginning of class check,” which is when
they are able to stand up ... and there is a whole check that we have to go through, so it’s, um, seat assignment, make sure they are in the correct seat, dress code, make sure their uniforms are tucked in, shoe laces are tied, no trash on the floor, so they look around if there is anything on the floor they can go throw it out. Homework is written on planner, they write their homework at the beginning of class. And, only necessary materials on desk.

This routine is repeated every day, including the day I observed, and in every class of every teacher of the school. An interesting feature of this school is that the students stay in their classroom from period to period while teachers rotate – that is why this procedure starts when Chanda enters rather than students. Chanda leverages her school structures to have a smooth opening to her lesson.

The teachers I worked with had thought deeply about how to arrange their classroom environments. Such decisions involving considerations like the seating of students, the arrangement of materials, the messages and images on the classroom walls, and even the use of time, were important means of controlling the experience of being a student in a classroom. Paige used her approach to materials and space to express a belief in her students’ ability to control their own learning, as well as in her beliefs in the power of community. Sophia chose to bring Henry into the classroom. On the surface these conditions of learning were a somewhat concrete realm where a teacher’s choices could influence their level of control in the classroom. Yet, the decisions were about more than control; instead, they showed a serious concern for how their classrooms would make students feel as well as a recognition that order needed to be maintained. They also at times demonstrated a belief that authority in the classroom could and should be shared. An even less tangible area where teachers sought to influence the classroom environment was through their relationships with students, a topic to which I now turn.
Relationships in Support of Order

As I interviewed my participants in their classrooms during their prep periods and after school, their doors seemed to be constantly bursting open as students peered in to ask questions and say hello. Several times, I had to turn my recorder off so a student could start a conversation. Paige even resorted to putting up a sign on her door that said “In a meeting with another adult.” It didn’t really work, and at the next passing period students were knocking on the door to ask quick questions or request to store their book bag behind a desk. When I was walking up the four flights of stairs with Franklin to his classroom, we were stopped in a stairwell by a student on the basketball team and together they spent a few minutes talking about sports mindsets. During one interview with Sophia, students who slipped out of their other classes kept entering to ask about an important upcoming club meeting. Though sometimes involving a smile or terms of endearment, these small moments revealed the seriousness with which my participants approached relationship building, and how much they valued these connections with students.

Anita was one participant who valued and worked towards building strong relationships with her students. She thought deeply about relationship building and found value beyond simply knowing students: “Relationships are so important and it really builds a trust and makes [students] understand that I want to know about their lives outside of academics.” I got a glimpse of how Anita turned this belief into action when she was late to our observation debrief interview. As I approached her to start our interview, she was fully engaged in what appeared to be an emotional conversation with a student in the hallway. There were big gestures, pained tones, and finally, a heartfelt hug. Asked about it later, Anita shared that it was a member of the student council – which she advised –who was upset about the way council decisions were being
made, and it was important to Anita to let the student know that her (the student’s) emotions and reaction could be safely shared. Relationships mattered to her and even served as a lifeline during her difficult first two years of teaching:

…something in the past few years that was stressed is relationships, relationships, relationships. And when I was struggling with management that’s always something that pulled me through; I always became so close with the worst kids.

Anita described her commitment to building relationships by telling me about her efforts in the lunchroom, typically a cacophonous place in the school avoided by teachers. Anita, however, made it a point to appear in the lunchroom: “Something that I also like to do is at least for five minutes, just walk around [the cafeteria], say ‘Hi’ to everyone.” Her presence in the lunchroom this year was prompted when her previous strategy of lunchtime relationship building ran up against school structures designed to minimize student movement during the lunch period. Previously, a classroom would be open at lunch and students would elect to bring their food upstairs. The arrangement changed this year:

[The administration] got more strict about bringing food up, so they don’t want the kids bringing food upstairs so then it’s like ok, the kids, you can go downstairs, get your food, and then come up if you have a pass, and it’s just like this whole ordeal. And it’s like, well, how am I ever going to hang out with a kid if they don’t feel like they need to be making up homework? Um, so, I like to do that.

The moments at lunch were particularly important to her because that was when her philosophy of giving students multiple chances on academic work was enacted. She allowed and expected students to come to her at lunch to make up assignments and quizzes or just receive more help, a pattern that she had relied on when she herself was a student. Anita grew up in suburban New Jersey and went to private Jewish schools there and in suburban New York City. “I was not doing well,” she said, recalling her time as a high school student, “I don’t think I ever ended up getting below a B, but I would fail all these tests…I just, like, didn’t get it. And it was
stressful that I was trying and didn’t get it either.” Her strategy was to meet with her teacher during lunch – “I really struggled in math, math was very difficult for me. But I literally met with my math teacher, like, every day for lunch.” This helped her get better grades, and her approach as a student can be seen now in her work as a teacher. She was making sure that she was available for her students at lunch, even if it meant going downstairs to the lunchroom to escort them upstairs.

Lydia sometimes used moments where classroom expectations were breached as a possible sign that a relationship needed to be built. In her class, students have a science notebook which they are expected to take home every day and in which their homework is to be done. She did not have the same organizational procedures of other teachers like Chanda and Paige, and thus students frequently were forgetting their notebooks or even leaving them in the classroom; however this was also a moment where she could learn a bit more about a student’s situation: “I’ll say something to them, like ‘Where is your notebook?’ And once they say ‘I don’t have it because,’ I can tell where it is going and then it’s time to like, ‘Let’s step outside real quick.’” Though, as she admitted, Lydia can be sarcastic and harsh, her demeanor in class was full of laughing and smiling, a communication that she genuinely enjoyed being with her students. Other teachers similarly used jokes, silly calls to attention like “If you hear my voice, clap fifteen times,” and private conversations to build rapport in the moment with students.

Chiemeka spoke explicitly about using humor. For example, the earlier example of his using the voice command on his smart watch was something he felt “[students] kind of find funny, it kind of lightens the mood a little bit.” He described other types of silliness he used:

Sometimes I’ll be like “Three, two, one, Uno!”, and the kids, like, hear that and be like, “What?” I try to be funny throughout the day. I always tell the kids, like, “I woke up really, really, nice today, don’t kill my vibe”
The message of “don’t kill my vibe” filled his discussions of how he communicated with students. “Me? I’m more chill,” he said, contrasting himself with his co-teacher who often carried a clipboard, dispensed negative points, and used a raised voice at students. Later, he said “It’s true. I am very laid back, I know myself. I’m really, really, laid back. I don’t get mad that much.” He then shared an example from earlier that day with a student who had been kicked out of his class:

So we have one kid, Theo. Like he’s probably, number one, I’ll say, disrespectful. Plus, he doesn’t listen. Even after everything happened [with being kicked out], he came to me and was like, “Yo, can I get a chip?” or something. I’m like, “Yeah.” And he’s like, “Oh, you like me now?” You know like, you know, quick banter. “Oh, no I don’t like you yet, I’m still mad at you,” I’m like, “Oh alright.” You know stuff like that. So I don’t hold grudges.

In recounting this, Chiemeka’s voice conveyed the playfulness of the interaction and betrayed none of the friction from being kicked out earlier. He was able to balance his frustration that the student “doesn’t listen” with his desire for connection. He seemed to have found an approach to working with students that had avoided the deteriorating effects of holding grudges. But perhaps the biggest way that Chiemeka showed he wanted to build strong relationships and let students know that he cared was through his own strong attendance. He took pride in never being absent:

I wake up every day. I don’t take off work. I like coming here. In a sort, I’m like, “You never going to have a sub.” And, they get mad “When are you gonna be out?” I think almost every teacher has been out so far. Not me. “When are you gonna be” – I’m never, I’m never going to be out. It’s not going to happen.

These types of interactions were important enough to Anita and Sophia that they both carved out instructional time for ‘icebreaker’-like activities. Due to some scheduling changes, I had a chance to see an abbreviated versions of both teachers doing this which I will draw on several times throughout this work. Anita used part of every week for students to share a
Highlight of the Week, a simple activity that her students looked forward to. When I observed Anita’s class, as she asked for students to share their highlights almost every hand shot up. The things students shared were both touching and mundane; one student went go-kart racing, another had his turtle escape its cage. Still, they were another node in a matrix of connections that Anita wanted to build with her students.

The efforts to intentionally build relationships were always being conducted in a gendered context. Often, an impression of boys as aggressive was expressed. Lydia was afraid of her small self-contained class that she taught with two other female paraprofessionals, and described “not feeling safe, needing like a[n adult] male in the room, because the other ladies in the room do not feel safe, we have huge boys in the room, some of which are violent.” Franklin approached his male students with the assumption that they are more prone to misbehavior:

Speaking of detention, of course you give the boys…boys are more unruly, but most of my 7th grade girls are mature than my 7th grade boys. Doing stuff that are puerile joking around, the lack of following instructions, um, the lack of focus. So that’s what I call maturity…

For Chiemeka, gender intersected with his race as he experienced the teaching profession for the first time and shows how both can combine to influence perceived authority. As he was applying to teaching jobs, he was working as a substitute paraprofessional and thus was assigned to different schools on a daily basis. In his travels, he was struck by the reception to his presence:

Every time I went to a school and I showed up, the female teachers really got excited because they felt like they needed a male figure in there, because I don’t know if they felt or the respect wasn’t there, but they really, really wanted me to be there…I could see there was a reception, more of a “come here” type thing when it comes to me being a male, especially black male, in the school, cos it was like a lot of female teachers, educators in general…
Chiemaka’s maleness and appearance as a ‘black male’ granted him a certain power as other educators imagined his potential ability to control classrooms of rambunctious boys. In this view, classrooms have a racialized male energy that is best countered and contained by a similar racialized male authority. In practice, Chiemeka drew on a different type of gendered construct for respect, that of a caring, proud father, which combined with his joking personality. At one point in his lesson he spoke into his smart watch and gave a voice command for a timer. Then to the class he quipped “Look at how cool I am! I’m practicing to be a corny dad!” Part of how he presented himself was with a light, paternal persona, his authority softened by adopting an out-of-touch but caring fatherly stance. This set him up to display his pride at various points when students met his academic expectations; for example at one point as he led the class in a discussion of heat transfer, a student blurted out the word ‘exothermic,’ and though the term had little to do with the topic at hand Chiemeka seized on the word and stopped the lesson to declare “I feel proud as a teacher, cos you remember!”

Paige located a key element in her relationship building to be her gender and made it a potentially legitimizing source of authority. The student population at Vocational High School, where she worked, was almost 85% was male, and as a female teacher Paige drew on her gender to build strong relationships with her students and to enforce her authority. Paige described herself in this way: “I’m from Phoenix, Arizona. My mother’s family is from Mexico, my father’s family is from, like, the Eastern United States.” Some of her students were aware that she had Mexican roots, and, as she was fluent in Spanish, they could joke about it. But she quickly downplayed this ethnic identity:

It’s not, like, a super prevalent part of my - it is an important part of my identity, but not a part that plays out in the classroom. Neither really is my Whiteness, I don’t think, which I think is very interesting. But I think my age and my gender, and my educational level are bigger pieces of my id that come out in the classroom.
It’s not that Paige was unaware or blind to her ethnic or racial presentation; she described the numerous trainings she had participated in through Teach for America to become aware of “how you show up in spaces because of your race and identity.” Rather, in working with students she felt that her connections were more heavily influenced by her gender. “My gender definitely has - the fact that I’m a woman, I get - not get away with - I can interact with students in a very different way than my male colleagues.” Though she stopped herself, she can in fact get away with different types of behavior. She uses touch frequently in her practice, placing a hand on a student’s shoulder, getting near students who are off track, or even playfully hitting them on the head. Here is an example she gave:

We have a lot of students who are very easily triggered by males, and if they say something a certain way those kids just go off, like, there’s full-fledged like breakdown mode, but I can say, like, not snarky, you know, teasing things to kids, or say, like, this morning I had a kid and I stopped because he was saying something over me and he never talks over me. And I kind of stopped, and I made like a little more of a scene than I usually would. And I was like, “What’s happening now? What is happening to the world?” And he laughed, he thought it was funny…but if a male had done that to him, he would have gone, like, and maybe part of it is who I am, too. Even if I were a man I could not have behaved that way.

Paige’s relationship building, then, draws strength from her gender, and specifically from the stark gender difference with her mostly male students. This has created a space where she can enter as a non-threatening voice and call upon a narrative of respect by joking “What’s happening now?” as if to say “You wouldn’t disrespect a woman like that, would you?” This is a non-threatening gesture, a moral reminder of how students know they should interact.

Exchanges like these raised eyebrows among some of her colleagues who questioned her boundary setting with students and expressed a nervousness about her using touch. But for Paige such actions are consistent with how she viewed her work with students as maternal: “I think I am, like, more motherly,” she said as she described the frequent check-ins with students and her
communication with parents. She even adopted some of the duties typically expected of mothers: “They’ll ask me to, like, clean stuff for them….or ‘Oh, can you sew this for me?’ Just traditionally things that parents would do, and I often honestly do it, like …fine, I can sew.” The maternal role is one that Paige embraces even as she relishes the juxtaposition with her position as a scientist who can confidently and competently raise animals and plants and also lead the school’s challenging Advanced Placement classes. Like Chiemeka, she draws upon a parental metaphor, but the maternal identity is qualitatively different in the way it allows her to interact with the mostly male energy in her classes.

Indeed, several students actually call her ‘mom’ or ‘mother,’ a somewhat strange and jarring occurrence that I observed in her classroom – jarring because Paige is quite young for a teacher and there is a clear racial difference. For some students, it was something of a joke said with a mixture of adolescent sarcasm and pride. Paige, adopting an accepting stance, mostly ignored these distractions and focused on the content of her students’ comments. But for other students it is more sincere and serious; there were four students in the class that I observed who Paige later mentioned were on the autism spectrum. One student gently held her hand as she described the directions for the lesson’s activity. Another student unassumingly brought his

![Figure 13: A sketch of characters on the whiteboard by members of Paige's Anime Club](image-url)
worksheet up to her and said “Mom, is this right?” Paige’s femaleness allowed her a type of trust and closeness with her mostly male students that could likely have not have been generated were she male.

Paige also had perhaps the most thought-out approach to building relationships. She spoke of using non-verbal signals, touch, and offering students a “sixty-second break” when they were struggling. This was all in service of investing students in the class, or as she described it, to push students to be “in it for you.” This is contra-Waller, who wrote of a school where students listened to the teacher out of fear that their lack of compliance would be met with some punishment. Rather, Paige was counting on students complying because they feel cared for and part of a community. To do so, she expended a considerable amount of time outside of her scheduled teaching assignment to be with her students in a number of ways, chiefly through a variety of clubs – STEAM, Art, and Anime. While she is clearly a gifted scientist, art and anime – which are out of her comfort zone – are opportunities to get to know her students.

I think that it is one thing to build relationships in class, it’s a very different thing to build relationships outside of class and I think that dynamic is what gives me my classroom management. And, this year, I think people like come observe my classroom management, and it’s not like I have a domineering personality, I’m clearly, like, very smiley and happy, um….but, like, social capital goes a really, really long way in this school.

It’s true; she doesn’t have a domineering personality. She is very gentle-natured, not quiet but certainly not an overly animated person. She has a calm presence that might be mistaken as soft. But her “classroom management,” the typical educational term for a teacher’s ability to control a class, is quite strong. Paige links her relationships to class order – relationships are “what gives me my classroom management.” Some of the students in the anime club, for example, showed their feeling of belonging in the classroom by taking over a small part
of the whiteboard at the front of the room with drawings of some of their favorite characters (Figure 13).

Paige had put all of her work with students together into a theory that, during lessons, leveraged the relationships she built with students outside of class time. Combining her control of space with her use of relationships, she positioned key students at different tables, eschewing an outright reliance on consequences and disciplinary structures and instead leaning heavily on trust. She even cited the corporate culture designed at Starbucks to round out her theory:

I think just the peer structure of high schoolers, especially people who are leaders amongst their group who have more dominant personalities, when they feel a certain way, other students kind of latch onto that feeling. It’s like, the whole Starbucks thing. You know? People like Starbucks so much because when the barista asks the person in front of you, they’re like “Oh my gosh, Tim, how was your baseball game yesterday?” The person behind them craves that relationship, and that’s why that’s...there is a whole thing about baristas. When students are like “Oh, wow, she knows a lot about my friends and his little sister,” it just, it makes people feel like a certain type of community.

Paige is making a startling comparison of her work in the classroom to the Starbucks coffeehouse chain. She is referring to one of the defining strategies of the company to not simply sell coffee but rather sell a “coffeehouse” experience, or as the CEO Howard Schultz famously put it, to create a “third place” between work and home where people could feel safe and enjoy a sense of community. It was this feeling, more than actual coffee, which was Starbuck’s chief product. Executives at Starbucks created a vision where the route to creating a unique customer experience was through strengthening the bonds between the barista and the customer and building “relational capital,” a different type of asset that valued customer voice (Gulati, Huffman, and Nielson, 2002). Schultz wrote in his memoir that the core of his company’s business model was to build loyalty in employees, including the thousands of baristas who interacted with customers. Employees who feel respected would have lower turnover, but more importantly “form an emotional tie to [the company] and buy into its dreams, they will
pour their heart into making it better,” (Schultz and Yang, 1997, p. 6). Obviously, the classroom is a very different place than a profit seeking enterprise; but Paige is drawing from similar sources for her theory of how to make students invested in her classroom. Talking with Paige for some time, it is clear that more than learning specific content, what is really being offered in her classroom is the opportunity to be part of a learning community. Both in and out of class, she seeks to build social capital – what Starbucks rebranded as “relational capital” – and she spends this asset when she seeks to motivate students who perhaps are not fully committed to working in her class. Like Schultz putting profits and customer experience together as mutually reinforcing, Paige has put learning (and order) and relationships together as equally necessary ingredients to creating a classroom culture. Later, I’ll share about some of the learning activities and approaches to working with students who may not meet her expectations as additional community building opportunities. This vision of Paige, painstakingly brought to fruition in the hours she put into afterschool activities, made its way into her seating arrangement:

You have even two kids at every table where you’re like, yeah, this kid is in it for me. …peer management is better than any other management because it’s not compliance, it’s, like, investment.

Paige uses relationships to transform the directions and restrictions of a classroom into an opportunity for community building, to turn compliance into investment. She sees her own personality, complete with the symbols of care and hope that it might represent, to be the best incentive for students to voluntarily choose to participate in class, to be “in it for me.” And, she has enough faith in the power and attraction of such a concept that other students who may not have the same relationships will want to follow suit and participate in the community that is being built. Being a full human for her students is an important part of her strategy to create an ordered class:
I think it’s important that you act like a human because if you’re just a robot that’s trying to teach the kids, they don’t know anything about you, and you don’t have human characteristics, it’s really hard to get anything done, any level of respect. Or hold them accountable or anything.

Paige emphasized that she wants her students to first see her as a human, a striking metaphor considering the impersonal and mechanical connotations often associated with large bureaucracies. Her school, a mid-size vocational high school in Brooklyn, has a very factory like feel to it; there is a shop room and a mock mechanic workshop where students can opt to be trained in entry level maintenance work. Unlike many small high schools that were opened in the early 2000s in New York City, this school still maintained the assembly line feel of an institution designed to produce students ready for blue collar labor that embodied early twentieth century school reform. Into this space, Paige explicitly rejected being a faceless “robot” who just teaches kids; she wanted to be a real human. Paige doesn’t shy away from the need for order, which is why she references the need to get things done, have a “level of respect,” and to hold students “accountable.” Relationships, while positive and nice to have, are also an important part of a teacher’s project of maintaining order, while the order she creates likely supports the further strengthening of relationships.

Discussion

That teachers are concerned with ordering space and time, or that they view relationships as important, aren’t by themselves remarkable; routines, procedures, and relationships, after all, are a common focus in teacher education and in-service training. Research on culturally responsive teaching practices has argued that to establish classroom spaces focused on academics, teachers must build a structured environment with clear rules, tightly regulated procedures, and an assertive manner of upholding the classroom order through limit setting and
consequences (Brown, 2004; Ware, 2006; Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007). Furthermore, teachers can uphold these high expectations by leveraging personal connections and students’ own cultural resources. (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009). The novice teachers in my study embody many of these characteristics in their approach to building a supportive classroom culture, but their reflections and their teaching also show how the decisions they made around questions of authority are reflective of their own individual beliefs and identities. To maintain order, the teachers in my study used several strategies that reflected and communicated ideals about education that were shaped by their own backgrounds.

The ordering of time, space, and movement in the classroom, what Metz (1978, p. 98) terms the “arrangement of the situation,” are some of the most fundamental decisions a teacher can make in supporting an ordered environment. A classroom could be designed so all students are facing forward, or with groups that fostered small group discussions. Materials could be arranged in a way that positioned the teacher as a necessary gatekeeper to accessing resources, or as Paige did in a way to allow students to take control of their own learning. The visual environment in the classroom could be intentionally designed to communicate messages of care, support, and welcoming. Sophia plastered a wall of lockers with a visual reminder of students’ goals for the future. Lydia’s neat arrangement of her whiteboards, with an organized presentation of the day’s homework and goals, conveyed a clear and predictable order to her students in each lesson. How a teacher structured time also was influenced heavily, as we’ll see in Chapter 8, by ideas about the nature knowledge and how students learned. For example, class time that was devoted to students independently interacting with some content is quite different from a class discussion where every student’s voice is contributing to a shared project.
The efficient use of time and space were supported by clear and well-designed classroom routines, and in their classroom tours the teachers were often able to point to artifacts in the room that allowed for a smooth and orderly functioning of their lessons. Paige’s system for students grabbing their notebooks on entry was one example of this, as was Chanda’s “beginning of class” check. As Metz (1978) writes, “The power to define the situation is important. Routines confidently established take on an air of inevitability. Students come to see them as an inherent part of school,” (p. 98).

Teacher efforts to control and order their classroom spaces also took on gendered dimensions. The dynamics of public schooling make clear the relevance of gender to relationships of authority in teaching. In the United States, teaching has long been a mostly female profession (Cuban, 1993; Taie & Goldring, 2018) and perceived as a women’s work (Olsen, 2008, pp. 2-10). In such school environments, gender can set a tone for establishing authority. Research has shown how schools produce gendered identities through the rituals, attention to dress, and varied discourses that fill hallways, lunchrooms, and classrooms (Pascoe, 2007; Ferguson, 2000; Morris, 2005; Thorne, 1993). If power can be considered an ever-flowing force that produces subjects, then processes like the monitoring of how clothes are worn, the interpretations of playground behavior, the celebration of heteronormative relationships, all work together to create the outlines of discrete gendered identities into which students are fit.

This gendered view of schooling can be seen in the use of space. In Thorne’s (1993) reflections on years spent as an ethnographer in schools, she describes how semi-regulated spaces like the playground or the lunchroom support a choreography that periodically integrates and then separates boys and girls, in the process sketching gender boundaries. Students are sorted and spatially organized throughout the school day in ways that maintain gender
boundaries (pp. 34-45). Typical descriptions of boys’ and girls’ activities differed greatly; boys were described as rough and tumble, concerned with hierarchy and competition, and prone to frequent and often playful verbal threats. Girls, by contrast, were described as engaging in ‘gestures of intimacy’ such as hair braiding, cooperative activities defined by turn-taking, and forming small and intense shifting friendships where best friends can devolve rapidly into estrangement and back (pp. 91-108). These trends extend into the classroom where an array of school practices are involved in gender production. Teachers engage in a ‘verbal making of gender’ as they attribute qualities, symbols, and values to each gender. When Paige describes her two excited students, Anthony and Joseph, she reflected on how “no matter where I put them it becomes worse,” reflecting how she saw them literally taking up a great deal of space in the classroom. To mitigate this, she had to be “protective” of the few girls in her class and seat them strategically. Indeed, in many classes it was boys who yelled across the room. Though teachers might sit students in mixed-gender groupings, the students would often self-segregate into same-gender groups as they engaged in side discussions.

Thorne (1993, pp. 91-108) argues that such boy/girl distinctions are too simplistic and do not do full justice to the range of gender expressions in a school. Educators often fall victim to a “Big Man Bias” and make generalizations based on the force of personality of a few vocal, charismatic, and confident males. Indeed, in Paige’s classroom several other tables of boys were quietly, compliantly, and studiously, playing the memory game. Even at Joshua’s table the students not only politely engaged in turn-taking, they even paused their game to ask if I wanted to play. In other spaces, typical gendered activities were complicated. And, while many students worked together in same-sex pairs, there were also several examples of cross gender pairs.
Teachers, then, worked to control important conditions of their classrooms in support of creating an orderly environment, even as such conditions were complicated by the dynamics of gender and their own backgrounds. Together, they worked to support a teacher’s authoritative position with respect to their students. While many of the decisions were unilaterally imposed, they also invested students by considering their interests and agency. Students often wanted to make such policies work. Chanda’s students often led the opening routine even as she controlled its design and structure. A student in Lydia’s class proactively asked about an upcoming seating change, legitimizing the normalcy of weekly shifts in seating. In Paige’s class, the management of materials and class pets were delegated almost entirely to students. Not only did such decisions reflect a need to invest students in the order of the classroom, they also were examples of how a teacher’s own personality and background was intimately related to how they structured their classroom. The seeds of Lydia’s design of her classroom space, including the decorations, the clarity, and the emphasis on cleanliness, could be found in her own experience in a warm and safe reading classroom. Anita’s trips down to the lunchroom to get students for make-up work was a mirror of her own work in high school to make up her low grades. Sophia built both her seating arrangement and the physical signs on her walls to counter a repressive school experience and foster the type of discussions from students that she valued. Teachers worked to create themselves as legitimate figures of authority capable of assuring order and worthy of students’ trust; they did so even as they worked within structural limits on time and space set by their schools, and larger cultural constraints such as those latent in gender dynamics.

Beyond controlling the arrangement of the situation, teachers found a source of great power in their relationships with students. Relationship building has been frequently written about as a vital component of creating culturally relevant classroom spaces (Brown, 2004;
By getting to know students, connecting with student interests or spending time outside of class, teachers were making an effort to communicate to students that the classroom belonged to them as well. Many of the characteristics of relationship building in the literature – such as terms of endearment, non-verbal interactions, using cultural connections, and touch – were on display. While, as we’ll see later, such relationships were critical for teachers to turn even their harshest statements towards students as expressions of care, they were also indicative of what Metz (1978) described as a type of personal influence that created a sense of obligation in students. When Chiemeka offered one of his troublesome students a chip rather than holding a grudge, in a way he was creating a small bond of obligation that he could rely on down the road. This interpretation allows relationships to be seen not only as a way to build trust in students, but also as a way to translate relationships with students into compliance, to “hold them accountable,” as Paige suggested. Relationships were thus a form of social – or “relational” capital - a metaphor that Paige explicitly drew upon to inform her work as she implemented an approach directly out of the corporate culture of Starbucks coffee stores. Starbucks spent little on marketing or advertising, and each customer purchase was usually of low value; thus, the company relied on customer loyalty and repeat visits. They had sought to take the simple retail experience of buying coffee, one that could be faceless, impersonal, and standardized, and turning it into an emotional event centered on human connection. The connections formed with customers were built on enthusiasm and kindness and rewarded with repeat business (Tillquist, 2009, pp. 50-51). Paige’s approach to relationship building is similar and could be captured by Howard Schultz’s own words – “When you meet with an experience at a higher level, where you are treated positively, where someone goes out of her way to make you feel special, where you're welcomed with a smile assumed to be intelligent, the experience stands
out,” (Schultz and Yang, 1997, p. 250). Relationships, of course had their own intrinsic value, but they could also be seen as an asset that could be exchanged for student allegiance.

More fundamentally, relationship building was a key way for teachers to create authentic connections with students that signaled care; like Schultz’s Starbucks stores, they were a way to make students feel special. Kathleen Nolan, in her book *Police in the Hallways* (2011), wrote about the impact of students of being made to feel welcomed. Her ethnography took place in a Bronx high school very much defined by a “culture of control,” with security guards in the hallway, a rigid discipline system, and deans on the prowl throughout the day looking for students who were out of line. The head of the school, Principal Alvarez, was all too aware of the alienating effects of this set up, and in an interview placed the work of teachers as the critical site where students could be valued or pushed away: “What's happening in the classroom? Do I want to be in the classroom? If I walk into the classroom and I don't want to be there, there's a problem. That classroom has to call me in. It has to welcome me in,” (p. 99). The teachers in my group had answered these questions by seeking to design their classrooms in a way that in fact called students in. In a system defined by bureaucratic impersonality and strict structural indifference, Paige believed it was “important that you act like a human.” Paige’s classroom was a place that, in its design, showcased and prioritized life. Sophia made a similar comment in describing why it was so important that she share parts of her experience with students:

I feel like there’s a very large disconnect between students and teachers. Like, we’re humans, we have our own story, and teachers are so scared to share their stories with their students. But in reality students want to hear that because they want to see themselves in you. And, I get it, some things are super personal but with something like this you can talk about a friendship that went wrong and students will be like, “Holy crap, you went through it? I went through it too!”

Like Paige, her humanity as a teacher is vital to connecting with students, and more importantly to making students feel recognized and welcomed. In the next chapter, I will look at
how teachers use their classroom structures and the foundations of relationships to uphold their authority even when it is challenged.
A classroom community can be a delicate place where order and good will may quickly turn to chaos and resentment. As we’ve seen in the way my participants have responded to questions about the purpose of education, many are drawn into the profession by the possibility of fostering empowerment and furthering justice. Teachers, and new teachers in particular, are often concerned with the challenge of maintaining an orderly class while furthering one’s goals and ideals of an empowering education. As teachers begin their careers, this can be reduced to a question of “survival” or just getting through the day (Olsen, 2008). Compounding things, teachers must often face this problem in isolation, a “private ordeal” that carries great weight in how external appraisals of one’s competence (Lortie, 1977, pp. 71-74). Taken to the extreme and over-dramatized, the concern with order can transform the classroom into a battleground. Almost a century ago, Waller (1932) typified this view when he described the dynamics between teachers and students as follows:

The teacher-pupil relationship is a form of institutionalized dominance and subordination. The teacher and pupil confront each other in the school with an original conflict of desires, and however much that conflict may be reduced in amount, or however much it may be hidden, it still remains. (Waller, 1932, p.194)

Others have pointed out that this bleak perspective is grounded in the observation that school is compulsory and students largely don’t want to be there; hence, teachers may appear welcoming and kind even as the threat of punishment lurks below the surface (Jackson, 1990; Metz, 1978, pp. 30-31; Lortie, 1977). Common dictums like never smile, make an example out of students, and don’t give an inch, are borne of this type of thinking. More hopeful scholarship acknowledges the very real benefits of education and the agency students can develop as the
result of strong relationships and a shared purpose for justice (Gay, 2010). This is the complicated and textured terrain of authority, a space where relationships of trust and allegiance are cultivated to serve a greater purpose. People exchange their compliance for the order, safety, and direction that relationships of authority promise to provide (Sennett, 1980). As teachers seek to establish such relationships, power is the subtext. Sennett (1980) describes relationships of authority as attempts to interpret the “architecture of power,” though the scaffolding may be hidden from view. Those who ‘have’ the power are often least aware of it (Delpit, 2006), and those who think they are using their authority for beneficial ends may in fact be furthering disempowerment (Nieto, 2008). My research participants were all in their third year of teaching and had carved out some personal perspective on power and authority. Though they showed a level of comfort with classroom management, they also had an awareness of all the ways that they weren’t fulfilling their students’ potentials. Anita, one of my participants, described this uncertainty in our focus group as we discussed order in classrooms:

What I was struggling with was the difference between limit setting and discipline, like, how much do you let [students] make the decisions?...You have to definitely lay down the line and that’s something I’ve struggled with in my first two years...But I also would like to give them more - I really want to give more student choice but I always find myself not...

In this chapter, I will be exploring this tension between limit setting and student choice, how teachers decide where and how to “lay down the line” and why sometimes they find themselves “not” working to empower students. The participants in my study offered a range of potential responses to such questions that revealed power and authority to be highly influenced by personal identity. Authority sometimes was a path to care, and even measures that might seem authoritarian – yelling, threats, personal challenges – could be recast as symbols of care if a bedrock of trust had been created in advance. The consequences of the fine line between caring
and domineering enforcements of power couldn’t be higher for the students who my participants were working with. Minority students are disproportionately the recipients of harsh and punitive responses to minor infractions in schools that can remove them from valuable classroom instruction and hamper their educational prospects. This hints at the complicated nature of relationships of authority, a bond that is constantly shifting and negotiated in classroom spaces.

Flexible Rules in the Classroom.

The setting of classroom rules is a first step in establishing limits in the classrooms. For newer teachers, setting clear and logical rules for students is often seen as a critical first step in creating productive classroom cultures. And, it is an opportunity for teachers to act with assertiveness (Bondy et al, 2007). While the teachers in this study certainly had rules, they also indicated that there was a good deal of flexibility in the interpretation and implementation of their rules.

“I’m not really super linear with my rules,” is how Sophia described her approach. She had a “One Mic” rule to ensure that only one voice was speaking at a time, and a more general rule of respect. She expected her students to be able to handle treating each other well, but she also expected a certain amount of chaos. She wanted her students to be lively, ask questions, and be excited, even if it meant there was a bit of disorder: “I think if I remind students that it is disrespectful to talk over somebody, they understand it, but I can’t control it if they’re super excited.” Her statement reflects a belief that students are going to be somewhat boisterous and will create their own discussions. Sophia had a “One Mic” rule, but as we saw in the previous chapter, she had designed her classroom to intentionally welcome and promote situations where multiple voices were encouraged. Sophia shaped her position as an authority figure into one of
almost equality with her high school students where both teacher and student voices have legitimacy. Sophia’s own background attending a charter school for middle and high school made her feel acutely the restrictiveness and, as she remembers it, dehumanizing result of tight classroom rules.

I absolutely hated when teachers talked down to me - don’t talk to me as if I’m a child! And, I think a lot of teachers, just growing up in this system, teachers really have that weird power dynamic towards students and they think that they are better than them, but we’re not better than them.

The prospect of correcting a student raised a complicated power dynamic that she recalls from her own experience as a student. Enforcing rules, if not done properly, could be seen as talking down to a student or treating them like a child. Now as a teacher, Sophia was purposeful about students feeling like they were treated as equals. She let them choose their seats to an extent. She gently reminded students about interruptions in class when others were speaking. Her tone was consistently warm and invitational as she prodded students to complete their classwork. In the class I observed, she never referred to or enforced official rules that she might have; she wanted her class to function on the less well defined but validating feeling of mutual respect. Chiemeka, similarly, couldn’t articulate rules for his classroom. “What are the rules?” he wondered when I asked him, “I don’t really have much rules, I don’t think with this class, I didn’t really have to put too much rules on them.” In his role as teacher, he didn’t see himself imposing order – putting rules on his students - but it was clear that there were some standards of acceptable behavior, although even this was variable. He expected students to do their work, but he also accepted and expected them to talk:

I’m not one of those people that feel like my classroom is going to 100% perfect. I tell the kids all the time “I don’t expect you to be 100%...but when I call you back, I do my Three, Two, One, that’s when I really need you to be silent, that’s when you get in trouble, that’s when you get the points off.” It’s twenty-six kids in the classroom, they’re going to want to talk to each other. They're sociable, it’s a sociable age, especially now
with Snapchat, they want to talk about this, want to talk about that. They don’t have their phones for the whole day, there’s gonna [be] stuff they want to talk about. Like, I get it. That point when I need you to come back, like, give me that time.

Chiemeka expresses an empathetic view about the needs and desires of students to be “sociable,” considering both their age, the class size, and the current internet culture. But he also reveals that he has a hard line when it comes to getting student attention. He has carved out two different types of spaces in his class, one that recognizes “there’s gonna [be] stuff [students] want to talk about,” and another where his authority is to be wholly respected, where students need to “give me that time.”

For several teachers, “respect” became a blanket term to indicate a contract of sorts between the teacher and students where, by being a part of the class students were agreeing to contribute to the decorum and order, and to participating, even nominally, in the teacher’s agenda. Lydia had a hard time remembering all of her rules - they were actually posted on her wall but as we were interviewing in another room, only a few came to mind – but the one she kept coming back to was respect. “Respect is the number one rule in my class. Everybody knows that, you can walk into any one of my classes and ask ‘What’s the number one rule in Ms. Rosario’s room?’ ‘Respect.’ They’ll all say it.” Sophia characterized it as follows: “The number one thing that I always say to my students at the beginning of the year is ‘respect is always reciprocated.’” Once again, Sophia’s times as a student in a charter school made her extra sensitive to the feeling of being treated as if she were ‘less than,’ an experience that she still described with stark emotions:

When I say respect, I’m not going to talk down to you…I just really hate when teachers talk to students as if they are animals, like, they [the students] are not human. And the thing is, teachers, need to understand where students come from. Because if you talk to me that way, expect to be disrespected.
If respect is a two-way street, Sophia understands that the concept includes the possibility of students justifiably questioning the authority of a teacher when a level of respect is not mutually maintained. She remembered and shared multiple instances from her time as a student where she felt disrespected, and she spoke with a genuine anger that a student might be treated like an animal or felt like someone was “going to talk down to you.” Her own identity as an immigrant and minority made her feel like she had the necessary perspective to “understand where students come from.” When she found out that one of her student’s attendance was getting worse because of a new job, it was important for her to validate that experience. Sophia herself had worked in high school at a Burger King, and this provided grounds for a connection through a common youth experience with her students. Her colleagues insisted that she confront the student, but she resisted:

[The other teachers] were like, “Oh, she’s working too much, Elmassi [Sophia’s last name] - tell her to stop working!” And I’m like, “No, we’re not going to approach it that way, we’re going to say, ‘Hey, why are you working so much?’” Because I had a teacher who said that to me and I wanted to slap him in the face. The second [the student] told me [that she worked] it took me back. I was like “Nope! Don’t want to be that person!”

Sophia’s identity not only influences how she interacted with students in establishing legitimate relationships of authority, it also guides how she contrasted herself with other teachers who might not be able to empathize in the same way. Sophia established a stance of legitimacy with her colleagues by claiming a shared experience with her students that needed to be respected, and she rejected outright adopting the identity of her colleagues who approached the working student without compassion, saying “Nope! Don’t want to be that person!” The type of person Sophia wants to be is one who respects and understands her students.
Lydia’s perspective on respect illustrated the negotiable and context-dependent nature of the term. Lydia’s malleable definition included her perceptions of how students lived and how they acted when they weren’t supervised:

What respect means in different households to different people is different things, right? So I can tell the kid, “In this class respect looks like One Mic, cleaning up after yourself, not using profanity in my room.” But for a lot of them this is how they hear their parents talking at home. The minute they leave this school, everybody curses and calls each other derogatory names, and it’s a joke. And so, there are certain things that when I say in my room, “We’re respectful,” there are certain things that you might come and see and be like. “That’s not respectful.”

Once again, Lydia positions her students as lacking certain skills for success in school and middle class society, and she identifies her students’ parents as the source of the deficit. In essence, she is saying that her students don’t yet possess the social capital that they might have earned from a stable family (Lareau, 2003). Because Lydia believes her classroom might not meet standard images of respectful spaces that are grounded in dominant norms, she adopts a calculation to ignore certain behaviors in favor of keeping her class going - “I have to let certain things slide because if I start going at every little thing, I’m not going to be able to get through the year.” In practice, her approach is similar to Chiemeka’s where she carves out spaces in which students can safely act in a way that might appear “disrespectful,” and as we’ll see she has tried to create other spaces where her word is final. Still, she does draw a line on certain behaviors and tries to respond. When she hears curses and derogatory name-calling between students, she described her attempts to do her best in addressing these moments:

It’s not like I don’t say anything. I say, “Remember, that’s street talk.” I told them at the beginning of the year. It’s like this, it’s not because I just say so, it’s because when you walk into a different neighborhood that’s not this neighborhood where everyone talks like this, when you go somewhere where they don’t speak that way and you speak that way, what’s going to be thought of you is that’s the only way that you speak.
To enforce her standard of respect, Lydia moved beyond drawing on the full authority of her status as a teacher to punish students, and instead she wanted to use transgressions as teachable moments about the real world, about domains where “street talk” is valid and where it is stigmatizing. Lydia’s complex and nuanced description of her identity greatly informs her perspective on the “disrespectful” student actions. She described herself based on race, ethnicity, gender, and place. “I do identify as minority, for sure,” she said at one point, and she interpreted “minority” to have multiple meanings. “If I walk down the street, I’m black. I’m not white,” she said, during our focus group. Earlier, she shared this description: “I think of myself as, I don’t know how to say it, like, I’m worldly. But I’m a very around-the-way girl, too. I’m very Lower East Side, very Bronx, you know what I mean? And I’m okay with that.” Lydia is certainly worldly; she grew up in the Lower East Side, went to college in rural New York, has traveled throughout Europe – where she first began to see herself as black – and had already had a successful career in the corporate sphere. But she is also an “around-the-way girl,” a term signifying that she is not naïve about the realities of the life of poverty and the unwritten rules that might govern the social actions there. In college, she had experienced the clash between her own background and white middle class norms. At the end of our focus group, after everyone else had left, she shared a time when her boyfriend at the time, who was white, used the phrase “cool beans,” and she recalled feeling shock at the radically different experiences in their lives that would allow someone to use that expression. This same boyfriend said to another girl that he wanted to have babies with a Latina because they are ‘hot and spicy’ and that they make great shortstops. All of these experiences seemed to be present as she discussed the significance of

5 A reference to the stereotype that Latinos are predisposed to being exceptionally talented at the game of baseball.
entering a place “that’s not this neighborhood where everyone talks like this,” and found its way into her structuring of norms around respect in her classroom.

Paige’s take on the concept of respect implicated her own notions of what the term even meant. Like the other teachers, she also couldn’t articulate the rules in her high school classroom beyond detailing routines for entry and getting student attention. Without strict guidelines or rules to enforce, she acknowledged that her approach was uneven: “I don’t know that I’m, like, the most consistent responder,” she explained. She did have a consequence ladder posted on the wall— a series of escalating consequences to be used when a student broke class rules – that started a verbal warning and rose to the seriousness of a phone call home. She was the only teacher to explicitly reference something like this, but she was becoming hesitant to use it as she increasingly mistrusted her interpretations of respect in the moment:

I’m trying to reflect on, like, how I interact with certain students who exhibit different levels of my perceived respect for myself. Like, the way I perceive students who I perceive to respect me less, I think I respond in a different way than students who I perceive to respect me more.

Her reluctance to make any firm proclamations about what respect meant came about because she saw it as filtered through her own biases and personality. Because a given action may be interpreted differently depending on her relationship with a student, she places respect under multiple layers of social construction by saying “the way I perceive students who I perceive to respect me less.” For example, one student’s reaction to her non-verbal redirections made her re-think signs of disrespect. Paige described frequently using touch and other non-verbal communications to remind students of behavioral norms, but not every student appreciated this and she had to learn to acknowledge that by students not responding to touch they were actually expressing a concern rather than resisting discipline:

Some kids don’t like to be touched, and they very frankly tell me. Like, I forgot one kid, actually, yesterday. And I just, like, tapped him on the shoulder, it’s not anything big.
And he was like, “We agreed, Ms. Rhodes [her last name], don’t do that,” and I was like, “Yeah, you’re right, we absolutely agreed, I’m sorry.”

To realize the validity of a student’s desire not to be redirected is a move to give equal value to their worldview. Paige’s re-telling didn’t offer the richer details of the student’s tone, facial expressions, body language, and perhaps even his exact word choice. Indeed, it is “microbehaviors” like these that can appear as a small act of defiance to a teacher and then be transformed into a semi-legal label such as “disorderly conduct,” with all the weight of official sanction attached (Nolan, 2011, pp. 53-65). However, through reflecting on her own role in interpreting the concept of respect, she is able to recall his words as a non-threatening and respectful “We agree, Ms. Rhodes.” Like Lydia and Chiemeka, Paige also tried to acknowledge that her students existed with their own needs and desires. Paige tried to communicate respect for her students by recognizing this need:

I think I respect my students. We have a rule in my class where if they cannot contain themselves, they can take, we call it “Sixty Seconds.” They have to ask, they’re like “Can I take my sixty seconds?” I have a kid who just does this, he just moves, he’ll ask me, “Can I have my 60 seconds?” And he goes in the hallway, and do what he needs to do in the hallway. I’m not going to monitor him. They know to be safe. I think that’s a respect for the fact they’re children, I should acknowledge the fact that I teach fourteen year old boys. Sometimes it’s hard for fourteen year olds to sit all day long and expect to not [be] talking all day long. So, I think providing them that respect they, like, equally provide me with mutual respect.

Paige is relocating the concept of respect from being only student-centered to including her own actions. Her creation of the “Sixty Seconds” mechanism is a way of “providing [students] that respect,” an acknowledgement that the expectations of her classroom – sitting, talking in a certain way – may not fully aligned with the needs of her students. Interestingly, she offers a gendered explanation of the needs of her students; she says her mostly male students “cannot contain themselves,” and that “I should acknowledge the fact that I teach fourteen year old boys.” Paige sees her classroom as a male space, where students are rough, energetic, and
active (Thorne, 1993, pp. 91-108); thus her solution is, rather than attempt to fix them, create an alternate space for a student in the hallway to “do what he needs to do.”

Rather than being codified, the teachers in my study created rules that were highly flexible in meaning and implementation. This allowed teachers to break out of rigid interpretations of behavior as “respectful” or “disrespectful,” and instead freed them to see student actions as contingent and contextual. In this respect, the rules that guided the teachers’ work might be better described as something in between norms and values; they are sometimes codified, sometimes implicit and enforced informally, and they can also simply be a set of ideas of how a student “ought” to behave (Portes, 2012). Teachers’ own backgrounds and identities shaped the outlines of these definitions of acceptable conduct and served as incredible resource in empathizing with students. Teacher intentionally carved out spaces in their classroom setups, whether through designing periods of talking or the invention of an intervention like “Sixty Seconds,” where students could act outside of institutional requirements and fulfill their impulses or desires without fear of being punished. As we’ll see in more detail shortly, they also set boundaries around spaces where student freedom was more heavily restricted.

Flexible Enforcement

The rules that teachers created, however flexibly they were framed or enforced, can be challenged; indeed, this is one of the biggest fears of new teachers (Olsen, 2008; Manke, 1997). In the classrooms of my teachers, these rules were less strict laws that were to be adhered to but rather guidelines outlining the do’s and don’ts in classroom spaces. The teachers here described several instances when such expectations weren’t met, and rather than blindly enforcing a rule and consequence when faced with a transgression they chose to use the trust built up through
their relationships to attempt reasoning and negotiation with students. Time and again, they offered examples or showed through their teaching how, when they could have reacted with a strict and consistent response, they instead chose to carefully calibrate their reactions to a student’s specific personality or situation. Chanda, for example, saw one student named Portia busy making beautiful post-it sculptures in the middle of class rather than working on the in-class essay. In that particular moment, Chanda enforced her school-based point system to deduct a point, a consequence that Portia seemed to accept. The sculpture making, while impressive to me, was clearly in the agreed upon category of “classroom don’ts” during worktime, but Chanda later made clear that if Portia had been engaged in something less clearly off task – talking, for example, which could be interpreted in numerous ways – she would have taken a different approach. “Portia also can get very angry, very easily. And so it’s very important when talking to her to constantly be very respectful because the second you say ‘Portia, sit down,’ she will feed off of that.”

At Anita’s school, such flexibility was at odds with how she perceived other teachers upholding norms. MS 5, where she worked, is a large middle school staffed with many veterans who Anita believed would find negotiating rules to be out of the ordinary. “This is a huge school,” is how she described her staff, “It’s, like, a hundred teachers, like, there are sixty year olds and then there’s first year and twentieth year teachers. So, like, the mindsets are very different…there is that kind of ‘all facts’ mentality. All facts, no talk, and also, like, Eurocentric white male kind of mentalities.” In such a context, Anita’s approach to minor infractions is unusual:

…if a kid is causing a problem, like, “Come outside, we’ll have a conversation outside,” instead of like jumping to that calling home. I don’t jump to give them detention, a lot of teachers will jump to a classroom detention, but I’ll pull specific kids outside, I’ll talk, one on one conversation, and, like, then the problem is over.
Resorting to detention was what she saw as the default approach at her school, representative of “Eurocentric white male kind of mentalities.” This is a school where by simply hanging up a small poster from the Women’s March or posting an inspiration quote from Martin Luther King, Jr., Anita had felt like she was making an important culturally responsive gesture to her students. In such an environment, typical consequences for students can lead to major punishments like detention, and instead she opted to talk one on one and leverage her relationships.

Paige’s use of “sixty seconds” was in a similar vein, essentially a deal that she negotiated with her students to show that she could trust them to fix their behavior. Another example happened in the ninth grade lesson when two boys, Anthony and Joseph, were being particularly boisterous. The class had been playing a matching game, and these two boys were dominating the room with their loud voices. After some time and a few gentle reminders, Paige approached the boys and though I couldn’t hear the conversation I noticed that Joseph retreated to a corner of the room and the entire class settled down again. Afterwards, I asked her about the moment:

I think I asked them first, “Do you feel like you’ve been your best scholarly self today?” and both of them said “No,” and then I was like, “Ok, but I know that you are capable of this, so can you just promise me that I can walk away and that you all can work on the task?” And then I walked away and like ten seconds later, Joseph or Anthony made a quip so I went back and I was like “Listen, you guys know that I don’t like it when you break promises to me.” Because it’s true, we make pinky promises a lot, they are really good about. And then, Joseph was like “Yeah, I know,” and he just...moved. I don’t know, I didn’t ask him. He just moved.

Paige initially tried an approach similar to her “Sixty seconds,” hoping that she could “walk away and that you all can work on the task.” That didn’t work, so she resorted to a tactic of appealing to the students’ sense of honor. They had made a promise, and she now wanted them to fulfill that promise. In this case the simple phrase “you guys know that I don’t like it
when you break promises to me,” was enough to shame or encourage Joseph and Anthony to react.

Chiemeka also related an incident from the previous day where he chose to forego using his promised consequence of a phone call home and instead initiated a conversation with a student after class. When we spoke he started almost re-enacting the conversation to show me how he jointly sought to arrive at a new understanding with the student:

I had another student today, I was supposed to call home but I was like, “Let me give you another chance.” She was being bothered by two students but she had a big blow up. And I was trying to get her to calm down, she started blowing up on me, I’m like “Wait, what’s going on? You serious right now? I’m trying to help you out.” And so, after class, I told her to stay, we talked about. “Ok, so, how you feeling right now?” “Mad.” “Tell me why you’re mad.” So we made a list. “So what’s making you mad?” “Oh, this student, this student.” I’m like “What can I do to help you out?” “Move me away from them.” “Ok.” I’m like, “Cool.” I’d rather that student move away. Then I’m like “What can I do to help you?” Um…I forgot what she said, something about, because sometimes I’m “jokey jokey,” I guess she didn’t like a joke I said. I’m like “Ok cool, I’ll tone it back.” Then, I said, “What can you do?” She’s like, “Stop talking.” I added “Know when to stop. Because sometimes you’re not in trouble yet.” And so we made a list.

This re-telling, a thick description of a post-class conversation, shows Chiemeka trying to empathize, asking her to “tell me why you’re mad” and readily understanding the need to have a different seat. He also shows a willingness to acknowledge that his “jokey jokey” approach that he earlier had described as an asset in his teaching personality, could be harmful to this student. But Chiemeka also shows himself gently laying the boundaries of what types of behaviors need to stop.

These interactions provided a pathway to draw on the strength of relationships and soften the enforcement of classroom rules. Rather than turning to outright coercion or forceful punishment, the inherent reasonableness and demonstration of care certainly influenced compliance and presented a different form of authority, a moral authority. The teachers’ charisma, their warmth, and the care they showed were all significant resources to encourage a
student to make choices in line with their expectations and uphold the classroom order. While order may not be the explicit or ultimate goal of building strong relationships, it is no doubt a sub-text; earlier we saw how Paige viewed her relationships as a way to hold students accountable, and the examples above show relationships as essential to the management of a classroom. This helps strengthen the authoritative relationship, one where the teacher established their legitimacy to direct actions not through dominating but rather through moral goodness. Thus, a moral order is reinforced through their use of authority.

**Laying Down the Line: Authority as Strength**

By making decisions around time and space, crafting malleable rules, and developing strong relationships with students, teachers sought to build safe and trusting environments that supported their position in a relationship of authority. For such relationships to function, students must voluntarily comply with teacher directives under the assumption that doing so will support a common good. Students assent to being controlled, then, because they trust in their teachers. Teachers reciprocate this trust by taking into account student agency, by approaching rules with flexibility, and by using reasonable conversations whenever possible rather than harsh enforcement. And yet there were several occasions where my teachers thought it was appropriate and justified to harshly enforce rules, where they needed to “lay down the line.” At times when they resorted to cold and harsh responses, teachers showed a distrust in their students and a fear that they themselves might appear to permissive.

Lydia revealed a hint of distrust in a rather mundane way when spoke of a beautiful aquarium that she had recently been awarded. The water was a brilliant blue that I’d never seen before in a school aquarium; colorful fish darted through the foliage and rocks. Its presence, and
her philosophy around maintaining it, revealed a different side to her approach to students. I commented on how clean the whole fish tank was, and she explained her students used to have a role in maintaining the tank, but now “I don’t allow them to feed [the fish].” The aquarium was a source of pride and something she relished sharing with her students. She had plans to make it part of her unit on living things, it was prominently placed in the back middle of the class where everyone could see it and the soothing bubbles of the cleaning pump filled the room. Yet when I asked her why she didn’t allow her students to interact with the aquarium, she was blunt:

I don’t trust them…we lost four fish in the first week. So, I took back my control, I didn’t know what was going on and I was worried about it, and come to find out the kid that was turning off the light was turning off the filter.

Because Lydia didn’t fully trust her students to handle the responsibility of the fish tank, she “took back my control.” Unlike cases where such decisions might be negotiated, her fear of ruining this wonderful resource justified her locking students out of the privilege of working with the tank. Franklin was even more blunt during our focus group: “I don’t really treat them, like, totally human.” The group was a bit shocked as he said this, but in fact many other teachers shared examples of how they don’t fully trust their students to always make decisions that support the order a teacher desires. Franklin elaborated on his statement, embodying a mini-speech to students: “You can’t go to the bathroom, you can’t get up when you want in my class. You want something to throw in the trash? You can’t get up, you gotta raise your hand!” While the way Franklin phrased his comments were bleak, it prompted Anita to reflect on her own sixth grade class and acknowledge that she wasn’t comfortable with students randomly getting up in class:

Today a kid just got up and started walking across the classroom. I looked at him and I’m like, “Where are you going? You need to ask me!” And he’s like “Oh, can I go?” I was like, “Yes, but you have to ask.” I would like to get to that point where there is that trust,
but it I do agree [with Franklin] that you have to, at least in middle school, establish those rules first.

At other times Anita spoke of empowerment, student choice, and reasoning with students, but she was also uncertain of her readiness to allow her students to freely move about the classroom. By insisting that students “have to ask,” she is implying that she also doesn’t fully trust her students and views her authority under threat when students fail to follow directions.

Chiemeka offered a different example of how he wanted to empower his students but didn’t fully trust them:

I’m not all the way controlling, I’d rather have [students] have a say, but it doesn’t really work out because they can’t do it sometimes, there are a lot of arguments, because they’re [in] 7th grade. Sometimes I try but it doesn’t always work out. They do a lab, and I’ll star it; anybody with a star, they’re the leader. [imitating students:] “Oh my god, I want a star too!” They would draw their own star. I’m like “No! It rotates, Stop! What are you doing?” So I made the one person be the leader and it becomes a big thing. They can’t even do that!

Chiemeka had tried to create a protocol where certain students will be the leader of their lab group and designates this decision with a star that he drew on their papers. His intention was to “have them have a say,” but his effort “doesn’t really work” out as many students clamoring for their own star. In the end he concludes his “they can’t even do that,” that they are not ready for responsibility he tried to bestow upon them. He also harbored a measure of distrust for his students.

These examples of a level of restriction based on distrust was taken to another level when teachers resorted to a rawer form of authority, of outright power. Though it wasn’t the preferred method of management, and though it may not always align with their ideals of education, using power to maintain authority was a part of their practice and it changed who they were as teachers. In fact, all of my teachers showed a level of comfort inhabiting the role of an authority
figure who could enforce consequences. In Chanda’s classroom, this type of power was expressed through a complex and layered system of checks and rewards. There was a school wide system, called a ‘paycheck’, that was maintained by a trusted student on a ledger. There was also a second shadow system of points that Chanda created to give positive rewards during the class rather than only deductions. And lastly, there was a whole class “conduct score” for each period and determined by the teacher. The conduct score was out of five, and depending on how the class behaved during the lesson their score would fluctuate. Chanda used to start her lesson by assigning a conduct score, but recently she had enlisted students to enforce the score system. She would call on a random student to assign a score to the class based on the overall behavior of the class. Similarly, whenever she would call out a paycheck deduction, the designated student with the ledger had to note down the new transaction. Making students part of the process of deductions was one of her strategies to build investment in the system, and she found that students were for the most part honest: “Sometimes I just pick a random student and say ‘What do you think the conduct score is?’ And whatever they say, I say sure.” The score itself then becomes less important than the fact that students believe in the legitimacy of the system and have submitted to its disciplining effects.

For this system to be effective in keeping student behavior in line with her expectations, however, Chanda frequently holds to her commitment to deduct points, and she does so swiftly and with confidence. Though students are being punished, she feels it is an important part of upholding the class culture and teaching students about their individual responsibility: “I’m not uncomfortable at all because [students] lost those points,” Chanda explained. “And…we give warnings before we take off those points. So, I don’t feel bad.” Chanda is quite comfortable letting students feel the consequences of their actions in class. This is important because a major
difference between her practice now as compared to her first year teacher is the ability to project an image of someone who knows what she’s doing. She describes a confidence, a calmness, an ability to communicate through her actions that she means business and is in full control. She relates a simple example from her first year of not knowing how to respond to a student who wouldn’t stop talking; at the time she couldn’t move on and was on the verge of tears, now, she says “It’s not ‘Oh my goodness, this is the end of the world!’ It’s just talking… after three years, some things don’t shake me up like during my first year.”

Other teachers also expressed a comfort with enforcing consequences, docking points, moving seats, and resorting to other semi-punitive means when relationships and flexibility weren’t successful. Several classes mirrored Chanda’s in having some sort of in-class point system. Paige showed me her gradebook and highlighted the “citizenship point” section where students’ daily points were tabulated. During class her co-teacher circulated with a clipboard and was quietly assigning points throughout the lesson. In Chiemeka’s class, his co-teacher was also the one who was responsible for keeping track of points, but instead of assigning points he was taking points away. At one point, his co-teacher, Mr. Lombardo, interjected to say “We have been doing great so far, not many people got negative points.” This was meant as encouragement but struck me as a subtle threat to students that they needed to keep their behavior in check. Chiemeka accepted this system as a natural part of his classroom, an almost unsaid agreement that students simply had to be constantly aware of: “They lose points without me even saying ‘take away points.’ They know that if you’re talking when I said no talking, and I try to bring you back, [Mr. Lombardo]\(^6\) is taking points off.”

\(^6\) Mr. Lombardo is his co-teacher in the classroom
Chiemeka earlier described his belief that students, inherently sociable and raised in an age of ubiquitous communication and technology, needed room to act on their desires. However, he was clear on key moments where he saw no room for flexibility, moments he termed ‘non-negotiable.’ In these instances, his approach was to be consistent and firm: “I really want the students to know what my expectations are and I - really, it’s non-negotiable. So if I was to let it slip, then they just won’t respect anything.” Chiemeka doesn’t want to be taken advantage of, so “let it slip,” so he works to uphold his non-negotiables with consistency. The biggest non-negotiable - one that he mentioned several times - was that students were to line up in two silent lines outside the door at the beginning of class. He took great pride in his lines: “I feel like I have the best lines in the school.” And judging from the three classroom transitions I observed, he has reason to be proud. It is clear that he spends a considerable amount of effort and time in working to ensure the student lines meet his expectations, and the lines are not up to his expectations he is willing to be consistent with public consequences that maintain order for the rest of his students:

So, if I walk outside, the bell rings, anybody that’s - I know it’s harsh - but anybody that’s not on task, they get an automatic phone call home… I’m always going to be transparent. I don’t sugar coat anything cos, like, what is the point of doing that? So I tell them from the jump, “Yo, if you can’t do this every day…” Certain things, it doesn’t make sense to keep on trying every single day.

When he perceives there is little room to allow for student variability, Chiemeka is willing to be “harsh;” there is no run up or warning before a student earns a phone call home. It just happens. I got to see Chiemeka’s implementation of his entry procedure when I visited MS 4 a week before my scheduled observation to distribute the student assent and parent consent forms. I encountered a scene of fervent chaos common to the ecosystem of the urban American middle school. As I waited in the hallway for class to start, a recording of the classic
schoolhouse bell played across the loudspeakers. There was a brief and pregnant lull, and then the doors to all the classrooms seemed to erupt and pour students into the hallway. Chiemeka - Mr. Mulder to his students - burst out of the room with a booming “Five! Coming out in four! Get ready in three! Silent line in two!” Pulled by the various streams of students going to different classes, a student named Florence was lingering just outside the line and carrying on a conversation with a passing student. As Chiemeka’s count diminished, Florence was abruptly isolated by Mr. Lombardo, the co-teacher, who brandished his cell-phone to start calling her home while the rest of us, including me, filtered in the classroom. Mr. Mulder introduced me to the students, I launched into my pleasant and welcoming introduction, only for Florence to explode back into the room and sit down. She was clearly furious, and the rest of the class showed their enjoyment of the display by contributing whoops and squeals of encouragement. I briefly lost my teacher footing as Chiemeka, like a dolphin gliding effortlessly through the turbulent seas, took over the class and I got to see him for the first time assume an unmistakable position of strength. He then calmly asked Florence to remove herself until the phone call could be made. In this series of events, Chiemeka’s meaning of “non-negotiable” became clear. While he enjoyed good humor and wanted to work with students, he was unmoved and resolute in insisting on compliance at key moments, even if it meant unpleasantness and student dislike. As he explained to me in an earlier interview, “At the end of the day, it’s authority, people don’t like authority, that’s life.”

Chiemeka’s partial distrust of his students, and his comfort drawing on his authority as a teacher, are very much connected to his own background. When I asked him if he was comfortable giving consequences to students, he laughed and said “I'm very comfortable. Especially my background, Nigerian? You don’t play that, a lot of that stuff [students] get away
with, culturally, it’s like, ‘What is going on right now?’” Though Chiemeka showed a great capacity for empathizing with his students, for example by acknowledging that they had needs to talk and be sociable, there was also several times when he expressed true bafflement at the way he perceived his students to act. Though he was born in the Bronx, Chiemeka’s mom took him and his brother back to Nigeria when he was young to attend school through the end of elementary. In Nigeria, his family was somewhat wealthy and could afford tutors and a private education as they received remittances from his father who had remained in the Bronx. When his family moved back, he found himself very different from his new American classmates: “I wouldn’t say I was the smartest kid, but coming from Nigeria, I feel like education here is lacking when it comes to other countries for some reasons, which is so weird to me.” He struggled socially, he was shy and had an accent and was actually placed classified as an English Language Learner, meaning he received extra support to speak a language he had known all his life.

While school came easy, he also took it seriously because of constant messaging from his mother: “Pretty much, my mom tells me all the time, ‘The reason we came out here was because of education, education, education, education, education.’ That was it, you know.” From a young age, education as something sacred was drilled into his head; in his re-telling his mother repeats the word five times. With that impression of the importance of schooling drilled into his being, Chiemeka at times expressed disbelief at the way he saw his current students now that he was a teacher. He shared his confusion most clearly when he was describing how some students earned low grades on his four-point grading scale, and the responded by not taking the grade seriously:

I come back once in a blue, like, “Y’all are really not getting this, but y’all are laughing. What are y’all laughing about? What are you laughing about, you have a test coming up?” In my mind it’s just, like, I have to think about my bias, sometimes. If there was, if
all these kids were in a Nigerian household, there is no way you would be getting away with this. You can’t settle for a “Two” or a “One” and be laughing and everything is okay. Like, when I was a kid? I had to be on point. I can’t come back with a bad grade because I knew what that meant. They just be laughing, I just called your house yesterday, how can you be laughing today? It’s bonkers to me.

Above Chiemeka showed an ability to recognize the challenges of the current digital age on students social behavior, but in the academic realm of grades he is truly confused. He doesn’t readily comprehend why students might not care about his grades, and more appallingly would make a mockery of whole project by laughing. His own frame of reference is imagining what would happen if he had brought such grades home, implied in the phrase “I knew what that meant.” Instead he had to “be on point;” when students don’t share the same approach, it just becomes “bonkers” to me.

Still, Chiemeka had shown enough concern and flexibility with students that he is quite possibly aware of the variety of reasons a student might display a concerted nonchalance in the face of peers and academic work. He was self-aware of enough of his potential biases. Yet, there were enough occasions where he expressed incredulity to suggest that he genuinely expects better behavior and can’t believe that students aren’t meeting that expectation. Consider these examples:

Sometimes I’m like “What’s going on?” Like, you could have stopped! Some students just don’t know when to stop. There’s a point where if you had stopped, nothing would have happened, it wouldn’t have got to the step of now I got to call your mom, or I have to call the deans. There’s a point where you could have stopped.

That’s why I do my 5 [holding up hand]….that’s non-negotiable. I definitely have a clipboard. That’s when I really have a clipboard. If you’re talking on my line…it’s the easiest thing to do, just two lines and be quiet. Like, I don’t know why are we doing this every day? Why is this a crazy thing? It’s non-negotiable

…they still mess up! Even after the countdown…You see “Five, I’m coming out in Four.” How do you still mess that up? As soon as I say “One”, be quiet. At least I give you a countdown. It’s crazy!
The way he interprets student behavior, with an air of shock and surprise that simple respect can’t be paid at the appropriate moments, suggests a distance between him and his students around beliefs about how school relationships should or are structured.

Teachers work to find balance the upholding of rules and empowering students. When this balance is challenged, teachers often err on side of working with students using caring conversations and showing flexibility. But as these example from Chiemeka’s class shows, there are times when teachers do not resort to negotiation. Sophia admitted that she somewhat playfully pulled ears. Chanda’s repeated point deductions were an example of a firm line being held. During our focus group, Lydia shared her own example that took to an extreme an appeal to raw and authoritarian power. When asked by Franklin what everyone did when students just didn’t listen, others shared a few ideas. Then he asked, “So, you guys don’t yell?” While the other teachers hesitated, Lydia jumped in: “I do. I’m Puerto Rican. It comes with the territory.”

She was justifying a display of force – yelling – through her identity as a Puerto Rican with the stereotype of yelling being a common cultural trait. Lydia, however, continued to share another way she assured compliance:

Lydia: I don't have to touch my students. I say things to them in a whisper. And then they look at me “Oh, you can't say that to me,” and I say [whispering]. Nobody is going to know.

Me: Wait a minute…

Lydia: There are a lot of boys on the basketball team, and I remind them that it’s really hard to play basketball with a leg that’s broke. Or an arm in a cast. And our room is directly in front of the main staircase. Accidents happen...I am short, and you are tall and I could bump right into your knee and you could fall...and I give them that face…”Is she for real? Ms. Rosario is bold and crazy.”

It was obvious that Lydia wasn’t seriously threatening to harm students, but it was equally obvious that as a group we were beginning to accept that the work of teachers included
establishing some level of dominance. Part of this was conveying an appearance of unpredictability, a suggestion that students were taking a risk any time they challenged the norms of the classroom. Franklin affirmed her approach of appearing “bold and crazy,” saying “That's a real tactic used by presidents, you seem crazy, so people don't like…” Franklin didn’t make the complete connection, but he was referencing Richard Nixon’s “Madman” theory, a brutal and damaging negotiation strategy Nixon used during the Vietnam War to breed uncertainty in the North Vietnamese government. Nixon would order massive and fierce bombing campaigns seemingly at random, hoping the North Vietnamese would be threatened into withdrawing their troops and signing a peace treaty out of fear of more carnage (Schmitz, 2014). Lydia’s bold appeal to raw power is striking because although not fully serious, there is a hint of fear suggested in her demands for order in the classroom. Lydia was unafraid to supplement her moral authority with a straightforward demand for compliance.

Franklin shared his perspective on how he viewed challenges to his authority by positioning himself in a position of superiority relative to his students:

One thing I do say to them is “I’m different, stop playing with me.” I’m not the same. Whatever that means to you I’m not the same. Don’t play with me. The reason why not to play with me because what you thought is the result of you misbehaving or dysfunctional class is not the result that is going to come, so don’t play with me. I am not the same.

Franklin believed, after talking to his school’s psychologist, that several students have their own objectives in class which clash with the teacher’s goals. These objectives might be getting attention, being funny, earning a peer’s respect, but whatever the case it was at odds with his own concern for order. This is similar to Waller’s (1932) description of the school landscape, a place of contrasting goals. Franklin then described to me what he called his “button,” a dramatic display of force that he uses to signal to his classes that they had crossed some line:
I go to the locker and slam the lockers as hard as I can, and what I do in my head, I want to let them know that “I’m a man, you’re children, and see how hard I smack this locker.” The sound, I look for the startle, they all pop up like “druuh!” Total silence.

Franklin is drawing upon his identity as a man, which he dramatically contrasts with his 7th graders by labeling them diminutively as children. The forceful smack of the locker, punctuated by a startling sound, metaphorically and physically highlights this contrast. When his control of the class seems to slip, he wants to communicate to his students his maleness: “I want to let them know that ‘I’m a man, you’re children.’” His maleness is ever-present in his teaching; he had earlier portrayed himself an astute observer of potential sexual violence in his female students and a protector. Asked about how his own background growing up in the Bronx influenced his teaching, he explained his ability to recognize trauma particularly in his female students, “I wanna say most girls growing up deal with some sort of sexual abuse and sex trauma.” His childhood in a ‘the hood,’ as he described it, made him aware that people were suffering and he, as a male, could play a role in preventing this.

Franklin also finds value in his intersectional identity as a black man to not only show an imposing strength but also communicate a sense of care born of common kinship. This dimension to his authority came out as he related the story of R.J, a student he described as difficult, frequently misbehaves, and rarely does the classwork. Yet, Franklin had found a way to connect with this student:

[R.J.] loves the attention, so as you can see before we left we’re talking about things that who else is going to teach him this stuff? He’s like “Yo, I picked out my hair today,” so, that’s like a black boy moment with a black older man that you can’t get nowhere else. “You picked out your hair? Good, why you always got fuzz in your hair?” I always groom him, I’m always picking fuzz out of his hair, it’s the only time I can show him that I love him.

The bonding over picking out hair and removing fuzz, the grooming, is an example of what Thorne (1993) called a gesture of intimacy, and though she wrote these are typical
associated with relationships among girls, this particularly example is thoroughly male and based in Franklin and R.J.’s shared blackness. Franklin was leveraging a black male identity that he and R.J. both held to connect on common cultural ground. In using the word ‘love,’ Franklin takes another gendered word that, like “gestures of intimacy,” are typically associated with females, and combines it with an image of toughness. The added dimension of race to the act of picking fuzz from hair became a legitimate bonding moment. This is important for Franklin because he also shared how he used the full force of his blackness and maleness to bluntly coerce R.J.: “I show him favor, that’s one of the kids with bad behavior that I show favor, because he can act up and he’ll get yelled at and when I yell at him, I yell at him. I don’t care if it’s inappropriate.” R.J. was a student who was frequently suspended and had arrived at MS 1 after being expelled from a local charter school. Franklin’s admission of using raw power through yelling is contrasted with his admission to being tender.

One particularly egregious incident involved R.J. and a vape pen, and shows Franklin’s willingness to fully leverage his male authority. Franklin recalled the lengths he was willing to extend his own identity to gain compliance from R.J.:

He sits in the back of the class and goes like this [mimicking a drag on a vape], and he’s about to hit a vape in my classroom? Oh, hell no! And I just, like, shock value, boom! “R.J.!” He hops up, everybody is scared, like what the hell is going on? “Get your ass over here, GET YOUR ASS OVER HERE”. He comes outside. “What the fuck you thinking? If you was my son, I’d slap the shit out of you!” This is outside. “Rip a vape in my classroom? You just got off suspension, this is what you’re going to do?” [His] behavior has gotten worse, first time I’ve ever seen him on task is today. That gives me leverage. But I just don’t want to see that again, it was a stupid move and I got my eyes on you. Stop playing stupid. So I usually go hard in the beginning and I gotta soothe it with “I care for you.”

In re-telling this incident, Franklin was animated and acting out the encounter. He drew deeply on his blackness to describe the interaction, using phrases like “Oh, hell no!” and “Get your ass over here!” Phrases like this call on an imagined father-son relationship to explain his
anger, and the yelling and pointed cursing demonstrate a show of force only justified by a paternal care. In his language, word choice, and tone, he is conveying strength and superiority grounded in his identity, and his feels this is justified because this harshness is meant to be balanced by ‘soothing,’ as shown through the intimate act of grooming. Franklin is describing how power – raw, harsh, and forceful – can be translated into an expression of care.

Discussion.

Teachers often felt a tension in deciding between limit setting and student choice, or choosing where and how to “lay down the line.” Coming to terms with being an authority figure can be a complex journey for teachers, one where beliefs about knowledge, social justice, discipline, the meaning of care, their own backgrounds, are examined. This can lead to a reckoning with the many faces of power (Bondy, et al, 2013, pp. 441-443). In her book Classrooms and Corridors, Metz (1978) defined authority as “the right of a person in a specified role to give commands to which a person in another specified role has a duty to render obedience,” (p. 28). Those giving commands have to earn this right, and they do so by proving they are furthering a shared moral order. The difference between providing direction for a shared goal and doing so for its own sake is the difference between an authoritative and an authoritarian stance. Authority, then, is shared by individuals in a hierarchy to support a certain moral order (Hemmings, 2005; Pace, 2003). In instances where the moral order is not clear or the goals are not shared, authority figures may rely on other more oppressive means to obtain compliance (Metz, 1978).

Teachers must prove that they are legitimate directors of power. Theories of creating supportive yet ordered classrooms have been updated to include the importance of relationship
building (Bondy et al., 2007), the authoritative and caring notion of a warm demander (Ware, 2006; Bondy et al, 2013; Kleinfeld, 1975), and pedagogy that values and affirms students’ cultural experiences (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The classroom is thus re-cast as a rich cultural space where both students and teachers bring diverse identities and jointly create a shared sense of order. Using Weber’s simpler classification of legitimacy, teacher must move beyond the rationality of bureaucratic authority and leverage the magnetism and humanity of charismatic authority (Manke, 1997). This is what Lortie (1977) calls the “delicate balance of teacher leadership,” (p. 151), and teachers must show that in relationships of authority, though there is always a greater goal, the balance usually tips towards them. It is one of the most difficult - if not the most difficult - aspects of teaching.

One way teachers worked to establishing themselves as leaders worthy of the trust of their students was in the way the formulated they rules of the classroom. Metz (1978) described “incorporative” approaches to designing classroom rules where teachers start with a list clear and explicit rules that they then enforce. In this approach, teachers are allowed to uphold these rules by virtue of their official position as a teacher, essentially a bureaucratic rationale for power. The chief reason for a student to comply is for the simple reason that the rule exists and the teacher is enforcing it. None of my participants adopted this approach as they described their classroom environments; instead, I frequently heard descriptions of classroom rules that Metz would characterize as “developmental,” rules that are more general and designed to be mutually discovered (pp. 42-48). Whether it was Sophia describing herself as “not really super linear” with rules, or Chiemeka stating “I didn’t really have to put too much rules on [my students],” teachers showed that rather than having strict rules, they chose to adopt flexible guidelines for what was acceptable in their classrooms. The rules that teachers created, then, were closer to
institutional norms that were informed by values, sometimes formal and written but largely unwritten and informally enforced (Portes, 2012, pp. 4-5). These norms, then, can be difficult to identity and express; indeed, teachers themselves might be unaware of their presence (Delpit, 2006). Lydia’s comments reflect this understanding of norms to be culturally bound and sometimes implicit when she said “what respect means in different households to different people is different things.”

As a way to mitigate possible misunderstandings or what was acceptable, my participants often worked to create spaces where students could act in a manner that may not conform to the dominant values of the institution of school. Chiemkea, for example, started from an understanding that his students wouldn’t always be quiet; Lydia knowingly accepted and allowed comments to stand that might otherwise be perceived as disrespectful. Paige created a space outside of her classroom where a student could take advantage of her “Sixty Seconds” procedure and “do what he needs to do.” Furthermore, teachers often chose not to apply the strict letter of the law of student behavioral norms and instead opted to reason with students. They chose to have conversations, pull students out of class, or use moral arguments like appealing to a shared promise, as Paige did, to gently compel students to bring their behavior in line with the norms of school. Teachers, rejected relying on “legal authoritarianism,” an approach that holds formal rules as sacred and can trap teachers in a “my way or the highway” type of thinking (Nolan, 2011, pp. 115-116). Teachers used their relatability, capacity for empathy, and desire to care for their students to prevent small acts of misbehavior from ballooning into harsh pre-determined disciplinary responses.

One danger of adopting this stance is that teachers might fear being too lenient and pre-emptively punish their students. Wachtel (2003) describes this thought patter as the permissive-
punitive continuum, where teachers fear that if they are not punitive, they will be allow students to run roughshod over their classrooms. This can be seen in Chiemeka’s rationale for giving automatic phone calls for students out of line, saying “if I was to let it slip, then [students] just won’t respect anything.” Franklin, similarly, described a “button” that was pushed when he sensed that the classroom was teetering on disorder, and he responded with the harsh slamming of a locker.

Lydia echoed the idea of the classroom as a space of struggle when she described her beliefs about schooling, saying “I believe that structure and being strict is important.” During our focus group, she expanded on her reasoning for taking a hard line:

And I don’t believe that every kid gets a trophy for showing up. I think that kids nowadays are soft, and that’s why you know there is a boo hoo fest every time they do something we're supposed to clap. They wipe a booger, we clap. And I believe that school is supposed to ready you for the real world.

As she repeated in many different ways, she had a perspective, borne of personal experience, on the necessity to be ready for the harsh realities of a world where minorities are unfairly judged. Her allegiance to stricture may at seem harsh, but as she continued her expanded reasoning revealed a deeper concern for her students:

So, I am caring-controlling, I wanna say. And I am strict, and I’m hard on my kids, but I always make sure that they know after that it’s from a place of concern and caring and I always tell them, “Out there, it’s real. It’s dog eat dog and I’m trying to get you ready for that. And I’m trying to let you know that school is not just to teach you the subjects, school is to teach you about life. And how to show up.”

Lydia’s comments show a breaking free from the linear choice between leniency and punishment. She is strict but also operating from “a place of concern and caring.” She wants to be hard on her kids, but she also wants them know that she is concerned about their futures. She identifies herself as “caring-controlling,” a term reminiscent of the literature on teachers described as “Warm Demanders” and characterized by assertive teaching, explicit rules and
consequences, and a warmth built through recognizing students’ cultures (Ware, 2006; Kleinfield, 1975; Bondy et al, 2013). Like Warm Demanders, the teachers I studied often were fully in control of many elements of their classroom, as I described in the previous chapter, and also made an effort to understand and empathize with their students.

The small and infrequent moments of raw power - Franklin confronting his student R.J., Chiemeka strictly backing up his entry procedure with phone calls, Chanda’s quick and consistent point deductions – were all examples of how teachers could transcend authoritarian strategies even as they demanded compliance. Though harsh, these actions need not be interpreted as negative. Indeed, the vast majority of the moments in my interviews and observations were supportive, encouraging, inviting, and deeply interested in students, and this demonstrated how power itself can be a form of care. Several authors have argued that when backed with clearly communicated ideals and a tacit agreement that a greater moral order was at stake, displays of force and power can communicate a teacher’s care for their students (Ballenger, 1992; Howards, 2001; Noblit, 1993). Delpit (2006) has argued that students of color expect authority figures to act with authority. The full context of teacher-student interactions, backed up by a history of trust – and perhaps strengthened through bonding over common cultural expressions, as Franklin did with R.J. – can be far more important than the actual words or even the tone a teacher uses. As Bondy et al. (2013) write, “In acting as a warm demander, ‘how you say it’ matters, but who you are and what students believe about your intentions matter more. When students know that you believe in them, they will interpret even harsh-sounding comments as statements of care from someone with their best interests at heart.”
CHAPTER SEVEN
NEGOTIATING CONTROL WITHIN SCHOOL STRUCTURES

Much of what happens inside a classroom is influenced by forces that exist outside of it. As teachers work to establish legitimate relations of authority and construct domains of knowledge with which students can interact, their efforts are greatly shaped by decisions both near and distant. Schools have many of the elements of Weber’s classic definition of bureaucracies: clearly stated rules, a well-defined hierarchy, and predictable rewards and sanctions, all meant to breed a certain uniformity in the work of teachers (Ingersoll, 2003). But because the work of teaching is highly interactional, and schools in particular are fundamentally human organizations, there also exists a vast array of unseen and informal rules, a shadow structure of norms and values characteristic of institutions (Portes, 2012). In discussing their efforts to create classrooms that met their ideals, my participants surfaced the challenges of working within such a complex bureaucratic environment. Frequently, they named struggles of having their work constrained by administrative regulations, the stresses of evaluative sites like observations and lesson plans, and the delicate approaches they adopted in working alongside colleagues. But the teachers also embodied power’s multidirectional nature, using their charisma, strategic alliances, and their competence to legitimize positions of authority within the school and pursue their own agendas. In this chapter I will be analyzing the significance of these topics, but first I’m going to discuss how the work of teachers in schools is highly regulated and controlled.

Teachers in modern schools have always been subject to strict controls. As industrial organizations became ubiquitous in the twentieth century, bureaucratic principles increasingly
governed the management of schools. As schools began to serve large populations of children and the scale of education grew, standards and decisions became centralized and clear rules were established for the work and advancement of teachers (Tyack, 1974). Furthermore, the gendered nature of labor in education supported a dynamic of control between mostly male supervisors and a largely female teacher force (Grumet, 1988; Strober and Tyack, 1980). But schools have always been a place of “endemic uncertainties” (Lortie, pp. 136-161, 1977); unlike other organizations, it is unclear who are school’s ultimate clients - Students? Parents? Society at large? Future Generations? - and what are the actual products - academic gains? fully socialized students? low crime? The inability to definitively answer such questions underscores how schools fit neither corporate or factory models; they are an altogether different institution. One example of this is how schools feature a “dual captivity” where neither students nor teachers chose to work with one other; they are both assigned to each other by some administrator. Complicating the picture is the reality that teaching is largely interpersonal work; with diverse humans managed by strict constraints, the need for negotiation, relationship building, and discretion, is paramount (Ingersoll, 2003, pp. 136-143). The fields within which a teacher’s work exist are thus governed by guidelines ranging from rigid formality to vague informality, melding stringent regulation and considerable flexibility; teachers have always been at the center of this arrangement, both heavily monitored and regulated yet also given great autonomy in their work. My participants grappled with many of these dynamics even as they explored establishing their own authority in and out of their classrooms.

In my conversations with the teachers in this study, an underlying topic, often mentioned in passing, was the impact of outside decisions made by supervisors. For example, class sizes were often mentioned as a source of frustration with teachers given groups of students ranging
from the high twenties to low thirties. “During class, I can’t do a lot of that stuff,” Sophia said at one point, referring to the work of building relationships. Her class sizes prohibited much meaningful interaction and forced her to use times after school and in the brief transitions between classes to connect with students. Paige explained the challenge this way:

The capacity to be able to talk about certain subjects is different in a 42 minute period, because all my classes are 34 [students]…um, I have one class that is one over, which, whatever. There are ways you can build relationships in that context but…I cannot have a five minute conversation with the student about one of their hobbies in the middle of a forty minute class.

As we saw in a previous chapter, relationships are a critical part of Paige’s work as a teacher, one that she sees undermined by the sheer size of her classroom. The actual dimensions of Paige’s classroom seemed cramped when filled with the energetic and large bodies of almost thirty teenagers folded into small tables. In passing, Paige also mentions that one of her classes is “over,” meaning over the union-negotiated class size limit of 34 students, a fact which she accepts with resignation by saying “whatever.” One of Chanda’s classes was designated as “self-contained,” meaning it was populated entirely by students who had at some point in their educational careers been officially determined to have a learning or behavioral disability. These are also often called “12 to 1” classes and are capped by federal law at twelve students. They also require a teacher who is certified to teach special education. Not only was Chanda’s class over this limit, she was also teaching out of her certification area. Chanda, a social studies teacher, was explaining her modifications for this class when she revealed a pattern of overenrolled classes – “Well, it’s not actually 12 to 1, it’s 18 kids. I’ve had a 12 to 1 [class] every year. This is my smallest one, 18. Last year it was 22.” Teaching out of one’s specialization area was not uncommon; Sophia, who was certified as a biology teacher, was programmed to teach a Physics and Computer Science class in addition to her Anatomy class.
Like Chanda, Anita had similarly been assigned to teach a 12 to 1 class the previous year and shared her reflection on the experience: “I’m not special ed certified, and I was in a self-contained classroom, so I would not do that again. No way. First of all, it’s illegal. Second of all I did not have the skills and it was hard dealing with that emotionally. I’m just failing you.” Not only was Anita’s experience difficult, she observed and felt the impact of what she perceived to be administrative decisions that negatively impacted her special education students. As discussed earlier, Anita’s school was tacitly tracked into low, medium, and high performing “houses” (named Gold, Eagle, and Star houses, respectively). While her first year at MS 5 was spent teaching in Gold house, this year she had been re-assigned to teach in the middle “Eagle” house. The topic of special education arose when she showed me her new laptop cart for her sixth graders.

Last year we had a small class with broken iPads that were, like, half working, or sometimes working. The priorities of the school, the small class in my school is like the bottom, bottom, bottom, of the totem pole. Like, students who need them [the iPads] the most, I don’t know…I had this conspiracy theory last year that most of our special ed funding was going to Star and Eagle [houses], or definitely Star, at least, because statistically if you’d looked at my school on whatever it’s called, the, like, the report card, my school is a high performing school. But it’s not. It’s not. Star is. Right? And, Eagle, like, would be. Gold is a mess, and it needs so much help. And it’s really sad because there is a lot of bureaucracy here.

Anita presents an intricate and damning theory of the institutional decisions that have shaped her experience as a teacher in two very different parts of her school. When teaching in the Gold house, her placement as an unqualified teacher with the neediest students, coupled with a lack of investment in meaningful resources like iPads, led her to conclude that the special education class was literally at the lowest level of a graduated hierarchy, at the “bottom, bottom, bottom, of the totem pole.” She directly felt the impact of these decisions on her ability to serve her students; not only was she unprepared but she felt that she was failing her students. She then
connected this experience to a theory that implicated the city’s larger accountability initiatives that labeled schools as “high performing” through a system of school report cards. Connecting the experience of several teachers in the study group is the observation that school-level organizational decisions about elements such as class size and teacher assignments had profound impacts on the quality of work teachers felt they were able to do. These decisions sometimes pushed or surpassed the limits of what was mandated in official rules, yet teachers showed an unwillingness or inability to contest them.

The consequences of such decisions were compounded by the ways in which resources were allocated. Lydia taught a mixed class of general and special education students. Such classes are mandated by law to be staffed with a special education certified teacher in addition to the content teacher. However, her school made a staffing change: “They took a teacher out of the room, so I don’t have a co-teacher and I don't have a special education teacher, so I have way too many kids at way too many levels.” Lydia was now resorting to using more videos and laptop work with headphones. This was also against federal law as it was out of Lydia’s content area. Additionally (and against federal law as well), she was teaching a small self-contained “12 to 1” special education class, where “for the first time - I’ve never had a fight in the class, I’ve had altercations, but never like a full out brawl - and yesterday I had the first full out fight.” At MS 5, Anita’s school, the teacher resource center had lost its director and the school was down to two guidance counselor for 1,100 students. Chanda had given up expecting any sort of resources from her school: “Anything I want, I would never go to the office. Like….just ‘Donor’s Choose,’” she said, referring to the internet platform where teachers can request donations from outside donors. She was speaking about the rolling cart which, without a classroom of her own, she used to transport her materials from class to class. I was admiring the cart because, as a
former “traveling” teacher myself, I could appreciate its importance, and then she mentioned that the colored paper she had used in the day’s lesson, a bright green handout on which students could write their essay outlines (“if it’s green, they are less likely to lose it!”), had also been ordered through the website and not through the administration.

The reason Chanda had to travel between classes was because in her school, students remained in the same classroom all day with the exception of their lunch and gym periods. Chanda traveled between four different classrooms moving her materials on her cart and sometimes accommodating different seating arrangements. In the front of every classroom on large and colorful posters were guidelines from the Hochman Writing Method – “any room you go to in this school, they will be identical,” Chanda told me. This arrangement had presented additional challenges as she entered a classroom where students had likely been seated for long periods of time:

[Students] don’t have that five minutes to walk from this class to that class. There is all this built up energy, now they have to get up because they’ve been sitting for one hour and then it’s hard for me also knowing that they’ve been sitting for one and a half hours in ELA. And now they’re standing up, to be like “Sit down!” But, I mean, I do it anyway.

The decision to keep students in one place is an administrative one, and Chanda clearly had some reservations, saying it’s “hard for me.” She recognized that she had to enforce a rule that is against her students’ interest. Yet, as this is a decision made centrally, she chose to “do it anyway.” Anita and Franklin both experienced similar arrangements at their middle schools; Franklin actually found some positive implications to keeping students in the same classroom: “I wasn’t excited about it when I first came, but it was done intentionally to keep the kids inside the class and not have to worry about kids switching, so, being able to come into a class and not
having to wait for kids to sit down and settle down and they’re already settled down.” In the decision to keep students in the same classroom, Franklin saw the benefits of order.

The arrangement of resources that resulted in co-teachers being removed, guidance counselor positions left unfulfilled, and school supplies to be procured from elsewhere, were not necessarily an indication of a lack of resources. After all, Anita’s school had provided her with a new top of the line laptop cart for her class in the Eagle house, and she had a class set of new textbooks (that, as I note later, she found of limited use). As Paige was giving me a tour of her classroom, she pointed out a large metal case that had recently appeared – “They just bolted this to my desk, yesterday, so…” – where five new and unrequested Chromebooks (laptops) were soon to be delivered for use with her class. Like class sizes, teaching assignments, and classroom use, decisions about resources were often made centrally and directly impacted the work of teachers.

Still, as we’ve seen in other chapters, relationships of authority are constantly negotiated and the teachers in this study showed great savvy and cleverness in identifying spaces where they could chart their own paths. Every one of my participants had made an effort to be involved in some extracurricular activity that existed outside of the scope of their teaching responsibilities. Chiemeka coached the middle school girls’ basketball team. Franklin led an afterschool club where I saw him playing soccer with a group of boys. Paige led several clubs and she also was the team leader who coordinated the work of all 9th grade teachers. Chanda managed her 8th grade team’s “Paycheck” system and the group of student volunteers. Anita led a debate team, often without pay. Sophia led the Black Lives Matter club, and was also a part of a small team of teachers at her school who had earned a national fellowship to strengthen education. Teachers
sought out opportunities to make their mark on the school through activities that were outside their formally defined institutional role of teaching students.

The teachers’ willingness to go along with demands on their time, even when it bent the rules, combined with their efforts to work with students beyond their job description, built a sort of capital that secured independence. Administrators themselves faced enough pressures that their limited attention and energy was often devoted to the most pressing of concerns. As long as things were going relatively smoothly, teachers were largely left alone; “It gets frustrating, um, because I sometimes feel, like, if havoc isn’t breaking loose there is no attention,” Anita said. She didn’t feel like her teaching was as effective as it could be, but she knew that she would be largely ignored as long as “havoc isn’t breaking loose.” A climate of constant crisis pervaded and thus areas of relative calm were assumed to need little oversight. It was exactly this lack of attention that allowed teachers to innovate. In the absence of substantive feedback or support, teachers were left to define their own work. Paige’s ability to lead her students to strong test scores on the state exams also helped – “No one cares. I had good Regents scores, so they [school Principal and Assistant Principal] don’t care. My classroom could be on fire every single day and they would have no idea.” Paige’s work with after school clubs, her innovations around different types of lesson planning and curricular changes, these were all decisions she had taken on herself without seeking or receiving administrative approval. Her classroom is orderly and the students earn high exam scores, thus she had free reign. Many of the individual instructional decisions around knowledge and content that are described in the next chapter resulted from this freedom. Lydia similarly felt her school was oblivious to her work, though in this case it was because of larger systemic issues at the school: “My school is such a mess that I can pretty much get away with whatever I want. So the good thing about that is that I can try anything.” The
thing that she was trying in light of the removal of a co-teacher was the “blended learning” I had
described above with some students working independently with multimedia on laptops. Beyond
a feeling of neglect, both Lydia and Paige highlight how the way they are left alone, while
allowing freedom, is also a sign of indifference or incompetence on the part of their
administration. They are left with little faith in the larger system in which they work.

Relationships with colleagues were another area where teachers enacted their own
agendas. Such negotiations were delicate because they were often interacting with more veteran
teachers or with administrators who had more institutional power. Lydia gave an example of this
as she described the relationship she had cultivated with her school’s secretary. As we were
conducting our debrief of her classroom observation, she remembered that she needed copies for
an upcoming lesson. She stopped me before the interview even started to remind herself that she
couldn’t talk for the full period: “Oh, I need copies for tomorrow, which we’re not supposed to
do. But she’ll do it for me.” Lydia was referring to the school secretary; while there was a
formal procedure at the school for making copies, Lydia hoped to circumvent this by leveraging
her relationship: “[It’s] supposed to be at least 2 days [in advance]. I’m very nice to the ladies in
the office. So, [laughs], sometimes, you know, I may have a little snafu and realize that I want
something last minute and they, they’re very accommodating.” She bought coffee for the
secretaries, she made sure to always be pleasant with them, and she never took advantage of
what favoritism she had garnered – for example, she refused to use her pull to make copies for
other teachers. She was negotiating the difficult and complicated terrain between being a teacher
amongst colleagues and a teacher working in a system with clear hierarchies. Her role was
individualized and isolated from others, but she also had to work to maintain a connection with,
and not alienate, her colleagues. “I’ve literally had other teachers ask me to get their copies
because [the secretaries] say ‘no,’” Lydia explained, but she insisted that “I can’t wear out my welcome.” Lydia displayed this same sense of how to get things done in a bureaucratic setting when I asked for her help in securing principal approval for this study. Lydia was the only participant who took me after our first interview and to track down the principal. “The only way she’ll approve it is if you’re there with me,” she told me, and then adeptly but gently cornered her principal in an in-service training. We all stepped outside and Lydia politely and expertly insinuated that the research project was a badge of honor for the school and I was the honored guest. A few moments later I had the approval letter.

Paige used her interpersonal skills in a different way at her school to undertake a school-wide effort. As leader of the 9th grade cohort at her school, Paige wanted to implement a project to engage more parents by informing them of their students’ progress: “It’s something I really wanted to do because we used to have non-structured outreach time and it was, like, a total waste, like no one ever did anything.” Her school, with what she characterized as a “veteran staff,” had long had a culture where school-wide initiatives were ignored and teachers stuck to their classrooms. By working to motivate her colleagues to collaborate on a project, she was taking a risk and challenging norms on staff effort that she had discovered through her after school work:

People ask me why I stay after school and I find those questions interesting. And I understand that there is some level of experience that speaks to people getting burnt out…and I have like a very different life situation and that staff here is a very veteran staff who has families and, I understand that. But I don’t have a family. Like, my kids are, you know, my kids here are my kids.

While she recognized the unique privilege of her relative youth and family status, she was also driven by her commitment to “my kids” and the relative autonomy she enjoyed as a respected teacher. Her approach to launching this initiative included a mix of technical
leadership in creating spreadsheets and action plans, and a respectful insistence backed by a strong rationale:

I think I respect my teachers, and I’m very up front about the fact that I’m not an administrator, I can’t make you do anything. At the end of the day we teach the same kids, and I always frame it in a way, where, it’s like, “What are we doing for our children?” not like “What are you doing for me?” I don’t know if I’m guilt tripping people…I think I frame things where it’s like, “Oh, not doing this action negatively affects our children.”

In seeking to invest her team in this project, Paige makes a clear distinction between her and administrators. She can’t rely on formal rules or threats, nor does she want to. Ultimately, she makes it clear that there are no official sanctions or penalties for lack of participation. Rather, the moral weight of the decision is what she brings to bear, perhaps by “guilt tripping,” but certainly by appealing to what is best for “our children.” Paige’s approach to motivating her team of teachers is not that different from what she used with her students that I discussed in Chapter 5 – instead of motivating children to engage with classwork, she is motivating adults to engage with children and their parents. This approach is well-thought out, difficult to execute, and very aware of human motivations and group dynamics. She is using a type of moral authority that is not universally available to other educators, even those with formal titles, as hers has been earned through her work with students. She didn’t reach everyone on her team: “I only have two people this year who don’t want to participate. They’re just close to retirement, and they don’t care how I feel. Which is fine. It’s fine, like, I have eleven other people who really like work.”

Not every teacher felt unsupported or unattended by their administration. While Lydia, Paige, and Anita all expressed some degree of isolation, in part because of their competence, Chanda experienced a great deal of interaction with her school’s administration; many of her instructional choices, including curricular ones, were driven by school wide structures. The
entry procedure, the disciplinary tracking system of rewards and deductions, and the writing curriculum were all school-wide policies. When she made a modification to the writing program by introducing a “discussion essay” (mentioned in the next chapter) it was a significant change for which she had to gain approval – “I had to fight to get it done because in this school they write a lot of argument [essays].” Chanda saw the heavy support in two ways:

I feel very supported at MS 3… it’s a good thing and bad thing. It’s like Big Brother. So anything that happens in my classroom, they know, in the office they’ll know. And that’s a good thing because then that means if I do need support, like, my first year they had to put in another teacher because everything was falling apart, and I had no idea that they knew. But one day, Ms. Bentley came up to me and said Mr. Seymour is going to be in here permanently, and so they knew.

Chanda saw the value in this support, especially in the vulnerable time as a first year teacher where many teachers like Anita feel isolated and in a “sink or swim” situation. Yet, she compares the arrangement to “Big Brother,” a state of constant surveillance where the “office” seems aware of every occurrence in her classroom. To explain the ‘bad’ side, she said “But it also can be a bad thing because sometimes you just want to handle something and you don’t need them to know…. My first year, I cried in front of the kids, and so they found out and then it turned into this whole big thing and it would have just been better if they hadn’t found out.”

Chanda’s mixed feelings on her administration’s support nicely illustrate the multiple ways relationships with supervisors can be interpreted. There is a part of Chanda that yearned for the safety that came with an additional competent teacher in her classroom, yet she also wanted the freedom and trust to handle her struggles by herself. Indeed, the way teachers’ work was arranged and controlled presented a series of paradoxes. The outlines of a teacher’s work was highly regulated, but the work inside was rarely attended to. Teachers were largely ignored by their administrators, but at the same time were looking for signs of care and interest. And, as
Chanda pointed out, administrative awareness was both a true support but also an embarrassing intrusion on a momentary personal failure.

As we’ve seen in this section, a wide range of administrative decisions in areas like class size, teacher assignments, and the organization of students, all impact the work of teachers. Teachers accepted these restraints, and even additional demands, and used their acquiescence to open the door for their own resistance, finding or creating pockets of autonomy to navigate relationships with their colleagues and enact their own projects. Structural decisions influence the work of teachers, and teachers can negotiate the effects of such decisions through their relationship building and understanding of the institutional landscape. In the next section I turn to some examples of how teachers respond to specific rules and policies that dictate teacher actions; yet even here teachers find ways to resist and negotiate the enforcement of school-wide policies.

*Rules for Teachers*

Schools, as bureaucratic institutions, are replete with well codified rules to guide teacher and administrative actions. These rules are formalized in documents like the staff handbooks, the union contract, or even federal law. Yet, as we saw in the previous section with union negotiated class size limitations, these rules are regularly bent or avoided altogether. Sometimes, these rules are designed to guide teacher behavior; for example, rules existed around non-instructional duties or “emergency coverages,” which I will explore momentarily. However, there also existed rules for students which teachers were required to carry out. This was complicated by the fact that teachers were asked to enforce rules that they didn’t create and perhaps didn’t believe in.
Sometimes, teachers were assigned non-instructional duties. Chiemeka, for example, was given “lunch duty” and hallway monitoring. He seemed to accept the responsibility with equanimity, “It’s two times a week. It’s not bad, I’m used to it now. But… you really have to be walking around, management, all that, so it’s not really what I want to do with that time.” Anita also had an administrative assignment but instead of accepting the default role of being a homeroom advisor, she had been given the choice to serve as the student council advisor. “So, everyone has to have a C6,” Anita said, referring to the terminology in the union contract where administrative assignments are called the Circular 6, “It’s just so much more fun to me [to lead student council] than being an advisor.” One of Anita’s rationales for advising the student council members showed her strategizing about larger relationships in the school:

Student council has kind of given me an outlet to help give the kids more of a voice and I think build my relationship with Ms. Tyson that I feel maybe, like, if I really needed something I could go to her. By no means are they coming into the classrooms and checking in on us or asking, like, “Hey, how’s it going?”

Anita recognized that her administration, in particular the assistant principal Ms. Tyson, wasn’t going out of their way to offer support. In fact the previous year she had felt particularly isolated: “I had a really hard year last year, I really was not supported. I didn’t know what I was doing for a lot, and I needed help. And I didn’t get it, and it’s kind of like sink or swim, and then, it’s very different this year.” Ms. Tyson is an overworked administrator who effectively ran two of the houses at the school with almost eight hundred students, yet through student council Anita had found a direct line to the assistant principal and the newly built relationship is one reason “it’s very different this year.”

As Anita indicated, teachers were not actively sought out to be offered support by administrators. The isolation and “sink or swim” nature of teaching – especially in the first few years, meant teachers were to follow some baseline expectations around common tasks like
planning and attendance at in-service trainings, but by and large teachers referred little to rules that were imposed directly on them; they were free to dress as they liked, to mostly teach as they like, and had discretion on making curricular choices, as long as students were safe and school-wide policies were enforced. The flip side of this is that teachers were expected to uphold behavioral expectations designed by administrators.

Teachers were very aware of the rules for students and worked hard to prioritize enforcement in their instructional work. For example, one reason why Chiemeka considered the two lines before class to be a non-negotiable was that it was required by his administration. When I was there, I noticed most teachers were unable or unwilling to enforce this rule, but it was clearly important enough to Chiemeka that he upheld this rule. Another rule like this was the school’s uniform. He seemed indifferent to the issue of whether there should be a uniform, but he had a clear reason for why he upheld the rule: “You know, emails do come.” Apparently, the middle school dean at MS 4 would occasionally enter his classroom and if his students were out of uniform, then he would receive communications about ensuring students were properly dressed. Chiemeka never mentioned any sort of oversight about how his students performed in class or about receiving feedback on his instruction, but when it came to enforcing the school’s uniform policy he was very much aware of the possibility of being singled out. This made its way into the rationales that he gave to students:

Some students are out of uniform inside certain classes, I try not to be in mine, because you know, I don’t want to be that person that seems I’m playing favorites, so everybody’s got to be in uniform before you step inside my class. Yeah, that’s just what we’re supposed to do, so I gotta do what I gotta do.

Regardless of any personal opinion Chiemeka might have about the uniform, he is committed to following through on it because, as he says, “I gotta do what I gotta do.”
There was one rule that Chiemeka had difficulty enforcing, and he struggled to do so largely because he felt like his voice hadn’t been heard on the matter. In general, Chiemeka bought into his administration’s efforts; he accepted emergency coverages (more on this later), upheld the policy around lining up before class, and did his administrative duties all with little complaint. However, the administration had recently mandated that students who were more than five minutes late to class were to be sent upstairs to the Dean’s office for disciplinary action. The rationale was simple: students travel only a matter of feet between periods; all seventh grade classrooms were located in one small hallway, and thus the only possible reason for being late to class was intentional wandering. While Chiemeka understood this, he was frustrated that his opinion on the matter hadn’t even been consulted:

It’s really tough because they just changed the rules, if you’re late to the classroom, no more late passes, you’re going straight upstairs. Which is tough on us, I’d rather they’d just come in late and get the work done rather than spend the time on the Dean’s. And we didn’t put any input on that, they didn’t ask any middle school teachers, they didn’t ask any teachers like “How did you feel about that?” Because we would have said “no.” How does being late equal spending a whole day away from the classroom? That doesn’t make sense. Some things we should be consulted on, in a sense, especially if it affects only our grade [level]. Nobody talked to me about it. It’s just one of those things.

What frustrated Chiemeka most about this was that an issue that affected him directly, and about which he had the most insight as a classroom teacher, was something that he wasn’t asked about. He also saw that the punishment – being sent upstairs – didn’t match the infraction in this case, and furthermore removed students from a chance to “get the work done.” He followed this up by noting the faux sincerity in his administrators’ tone when they had feedback conversations – “They always ask that question ‘What can I do for you?’ This one, you should have consulted us on this.” On a matter that he passionately felt like he had relevant expertise, he was frustrated by being excluded from the decision making process.
Franklin also discussed his reluctance to uphold a uniform policy because he was wary of administrative sanction. In Franklin’s class, a Dean comes in every day and does a quick uniform check. Here is how he described his perspective on the policy:

There is one thing that I do not enforce that admin asks, now that I’m reflecting, that if it’s not a school sweater, the dean will come baring in the room and say ‘take off that sweater!’ It’s a nice sweater, very plain, [but] since it’s not a school sweater….because the dean walks around every morning, he pokes his head in, it doesn’t matter what’s happening, he’s going to interrupt that lesson and make sure that girl gets that sweater off of her

The threat of a dean “baring” into the classroom is enough for Franklin to become more vigilant; he knows the Dean might come during the morning and question his lax approach to the school sweater. He says that he doesn’t enforce this rule, but staying on top of the uniforms is clearly important enough to him to avoid the sanction.

While enforcement of school rules was variable, there were times when the consequences for not following them could be serious. Lydia had run up against the reality of possible repercussions due to a confluence of factors. After our focus group meeting had concluded and all the other participants had left, she shared with me a recent occurrence that had shaken her and put into stark terms the fragility and importance of her job at her school. The tape recorder had long been turned off and Lydia was talking about her struggles with major changes in her personal life. She had recently divorced, had a young child at home – in fact, she was the only parent in the participant group - and lived far from her mother who sometimes provided child care. As a newly single parent, she was finding it increasingly difficult to get her daughter to child care and then find a parking space at her work, all before eight in the morning. She was relying on her allies at work to cover for, to move her punch card (which must be ‘clocked in’ every morning), or to buy some time from the secretaries, but the stress was taking its toll and that very morning she was in a minor car accident on the way to school. The incident had put
her on edge because she had just gotten “written up” by her principal, a disciplinary procedure where the principal writes a letter to be entered into the employee’s permanent file. Lydia, a teacher who consistently spoke with forcefulness and assuredness, explained how she was shaken by being called to task and tried to convey to her principal – the same principal who weeks earlier she had confidently pulled out of a training to get my approval form signed - that she felt ashamed, embarrassed, and that being late was “not who I am.” The framework of school rules had brought out a moment of humility and vulnerability from someone who taught with strength and independence in the classroom.

One rule that affected all of the teachers was emergency coverages, and this topic elicited an interesting and spirited conversation during our focus group. Emergency coverages are a policy in the New York City Department of Education (DoE) designed for the likely event of a teacher absence. When a teacher is absent, many schools in the DoE don’t generally call in a substitute teacher as a replacement for the day, but rather have other teachers fill in. Apparently, teachers can volunteer for these coverages, and also have the right to refuse a coverage assignment; yet the application of the formal rules governing the assignment of coverages were highly malleable. The frequency of teacher absences and the manner in which coverages are organized and distributed revealed a great deal about relations of power in the school, as did the ways in which teachers interpreted these coverages. This issue arose as Anita was discussing the level of influence different teachers have in her school:

…there are certain teachers who definitely have a lot more pull in my school and it’s also because they’ve been there for a lot more time, but it’s frustrating because it’s like, they get favoritism and everyone knows it and they’re not, they’re text book teachers. They’re not doing crazy innovative things...it’s just the fact that they take all the coverages and...the Principal knows that they are willing to step up but they’re also doing it for money.
Anita is recognizing that there is an informal hierarchy of teachers within the school ecosystem that is not determined necessarily by the quality of work in the classroom or strength of relationships with students. The teachers she is referring to, after all, are “textbook teachers,” code for teachers who teach rote, predictable, teacher-centered lessons. Instead, influence is gained through longevity, a demonstrated allegiance to a school that has high teacher turnover. And, influence is gained by a demonstrated willingness to do what the administration asks, which in this case is volunteering to take on one of the least desirable teacher duties, the emergency teacher coverage. As she indicated, teachers receive a contractually negotiated monetary allowance for each overage. The teachers that Anita are referring to have made a different type of bargain with their administration; they have agreed to continue working at this school for several years and to partake in the unpalatable assignment of coverages in return for the favor they gain and the monetary reward. Anita made clear how these teachers viewed their work at the school:

Like, [these teachers] volunteer always for coverages, but it’s also because they want to make more money. The principal will always - and the APs - give them responsibilities a lot of the time, and they’ll do it, but they don’t care about it. Today, actually I was in a meeting, this is something about planning these college day things and like straight up one of them said “I really don’t care about this, you know, I’m just doing it because I was asked to do it, you guys can too.” But they will have priority in a lot of these decisions.

Not only do some teachers do unpalatable work, they convince other teachers to join them. For administrators, this can be a valuable asset when they have few incentives at hand to entice teachers to do extra work. Anita, however, hadn’t yet gained enough influence to request coverages, or had yet to develop the indifference to carry out her job without caring. As she recounted the meeting, she was again showing an awareness of the informal hierarchy that shapes her school, and the benefits some teachers gain by claiming indifference. Anita notices that some teachers just “don’t care,” that they quite literally value money over relationships with
students, and that this type of calculation actually increases one’s leverage in the school. Anita, on the other hand, is stuck under the weight of “frustration,” watching other teachers reap rewards gained through “favoritism” while little actual teaching is done.

Chiemeka, surprisingly, initially described coverages as an almost pleasant activity that was a chance for him to help his school team out. As he described the process at his school of getting assigned coverages, it became clear that one of the reasons he is able to approach them positively is that he is informed about the assignments in a timely manner. He began explaining about an upcoming coverage: “Like, tomorrow I’m going to do 9th period, but it’s a teacher I like.” Before he could continue, Anita jumped in incredulously. “They tell you ahead of time?” Indeed, Chiemeka found several reasons to be positive about coverages:

I kind of, like, I don’t mind doing it if they ask me. I feel like my school is to this point, they know I’ll do it. I like the money. Plus it’s shared anyway, I can just sit there and be on my laptop, just prep. I like the kids anyway, so it’s like, whatever. And they already know what they’re going to do, I don’t have to do much, so I don’t mind doing it.

Chiemeka knew the students, there was a clear plan for what the students were supposed to do to be kept busy, and he was unworried about any chaos emerging. As he said, “I don’t have to do much.” He accepts these semi-voluntary assignments in exchange for the opportunity to get some work done and make a little money. It is semi-voluntary because contractually he can refuse these assignments, but when pressed he admits that he has to do them: “if they put me on a coverage for like...you can’t be saying no. You can be mad at it, but also, who else is going to show up?” He has become someone who does coverages, thus when asked he is compelled to uphold this role. Even though a coverage is not required, Chiemeka displays a loyalty to his school in part because “who else is going to show up?”

It is expressly written into the union contract that emergency coverages could be voluntarily accepted. This came as a surprise to several teachers in our group. Given the various
political dynamics and cultures in different schools, it is quite possible that if teachers refused coverages en masse, schools would cease to operate. However, teachers also must recognize that refusing a coverage would come with a political cost within the school. Chiemeka, who expressed not really minding coverages, granted that this was the case when he said “you can’t be saying no.” He recognized that if he doesn’t do the coverage, the school will not function well; so, he accepted responsibility for covering for his colleagues. Sophia brashly refuted this logic, describing how she regularly refused coverages: “Yeah. Hell yeah. Don’t give me three sciences to teach, don’t schedule meetings for every single free period I have and that ask me for a..., absolutely not, what are they going to do? Fire me?” Sophia didn’t feel the responsibility to fulfill a coverage and instead saw it as an unfair attempt to add to her already difficult teaching assignments. She also was boldly declaring that her role as a science teacher with strong relationships was highly valuable and thus earned her a right to turn down extra duties.

Conversely, Anita expressed a sense of powerlessness and resignation when a coverage assignment was handed to her. She related a machine-like system that sprang into action when a teacher called in sick:

…”[The coverage teacher] could be a random, in most cases it would a random teacher in the school that [students] never met, and we find out morning of. And even if you have a meeting [scheduled], it takes precedent. Like, you can only say no, it’s an unwritten rule basically, people only get out of a coverage if you have an IEP meeting scheduled or you have an observation scheduled, otherwise they’re not going to let you get out of that coverage. They tell you during advisory; they’re like, here, you have to be there. And if you’re not there, they page you over the loud speaker. You have no choice.

Somewhere within the school, ‘they’ make a decision about who must take a coverage and the assignment then is made. Unlike at other schools, little consideration is given to if a covering teacher has a relationship with a student – an important fact since one of the biggest challenges of coverages is walking into a room of unknown students and trying to quickly
establish order. Anita recognizes the unwritten rules governing when a coverage can be refused - the only way out is if a teacher is scheduled to be a part of a student’s “Individualized Educational Plan” meeting or if they are being observed by an administrator. The seeming randomness, the lack of transparency, and the efficiency with which she is tracked down by the omnipresent loud speaker, all contributed to a feeling that she could be subject to a coverage at any moment, that “you have no choice.”

Emergency coverages were an example of formal rules and procedures shifted and morphed according to the context of a specific school. Teachers had varying ways of interpreting these complex dynamics; Chiemeka developed a sense of qualified loyalty, Sophia a feeling of defiance, and Anita one of powerlessness. The unwritten nature of many such institutional norms was underscored by how surprised teachers in the focus group were to learn about the arrangements at a different school. Like enforcing administrative rules around uniforms, or Lydia managing strict punctuality requirements, coverages were a representation of how teachers had to contend with structures of power in their schools.

**Grading**

An area of schooling that was high in both administrative enforcement and teacher agency was grades. The keeping of academic records constituted one of the central functions of teachers, an official documentation of the supposed learning that was happening in school every day. Thus, administrative oversight was quite present – “this is one area where I am regulated,” said Paige. “And they look at our grades because we are a Focus school and so I’m not allowed to fail very many students.” The “Focus” designation for schools is assigned by the State Department of Education and is given to schools that have been classified as persistently failing.
Paige works in one such school, and thus her gradebooks are heavily scrutinized. Still, grades were an entity in schools whose meaning was unclear, with different representations for different teachers. Grades appeared to be highly negotiable and a product of a system of power. Grading is a domain where teachers could uphold an inherently evaluative and sorting structure of schooling, or they could challenge this norm and offer the reward of grades according to a different value system. As my participants discussed their ideas about the larger purpose of grades a murky picture emerged about their significance. But grades also took on the character of another type of knowledge created by teachers to locate and describe students, and sometimes to challenge the very idea of learning.

In some of the classes I observed, teachers referred to quizzes and forthcoming grades as a way to motivate students to engage with learning. Grades and quizzes emerged as a strategy to underscore the importance of the knowledge that teachers had produced in their instruction. Other teachers scarcely mentioned points or upcoming assignments. Lydia used quizzes as a motivator for her students. As she circulated and noticed written answers that she was not satisfied with, she called out “I don't know what’s going on, you guys are playing too much Fortnite! Because that’s not going to work, Like, it’s starting to get real, you don’t realize that from the last quiz?” The most recent quiz was not only meant to be a motivator, she contrasted the popular video game Fortnite with the learning that students should be prioritizing. Lydia was elevating the importance of her lesson on atomic structure, something of “real” significance rather than the video game.

Chiemeka actually opened his lesson with a lengthy appeal to improving grades. As the class settled and he had his students’ full attention, he began:

Alright, so, yesterday we gave you a chance to basically organize your binders, turn in everything you haven’t turned in. Now today, to start working on it, now we’re going to work. We did the labs, now we’re going to work on the “explain” portion all over again,
so you have the chance to create a great Jupiter Grade.\textsuperscript{7} Monday…progress reports are due. I’m trying to help you guys out, and at the same help multitask and help you with the test. So give me your attention, do not stop me because you want to talk and be distracting. Unnecessary noise is not needed. We’re here to learn and we’re going to get started.

This opening is interesting because Chiemeka is setting the tone for the entire lesson by posing the day’s review as a chance to “create a great Jupiter Grade” – the online grading system his school uses. The lesson is in fact a repeat of a previous lab where students had to explain how heat is transferred, but by repeating the topic students are actually given a chance to strengthen their upcoming progress report and Chiemeka positioned himself as a guide who can “help you guys out.” At the same time, Chiemeka offered a contradictory purpose for the lesson, saying “we’re here to learn.” He also gave several behavioral expectations – “unnecessary noise” and distractions are unwelcome. Grades, then, had a complicated meaning beyond just signifying learning in Chiemeka’s class.

In an earlier discussion with me, Chiemeka explained how his grading system in fact includes more than just a reflection of the content learning he had specified. As mandated by his school, he graded assignments on a 4-point scale, with 4 representing mastery; sometimes, students challenged his grade and he described how he might justify his grading to a student:

There are times where random student might tell me “Ok, oh, why do I have a 1 or 2 or 3,” and I’ll sit down and talk to them about it. It’s not about just doing the work, sometimes your participation, the things you’re doing in the classroom, getting kicked out, things like that, affect your grade. It’s not about, ok you’ve turned in a piece of paper, but you was like, you were just trash the whole week! Like, \textit{you don’t get graded just because you did work, you get graded because how you were in the classroom. Did you disrupt the classroom?} Ok, you got your work done, but you distracted every student in the classroom. Like, do you really get a four for that?

In his classes, Chiemeka sees the grades as reflecting more than “doing the work.” Interestingly, even this baseline is different than showing learning, it is simply a measure of

\textsuperscript{7} This is the online grading system that is used to show students & parents their real-time grades.
completion. Yet Chiemeka builds off the assumption that grades are about doing the work and then adds his additional interpretation. Students get graded based on “how you were in the classroom;” classroom disruptions, behaving like “trash,” getting kicked out, are all considerations that Chiemeka factors into his grading: “Everything that happens in the class is a whole, it’s rounded as a whole, you can’t just finish the classwork but you just made my life hard as hell teaching the class, you know? Something has to happen about that, you know?” Grades, then, are Chiemeka’s way of ensuring that something does happen in response to poor behavior.

This belief about grading had evolved over his first two years teaching and was grounded in a feeling that he didn’t want to be taken advantage of. The experience of working with a particular student, Anthony, had changed his thinking about the purpose of grades. Anthony was a student who was exceptionally “book smart” and did very well on quizzes and classwork. But he was also a student who “didn’t care about anything, he’s always in trouble.” The combination of completing the classwork and being disruptive was not tenable for Chiemeka; in effect, the classwork itself was not serving as a strong enough motivator to behave well in class.

It’s difficult to assess what Chiemeka means by ‘book smart’ because of the nature of knowledge and learning in the curriculum he had designed. For a student to be considered smart, presumably they should be able to repeat a few well reviewed concepts and answer questions with relatively simple answers; but it perhaps might also mean that a student completes the daily assignments. For example, in the lesson I observed, several items on the student worksheet for the day were some variation of “What happens to molecules when their temperature changes?” and the acceptable answers were usually “It moves less” or “they move more.” Students who could put this phrasing into a complete sentence were rewarded even more. Anthony, it appears,
was able to play this game well, and Chiemeka realized that grades that measured academics alone were not enough to create the classroom he wanted:

I feel like that [grades] help spurn the culture…I’ve noticed that students understand that even if they get on the basketball team, there are students on the basketball team that should not be on the basketball team. Even if they have academics they’re always in trouble. Like, students reflect on it like “He’s on the basketball team? She’s on the basketball team?” Same thing is kind of happening in the classroom. Like, “How are you passing? [Students might say] “I do all my work! I’m always good. I don’t call out.” So they think about it like that. “So wait, I can get a 4, I just got to do the work but I can do whatever I want?” They recognize that… “I can do whatever I want, I just got to do the work.” Next thing you know they acting out, they don’t really care about nothing. “I know I’m going to pass anyway, so what’s the point.”

Chiemeka doesn’t want students to feel like they can do anything they want; instead, he wants them to feel compelled to follow the rules and norms of his classroom. Because grades are equated with class culture, they should act serve as a pass to behave as a student pleases but rather offer an incentive for behaving well or a deterrent to behaving poorly.

Anita’s perspectives on grades were quite different. Rather than an incentive to behave, she came to see grades as a means of communicating her desire for student empowerment. When I observed her lesson, she didn’t once mention grades or points, only pausing at the very end of class to remind students that their homework was due the next day. She frequently pointed out that her students showed great motivation as part of the MS 5’s gifted and talented program. Still, she shared that many of her colleagues were quite rigid about grading with strict late policies for their students and a finality to grades once an assignment was completed. Anita shared that she had two feelings about grades:

Yes and no. I care about grades, um, in this sense of like, we’re grading on mastery, you get a million chances to show me that you can do this, if you give up then that’s your grade and like that’s what shows, um, but like…a test, if a kid does really bad, I would let them re-do it. And average the grades just so like, ok, you messed up here is another chance
She cared about grades because they represent learning – “mastery” – as she describes it. But she doesn’t care about the more bureaucratic aspects of grading. Instead, she wants her grades to be an arena where students see that they have “a million chances to show me that you can do this.” Grades, then, are a form of flexibility; “I tell them a lot that they can always come to me and I’m always here for help and they can always redo work,” she had told me in one of our interviews.

The topic of grading only came up when she was sharing in our focus group that she struggled with the tensions between limit setting and freedom, or, as I quoted earlier, the need for “laying down the line” and building student agency.

I struggle with the limit setting, because I would like, I like to give a lot of chances and I think that’s really good but also sometimes bad. My students, for example, they just got their progress reports and so many of them had missing work and I gave this whole spiel: “You can always make up work but you need to make the effort to come to me and spend lunch with me. I’m not going to let you give it in the last minute,” but even the fact that I’m giving them that opportunity is different from a lot of teachers, so that’s something that I’m struggling with. Like, where do I set my limit?

When Anita is speaking about setting limits, rather than speaking about discipline, she is referring to the number of opportunities her students should receive to make up missing work. Grades are both good and bad; the good coming from their role as a motivator for students to come re-do work, but there is “something bad” in that students might hand work in at the last minute. So, she asks herself “Where do I set the limit?” For Anita, grades are not a measurement of behavior or the extent to which students are disruptive, and they are not a measure of completeness, as they are in Chiemeka’s class. Anita views grades as the backdrop for a larger struggle she is having with her role as a teacher between providing strict boundaries for her students and encouraging students to be self-advocates.
Paige’s thinking about grades showed a direct challenge to the structure of education and the role of learning in her classroom. She had explained to me that she rarely gave assignments in class that could be directly graded, and instead tried to design hands-on activities for students. Often this included work like cutting out models, gluing drawings into a “science notebook,” or playing games. The lesson I observed was in fact a memory game involving cell biology vocabulary and several groups boisterously and engagedly participated. One group of four boys, however, was very reserved during the game and, noticing this, Paige dropped by to help them get started by saying “I’m going to help you cheat!” She then started pointing out some of the possible matches and the boys began getting more involved in the game. I asked her about this exchange later, and she attributed the group’s reluctance to play the game to a larger unfamiliarity with the joys of learning:

That’s a very studious table. And I think it’s interesting too, some of the students really like games, and I try to play games twice a week in here. And some students like Ahmed are like, “We just want worksheets”. I’m like, “No!! …We don’t want to do worksheets all the time!” I don’t like that. I think it’s just, like, the traditional learning experience, they just do worksheets all day long and, like, which I really detest about our educational system and in general you do something and you get points for it, and you do it, and you get points for it, over and over, all day long, and it’s like, here’s a sheet, give me my points.

Paige saw grading as a larger systemic issue in education which she detests. Grading transforms classwork into a strictly transactional activity where students demand points in exchange for compliance. Acclimated to earning the immediate and predictable reward of points toward a grade in exchange for producing some written work, a lesson design that disrupts this simple arrangement can throw off students like Ahmed. The students at Ahmed’s table at first didn’t know what to make of it or how to respond. Paige saw students who are stuck in this arrangement as having lost an intrinsic desire to learn, and instead they are in class simply to continue with a pre-arranged agreement. She gave an example of one student, Luis, who
consistently refused to participate in non-graded activities; without the reward of grades, Paige had to resort to other means to provide motivation:

Some students, um, there is a student named Luis. Luis is very, very, capable. Like, very smart. He doesn’t want to do work sometimes. For him, he and I, honestly, I just have conversations with him and I’ll say, “Listen, like, I’m not your mother, I’m not going to stay here. You’re a young adult, and you know what you’re supposed to be doing, and you know what we’re working on, so I’m not going to force you, but you know the repercussions for your learning and eventually potentially your grade on notebook checks so you can make a choice.” And usually they make the choice. I would never be abrasive and say “Why aren’t you doing your worksheet?” because I feel like that’s counterproductive for students. They just tense up and they don’t want to do that anyway. Whereas, I gave them a choice, you can do it or….But, as long as you’re not distracting other people, as long as you’re just making the choice for yourself.

Paige is seeking to resist a larger arrangement in schools of rewarding student compliance on incorporative tasks like worksheet completion where students are asked to provide a set of sanctioned responses. Her creation of games, activities, and hands-on work is an attempt to undermine a fundamental agreement that exists in schools between students and teachers and that pivots around the knowledge that teachers choose to emphasize. Paige noticed in some of her students an uncertainty of the incentives in this new type of project, and sought to make a case for engagement around other concepts like responsibility and an allegiance to “what you’re supposed to be doing.” That statement remains unclear; are students “supposed” to be complying with the teacher? Learning? Following their own conscience in the classroom? Paige’s use of the twin phrases “I’m not your mother” and “You’re a young adult” are fascinating. She sought to remove any lingering and subtle maternal authority that might compel students but also wants to keep the pressure of responsibility on them. As we’ve seen, Paige is a teacher for whom relationships of trust and shared purpose are vitally important to her classroom culture. Here, she verbally downplays the powerful moral force of motherly concern and foregrounds a student’s own sense of responsibility. She is signaling to students that they are
free to choose their own path, though there exists one path that is mutually understood to be better. Still, her moral presence is hovering - grades are central to the relationship but when Paige claims “I’m not going to force you, but you know the repercussions,” she is avoiding an outright power struggle, freeing herself from having to constantly hold an impending quiz or progress report over her students’ heads, and letting the quiet and distant authority of a sense of responsibility, a commitment to “learning,” and her own judgment – as well as grades – do the work of motivating students.

Chiemeka, Anita, and Paige, all adopted differing approaches to grading in their teaching. Grades could be a means to secure acceptable behavior in the classroom, to communicate a flexibility and belief in students, or a way to subvert existing institutional arrangement inherent in schools. Each teacher ran up against the variable meaning of grades as they outlined their philosophical approach. Chiemeka described grades as reflecting both a repeating of the knowledge he valued as well as a student’s agreeing to not act like “trash” in class. In Anita’s class, grades were another front in her attempt to find a balance between giving her students agency and “limit setting.” Her grading actively countered the strict authoritative position of others teachers that demanded students present their work in one way, and instead allowed students “a million chances” to turn in their work. But she also recognized that students might take advantage of this agency and choose to not do their work initially and turn in assignments late. Paige detested the normal arrangement of students being rewarded with points for completing a written activity; she believed it weakened intrinsic motivation and bred mindless compliance. However, she also relied on a more subtle moral force of what students are “supposed to do” and distant grades to influence her students. Philosophies of grading represent
different ways teachers used a larger institutional structure to foster student motivation and at times resist the de facto arrangement of schools.

**Being Evaluated**

Throughout the research study, moments of evaluation with administrators appeared sporadically as reminders of the degree to which the work of teachers was monitored. We’ve seen how teacher enforcement of behavioral expectations was monitored with regularity by visits from the Dean or email reminders; Chanda characterized her administration as “like Big Brother.” Evaluation of the supposedly core work of teachers – classroom instruction - was different; it was carried out haphazardly, sporadically, and yet seriously. Teaches were aware of the high stakes of their evaluations and had developed a sophisticated understanding of how to make the best of these important official moments. Lesson planning and classroom observations were the chief mechanisms by which the work of instruction was judged, and together they formed complex sites where administrative power was both formally recognized and subtly defied by teachers.

Teachers recognized lesson plans as important yet flawed official documents, necessary for their work as educators but of uncertain value to the actual task of serving students. This topic of lesson plans came up when Franklin, who became sort of a de facto leader of our focus group, launched into a discussion of a successfully completed classroom observation. “Today was my first, in three years, my 3rd year teaching, my first time I had an observation where there were no ‘Ineffectives.’” The group expressed surprise and gave a round of celebratory comments as he mentioned this; the “ineffective” referred to a four point rubric on which teachers are evaluated along a variety of characteristics, for example, classroom environment,
questioning, assessment, and – relevant here – planning: “And that’s because I was forced to do lesson plans. Most of my ‘ineffectives’ were from not having lesson plans.” Franklin had spent his first two years getting observed by his assistant principal and has consistently received at least one Ineffective rating in the planning category because he never had a lesson plan. He related his previous experience in an observation:

Um, [my assistant principal] walks into the room, she says, “Do you have a lesson plan?” And the one time, the last time, I thought I had it, and I didn’t. The lesson went great but I still get an “ineffective” because there is no paper lesson plan. Anything that they can align to me not having a lesson plan is going to get an “Ineffective” just because you need to have a lesson plan.

To strengthen his overall scores on his observation, his assistant principal ultimately “forced” him to complete his lesson plan. This didn’t change Franklin’s mind about the value of the lesson planning for his instruction; when I asked him if he felt he needed a lesson plan to teach, he responded “I don’t believe you do, me personally. I still don’t believe you do, because my worksheet is everything. Sounds bad when you say it.” The lesson plan is a document that Franklin understands is required and also in which he sees little practical value. By saying it “sounds bad” to acknowledge that he thinks so little of the actual plan, he is perhaps hinting that this feeling is a minor disrespect to his supervisors. The only reason Franklin wrote a lesson plan now was because his administrator was requiring it, and he was rewarded with a positive score on his observation.

Though Franklin may have felt like it didn’t sound appropriate to voice this opinion, others were quick to jump in and second the belief that lesson plans weren’t worthwhile. Sophia outright rejected the importance of actual paper lesson plans. “Yeah I don’t. At all. I don’t lesson plan. I just know the order of my lessons,” she said. For her, the more important document was the actual learning materials that she gave her students: “The thing is, if my
worksheet has everything that I needed to have, including the higher level questions, why do I need to repeat it in the lesson plan?” Sophia saw the lesson plan, then, as repetitive and not adding value to her planning. Upon hearing her comments, Franklin then adopted the persona of an administrator, seemingly channeling a conversation he may have experienced in the past:

FRANKLIN: I’m going to speak as an administrator - so I’m going to give you some feedback: So I have to go through your worksheet? No, I want to see you lesson plan, and I want to look through our lesson plan and maybe we can sit together and talk about your instruction.

SOPHIA: So sit down and watch my class! Don’t give me feedback on something you don’t see! Or give me feedback on the task itself, you don’t need the lesson plan to figure out the task, like, the rigor of the task.

In his re-enactment, Franklin displays an appreciation for the rhythms and notes of a conversation with supervisors. As Franklin spoke, he leaned in and his tone became deeper and more serious. He even adopted a technique of masking an imperative by saying “maybe we can sit and talk together and talk about your instruction.” He conveyed a confident authority that he might be interpreting from his own administrators in the ability to influence teacher actions through the force of these conversations; perhaps changes in his own instructional work were compelled by just such a conversation. Sophia was having none of it, however, and expertly deflects this query by going straight to what she feels is the most relevant part of her teaching, the way she designs her actual learning task. For her, the best representation of the quality of her planning was in the task itself and as she played along she seemed to be asserting her authority as a teacher in the presence of an administrator to direct meaningful work in her own class, and at the same time questioning the validity of empty feedback from a supervisor who she assumes hasn’t taken seen her actual teaching. She flashed her classroom culture as a type of badge, saying “So sit down and watch my class!” to signal that the proof of her competence is found in her practice. Indeed, Sophia was a thoughtful and creative designer of lessons; later in the
discussion she shared several innovative learning projects she had implemented, like having students create multi-media presentations to demonstrate Newton’s Laws, or designing and pitching a wheelchair model in a Shark Tank-like event. Yet, the spirit of these activities were not to be captured in a lesson plan.

For some teachers, lesson plans seemed to have become symbols of deference toward administrators, part of an agreement to pay allegiance to the authority of supervisors while still holding onto the autonomy of teachers. Like Sophia, Chanda created sophisticated, differentiated, and thoughtful lessons, but she explained that she “never” lesson planned. However, there seemed to exist a certain arrangement at her school:

The only time I have to have a lesson plan is when we have a PPO or we have outside school visitors coming in. Other than that, because I make that entire workbook, I know the entire - a lesson plan is just re-writing. There’s nothing that I think a lesson plan can help me get that I don’t already have from creating [class materials].

The PPO is a “Principal’s Performance Observation,” the name given to an official superintendent’s observation of a principal’s practice. The pattern of hierarchical evaluation was repeated at a different scale as superintendent observed principals and required proof of school leader effectiveness in the form of creating a faculty with lesson plans; principals in turn observed teachers and required proof of their effectiveness in the form of a lesson plan. Though Chanda views lesson plans as nothing more that “just re-writing,” in a display of tiered bureaucratic symbolism she is willing to make her principal look good in front of the superintendent. Chanda knows her curriculum well and even advocates for making changes that benefit her students, but lesson plans are less about meeting her instructional needs than paying allegiance to her supervisor.

In Anita’s case, the lesson plan was less explicitly a symbolic device than almost a field of gamesmanship:
So [my assistant principal] came in and [the lesson plan] wasn’t printed out and I said to her, “I have it, let me just print it out.” But she left before, and after I had a prep the next period and I just fixed everything. I mean, the lesson was really bad and I get it from an administrator’s point of view, they want you to justify everything, so in the lesson plan I justify going over these questions and why I wrote it on the board, and x, y, and z, especially since it wasn’t a strong lesson, I knew if I justified it in my lesson plan she’d be able to be “Ok, but you explained it so fine.” …and then after she left I was like “Let me work my scheming magic right now.” Just to cover my butt.

Anita’s lesson, as I’ll describe below, was not up to her own standards, but she finds the lesson plan portion an opportunity for her to use her “scheming magic” to create something acceptable. Her Assistant Principal, Ms. Tyson, accepted at face value Anita’s request to “let me just print it out;” in fact, Ms. Tyson left before the request could be completed. Not only was the lesson plan a way to show her administrators that she respected their authority, in this case it was a means for Anita to gain extra credit on her classroom observation and to “cover my butt,” to show that she was meeting her obligations as a teacher on paper if not in practice. Sophia similarly engaged in the charade of lesson plans: “I’m one of those teachers, if they ask me for a lesson plan, I’m just like ‘Yeah, I'll send it to you later.’ And then I whip it up real quick.” This, of course, is quite different than the type or tone of response that Sophia suggested she would give in her mini-role play with Franklin.

One teacher for whom lesson plans were not symbols of allegiance or part of a game was Paige. Interestingly, Paige was unable to attend our focus group and so her perspective wasn’t shared with the other participants, among whom a sort of consensus about lesson plans had emerged. Paige, however, spoke strongly about her beliefs about the greater importance of lesson planning to equitably serve students. She was well aware that many teachers at her school were taking advantage of the lack of oversight:

That level of autonomy I’m sure is wonderful for some people. I also think it leads to very big systemic issues at this school. Like, I would say, 60% of the staff doesn’t lesson plan. And when I walk into other classrooms, not that I’m saying that they’re poor
teachers, I’m just thinking that adults are much like students, if you have high expectations, you need to meet them with high levels of support, and, yeah, no one is doing anything.

While Paige, like many teachers, values her autonomy, she sees a major downside to not having her colleagues held accountable. She acknowledges that lesson planning does not necessarily equate poor teaching, or perhaps she is being careful in how she characterizes her colleagues in a school she had earlier described as a place where “no one cares.” By saying that “60% of the staff doesn’t lesson plan,” she is implying that she is not satisfied when she walks into other classrooms, that there are “very big systemic issues at her school.” For example, she noted the poor pass rate on the previous year’s required State Math exam was 25% while her own class with the same students in science had a pass rate that was over three times higher. Student performance on state exams is a measure of her legitimacy as a teacher, and she wanted other teachers to show the same commitment. She was amazed that teachers aren’t met with high expectations or held accountable, that “no one is doing anything.” “High expectations,” of course, is a common refrain, a type of discourse used by many education reformers who seek to address educational inequity through an unwavering belief in the potential of students; Paige is applying that same thought to her colleagues. Unlike at other schools, where teachers had expressed lesson planning as a way to fulfill an obligation to administrators or as a forced requirement, Paige has different reasons for creating a daily lesson plan:

Yeah, I feel like it’s my moral obligation, I don’t know. I would feel so bad if I came in without a lesson plan, like, I would just not be able to emotionally process that…I feel angry for my students, and I think part of the reason admin doesn’t engage with me is because I’m very clear about how I feel about what’s right for students, and, like, not that I’m telling anyone how to do that job, and I would never say that “I know a better math curriculum,” but I think I’m very clear that I’m aware that there’s inequity…
Paige, operating in an environment where she is largely left alone to pursue her own goals, doesn’t seek approval from her administrators or strive to show her allegiance to them. Instead, she feels a strong allegiance towards the needs of her students, a “moral obligation;” but she also followed up the comment by saying “I don’t know,” as if to point out that she’s not sure where the inequity in schooling comes from – teacher apathy, administrative incompetence, or some other reason. She continued exhibiting a delicate balance between establishing her own competence as a strong teacher who merits respect and someone who infringes on the autonomy of other teachers, saying “I’m not telling anyone how to do their job.” What her comments clearly show is that lesson planning is an emotional commitment on her part, a symbol to herself of her desire to work for the good of her students.

Lesson plans were only one part of a larger “formal observation” evaluation process. This entailed an administrator entering a classroom to observe teacher instruction for a period of time ranging from fifteen minutes to an entire class period. As mentioned earlier, teachers are rated along a four point rubric ranging from “Ineffective” to “Highly Effective” on a variety of instructional categories. Like lesson plans, there sometimes was a game-like character to the implementation of observations. Sophia, for example, knew that the teacher contract required that she be observed four times a year, and that her first observation had taken place in the early fall. She then calculated that she could anticipate a lull in administrative visits, saying “I’m in my 2nd observation already, so I know I’m clear until the holidays.” Still, these observations were a serious matter as they affected a teacher’s official overall rating. Given this importance, it was also surprising that many teachers simply hadn’t been visited by administrators almost half-way through the year; at the time of our focus group in mid-December, neither Lydia,
Chiemeka, nor Paige had received an official observation. Franklin and Anita related that they had just received an observation on the morning of the focus group.

Anita’s case is interesting because she suspected that her observation was a form of mini-retaliation for being absent the previous day to attend a family event. “I knew she was coming,” she said, referring to her assistant principal, and the rest of the focus group seemed to affirm that observations could be a way of getting back at a teacher for some missed obligation. Even as she sensed the possibility of an observation, Anita had moved ahead with her usual plan and led her Highlight of the Week activity. As I wrote in a previous chapter, this activity was a critical part of her teaching, one that she valued for the opportunities it present to build trust with her students. Upon being observed, however, she cut short the activity and moved on to a hastily planned lesson that had “actual” instruction. This was one of the reasons why she knew that her lesson wasn’t very strong; the observation was a process that she viewed as important to meet certain images of how teaching should be done, and other activities like community building weren’t part of that picture. As Anita explains it, she “got so nervous because all the kids wanted to share.” She didn’t want Ms. Tyson to see the activity, however, because she had “never seen me do this before and I did kind of have a lesson today so instead of letting all the kids share today, I was like ‘Alright, we’re just going to get a few people today.’” Anita opted to forego the “Highlight of the Week” activity, a time where she regularly got full class engagement, and chose instead to use a lesson she “kind of” had prepared. Even though it was less likely to create the types of student interest she valued, she felt a partially designed lesson would be more recognizable and legible as good teaching to her supervisor. This may have been prompted because she felt the pressure of her first formal observation of the year and also strongly
suspected that she was under added scrutiny for having missed the previous day. She explained her decision to switch course to regular instruction:

They [administration], like, wouldn’t…they would be annoying about it and it wasn’t worth the, if I could prevent that fight with them and still make the kids happy by doing [Highlight of the Week] another day, yeah. And ideally, I’d like them to [understand], but there is so many things I would like to happen in this school that fighting with them about Highlight of the Week is not what I want to choose my battle.

So, Anita made the decision to cut short one of her most cherished instructional practices in favor of teaching that was more readily valued by her administrators. Few educators, of course, would state that fostering strong relationships in the classroom was an unimportant activity; however, administrators also have expectations around instruction of which Anita is well aware. Anita used the metaphor of a battle to describe the lengths she would have to go to convince her administrators of the value of such an activity. It was a fight she wanted to prevent because she didn’t want to risk her administration being “annoying” about it and saw a way to avoid the confrontation and meet her students’ desires by postponing the event. The following day, Wednesday, was when I had a chance to visit her classroom, and she made a point of explaining to her students the decision to postpone Highlight of the Week:

I don’t know if you…we have many APs in our school, and one of them was in our classroom, and she wanted to see a lot of instruction. So unfortunately, we couldn’t have that much time for Highlight of the Week so I put it on our “Do Now” because I did say yesterday that we’d get back to those who didn’t share.

Anita revealed a recognition of the difference between activities like the Highlight of the Week and the formally recognized and valued ‘instruction’, an action she perceived as important to her administration. Rather than continue with something of personal and pedagogical value, Anita chose to pursue the activity that was institutionally valued. In the face of the power dynamics of her school, she elected to hide her own personal agenda and mask the work she was
doing with her students in favor of formally recognized “instruction.” Immediately after finishing her explanation, several hands shot up; they didn’t seem particularly concerned about the delay but rather just excited that the activity was still taking place. In explaining her decision, she showed a commitment to making time for the Highlight of the Week was very important; she wanted students to know that her word could be trusted.

Observations, then, are like an institutional ritual where each side knows their role. For Sophia this meant she would prepare her lesson plan when needed (though she said earlier that she had her own scheme for this); Anita knew to eschew actions of real value to her and focus on the “instruction” that she surmised her administrators wanted to see. Something that Paige was frustrated to note was outside of the ritual was the actual giving of meaningful suggestions to improve her teaching: “The feedback is, like, not very…” She trailed off before turning to her memories of the preliminary conversation she had with her principal at the beginning of the year.

This mandatory “Instructional Planning Conference” is designed to give the teacher a chance to discuss goals for the year and to select the type of evaluation program they want for the year. Teachers, as guided by the union contract, can elect to have a different number of minimum required observations dependent on their previous year’s ratings. Poorly rated teachers must agree to more observations, while highly rated teachers have the option of selecting as few as three observations for the year. Paige related her experience in her initial planning conference with her Principal:

I went in to choose my observation, and I actually would choose more [observations]. I think it’s very - it’s good to get feedback. But I went in, and was like, “Let me read it.” And [my principal] was like “Just pick the least.” I have three times, because I’m highly effective. So it’s three times a year, and he was, like, “Just sign it.” And we didn’t have any discussion or anything.
For Paige, a teacher who views lesson planning as a moral obligation, the observation process held the promise of getting meaningful feedback on her teaching. Yet, she noticed that for her principal the whole arrangement was a burdensome administrative requirement, one that he urged Paige to make as painless for him as possible. Intended to support teachers in their development, observations did not fulfill the goals of teacher development for Paige’s principal; rather, it was a series of motions that they must go through. At the same time, it is interesting to note that Paige is also invested in the products of this process; even through the observations seem perfunctory at best, she still describes herself by the label they generate, saying “I’m highly effective.” This official designation may only be a bureaucratic label, but Paige accepts and internalizes this term and uses it as an identity marker for herself.

Observations weren’t just burdens, though; they could provide moments of feeling success as a teacher. Even though Franklin had expressed skepticism about the importance of writing lesson plans, he still spoke with evident satisfaction when he led off the focus group by saying “Today was my first time in three years...where there was no ‘Ineffectives.’” Chanda shared a similar moment when her official observation led her feel pride in her work as a teacher:

Actually in my observation [the Assistant Principal at the time] Ms. Wilson walked in in my first year, and I get very nervous in those situations, and I went up to a student, Briana, and said “Can you lead our class please?” And she had no idea what was happening. I just said “Page 64.” And she did it, and she was perfect, and so seeing students being able to do that, whether it was the front of the class, facilitating the “Do Now,” or in their small groups, that is something I’m proud of.

The observation was a validation of Chanda’s work as a teacher. Especially in her first year as a teacher, a time when she didn’t have full command of her classroom, the feeling of demonstrating competence at a moment of official inspection, despite feeling “very nervous,” allowed her to feel like a success.
Observations and lesson plans were thus complex sites of both evaluation and producing identity. Teachers negotiated their meanings by turning the process into a sort of game; they could both acknowledge the legitimacy of their supervisors by engaging in the process while also enacting subtle forms of resistance by only doing the bare minimum. There was also an element of ritual where the stated goal of development and support was trumped by a more institutional desire to fulfill the requirements of the respective roles of teachers and administrators.

Discussion

In Richard Ingersoll’s (2003) book *Who controls teachers’ work?* he discussed the unique position of teachers within the institution of schools. Designed with many of the common elements of a bureaucracy, a teacher’s work is highly controlled; yet, because of the complexity of the actual work of teaching, their time in the classroom is often unregulated. This interesting arrangement had led many to describe schools as a “loosely coupled” system. Furthermore, the nature of compulsory schooling and of how students were distributed in graded classrooms meant that both teachers and students were in a state of “dual captivity,” where both groups had to tolerate each other because of an “externally imposed requirement of cooperation,” (Lortie, 1977, p. 4). Norms and expectations are supported by strict rules and a structure of power, yet because teaching is a largely relational and thoroughly human exercise, the work of teachers relied on informal codes and spheres of influence and favor. Thus, the rigid structure – Max Weber’s iron cage - of a bureaucracy was softened and sometimes broken by the efforts of teachers to follow their own projects.

Ingersoll (2003) used the national School and Staffing Survey as well as his field work in schools to argue that teachers maintained heavy influence on instructional matters, the domain of
work that took place within their rooms. Meanwhile, teachers perceived minimal influence over administrative and school-wide social decisions. The responses of my participants showed this distinction to still be valid. In fact, I gave my focus group a modified version of the School and Staffing Survey, and as predicted they reported feeling much more control over the work in the classroom than over school-wide decisions or disciplinary matters (see Table 2). On a scale of zero (no influence) to three (heavy influence), my participants reported an average rating of 0.5 in their perception of influence in school wide matters, 1.15 on social matters like the training of teachers or the student discipline, and a strong 2.25 over classroom matters. This gap between perceived influence in different domains was much larger for individuals like Anita, Chanda, and Sophia, all of whom contributed in some way to the school but were also firmly in control in their classrooms.

Teachers are subject to myriad rules while also deeply influenced by structural decisions taken by their supervisors. This was evident in the discussions of my participants. They described activities like lunch duty, having to produce lesson plans, and being available for emergency coverages. Chanda had to follow school wide guidelines in implementing a writing curriculum, while Lydia described the stresses she felt by meeting strict punctuality requirements. More influential perhaps than the explicit rules were the consequences that followed from decisions around teacher assignment, class sizes, the structuring of time, and the allocation of resources. These decisions presented challenges for the effectiveness of teachers and were an indirect form of controlling their work. Large class sizes prevented the type of deep relationship building that was valued by many. Over-enrolling students and surpassing required class size limits was viewed by some teachers, like Lydia, as a hazard, and others like Chanda and Paige as something over which they had little control. Removing mandated co-teachers
made managing a classroom exceedingly difficult, and Lydia responded by modifying her entire approach to instruction. Chanda’s students were stationary for the majority of the day and she had to anticipate the resulting challenges; she also was an active procurer of additional donations because her administration restricted access to classroom supplies. Ingersoll argues that one of the effects of assigning teachers to teach out of their content area is a “de-skilling” of the labor force; asking teachers to work out of their field was a route to “devalue, deskill, and disempower teachers’ work.” (pp. 159-161). Indeed, this was something that several teachers shared. Anita was lost as a special education teacher in the previous year, feeling she “did not have the skills” and was “failing” her students. Lydia, as a science teacher was similarly out of sorts in her special education class, feeling threatened by a mix of what she saw as combustible students. Her class erupted into a “full out fight,” something she hadn’t seen in any of her other classes. Sophia was asked to teach three different subjects, and the pressure of preparing for these classes made her feel justified in resisting other parts of her job (like coverages). Ingersoll furthermore points out how teachers are placed in the strange position of having to enforce rules they didn’t create (pp. 143-150); for my participants, this largely centered on upholding rules around uniforms and hallway behavior while being monitored by deans. Instructional work, meanwhile, was more of a malleable and negotiated game, a site where administrators could have their authority validated by the rituals of the observation process while also allowing teachers to maintain autonomy. Seen altogether, the structure of power in schools seems to suggest an emphasis not on student learning but rather student management; having a teacher in every classroom or upholding norms for student movement and behavior were given priorities in evaluations over the improvement of instruction.
Consider teacher observations; these generally are conducted with the twin purposes of holding teachers accountable and developing their instructional skill. This second purpose was largely absent from the observation process; no teachers mentioned receiving valuable feedback on the way they taught, created a classroom culture, built relationships with students, or any of the other numerous aspects of teaching. Regarding accountability, there was certainly an element of ensuring that teachers were doing their job in, for example, the way Franklin was required to write lesson plans. Observations also generated a sense of nervousness in both Anita and Chanda. But in their descriptions of observations, participants depicted a process of collusion between administrators who wanted their demands for lesson plans and order to be respected, and teachers who wanted to maintain their autonomy in instructional work. The lesson plan was a site where this agreement was carried out, with teachers feigning to produce well-thought out and pre-written documents and administrators ignoring the fact that mostly no such document existed.

The distinction between classroom and school zones may give the impression that teachers preferred to stay in their classrooms and felt generally powerless regarding matters that took place outside. Even as they rated themselves as not very influential on school wide matters, every teacher showed a desire and ability to carry out their own educational projects in the school zone through building relationships and strategic partnerships, thus proving their value to the school. Rather than being isolated teachers left to fend for themselves, they actively worked to make connections throughout the school. An important theme is how, playing on the multidirectional and fluid nature of power, teachers saw and capitalized on opportunities to resist control, set terms within their school environment that commanded respect, and navigated relationships of authority both with students and their colleagues to support pursuing their own
agendas. The various clubs, initiatives, and leadership positions show teachers making their own mark on the school, and using a nuanced understanding of school dynamics to do so. Approaches to grading are another example of how a formal administrative requirement could be appropriated and re-defined by teachers according to their own values; thus, Anita turned grades into a way to communicate trust, Chiemeka recast grades as an evaluation of behavior, and Paige sought to challenge the entire relationship of grading altogether.

Over forty years ago, Lortie (1977) contended that teachers are ambivalent about taking on more control and content to be masters of the classroom, trading freedom for the acceptance of certain limitations:

[The teacher] accepts the hegemony of the school system on which he is economically and functionally dependent. He cannot ensure that the imperatives of teaching, as he defines them, will be honored, but he chafes when they are not. He is poised between the impulse to control his work life and the necessity to accept its vagaries (p. 186).

Lortie identifies the teacher with the pronoun “he,” but as I noted in the beginning of this chapter, teachers (and five of my seven participants) are much more likely to be female. This no doubt has relevance within a managerial structure that can be subject to gendered dynamics of control. The ambivalence that Lortie postulates was not at all apparent in the participants of this study. They frequently noticed indifference in veteran colleagues, but they were not willing to accept schools as they were. While Anita commented that her colleagues “don’t care,” for her, and perhaps other participants, the issue was that they cared too much. Anita had been asking fundamental questions of herself about the possibility of enduring in the profession of teaching while continuing to give the same high level of care. “I can’t do this for twenty years,” she told me at one point, “I think that the amount of energy that this job costs, I can’t see myself still having that energy and I don’t want to be a disservice.” For Anita, a critical part of the work of teaching is not only building relationships with her students but being committed to the effort for
large scale change. Teachers sought to make a significant difference in their classroom and beyond by taking on projects of their own interest. To do so, they had to navigate restrictions placed on their work and game various official evaluator structures. Such a commitment required the whole of teachers, their efforts were sometimes rewarded and sometimes ignored, and their impact was secured back through the channels of power.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Franklin</th>
<th>Lydia</th>
<th>Chanda</th>
<th>Sophia</th>
<th>Chiemeke</th>
<th>Anita</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Average</strong></td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocating non-teaching duties</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting administrators</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing salary schedules</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring teachers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding school schedule</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining teacher assignments</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining class sizes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocating discretionary funds</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Admin Average</strong></td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating administrators</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining whether to expel a student</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding to add/drop students</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating teachers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining student tracking policy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining faculty in-service training</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting school discipline policy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing classroom attendance policy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining classroom discipline policy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining rules for teachers’ behavior</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Average</strong></td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing school curriculum</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making educational innovations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting course texts</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing grading standards</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing goals for each course</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining homework levels</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting classroom concepts taught</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting Classroom teaching techniques</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Average</strong></td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Participant Responses to modified “School and Staffing Survey” (See Appendix D for questionnaire).*
Knowledge, as defined by teachers in conjunction with the larger structures of school, formed the foundation of a formal script that dominated classrooms. This official discourse was easily observable in teacher speech during class, but also in the instructional materials (like worksheets and texts) that they presented to students. However, there also existed in the classes I observed a lively and qualitatively different type of discourse that was harder to detect but ever-present, led by students and often challenging widely held notions of what ‘counts’ as knowledge. In this chapter, I will look at how teachers engage in an active process of negotiation between their own agendas, driven by their definitions of knowledge, and the multiple counter projects of students in their classrooms.

At large scales, actors such as curriculum writers, district officials, and test makers all shape what is considered to be official knowledge (Delpit, 2006; Manke, 1997). At a smaller scale, teachers wield great influence over what counts as knowledge and what they value in their classroom. Through their language use, resource selection, allocation of time, and the way they respond to students, teachers contribute greatly to what is deemed to be valid. Ideas about knowledge are also shaped by cultural factors; perceptions about what is valid knowledge occur within a framework of dominant values while other perspectives and ways of speaking and being are marginalized (Carter, 2007, p. 164). Such decisions work back and reflexively influence the teacher’s authority; teachers draw upon their command of and comfort with official validated knowledge to legitimize their own authority to claim expertise in the classroom.

This chapter is an exploration of the dialectical relationship between knowledge and a teacher’s authority in the classroom; teachers shape the definitions and scope of knowledge,
while ideas about what counts as knowledge also provide a framing for a teacher’s authoritative position. I simply asked my teachers to describe how they decided what happens in their classroom. The teachers’ reflections on their decisions about specific moments showed a tremendous amount of personal agency as they constructed ideas about what was to be learned. At times they shared a conception of “learning” as an act of acquisition, and this further suggested that their position as teacher was instrumental to learning. Together, these notions interacted with how relationships of authority were structured; teachers derived legitimacy from how they defined and presented knowledge, while their authority shaped the very bounds of this knowledge. Students, however, are not passive recipients but rather active constructors of their own worlds, and in the classes I observed there was a steady countercurrent of knowledge-creation by students. And, sometimes these two projects merged in unique moments where teachers and students jointly created new forms of knowledge, a signal of modified power relations that challenged the hierarchy of schools.

Knowledge & Authority

Teachers were instrumental in determining the bounds of knowledge in their classrooms, a process that in turn was heavily influenced by larger systems of knowledge creation. As they described for me how they selected the content for each day’s lesson, they referenced curriculum guides, colleagues’ unit plans, guidelines from supervisors, and upcoming state exams as all factors to consider. At the same time, teachers were constantly making decisions about what to exclude from their teaching. The power to define the bounds of valid knowledge included decisions teachers made to transform broad topics of study into discrete pieces of knowledge and vocabulary. As we’ve seen, teachers could then use their grading policies as a variable toolbox of motivators, rewards, and penalties that valued the types of student behaviors and actions they
felt to be most appropriate, and these ultimately justified the teacher selection of relevant knowledge. I’ll argue that such decisions, and the teachers’ reflections on them, suggest an underlying theory of learning as acquisitive, individualistic, and driven by the teacher. Thus, by making choices around what counted as knowledge the teachers were also working to shape their own position of authority.

Chiemeka described his rather straightforward approach to designing lessons: “I basically look at the scope and sequence. We have a really good teacher, Ms. Li, she been teaching close to, like, twenty something years. So I go through that, I’m pretty good at it, but it also tells you, ‘There is 8 weeks on this.’” His colleague’s scope and sequence is a detailed plan for what topics to cover and how many days or weeks each topic should be taught. His planning is built around key dates when exams are given throughout the school year, and he then fills in the necessary instructional topics in the empty spaces around these dates. More often, my participants described how they used their agency to select and exclude topics for lessons. Anita, for example, had been given a class set of new social studies textbooks, but she withheld their use from her students:

The books are basically…I have a love-hate relationship. It’s nice because it’s color, so that’s huge. Lots of maps, so the kids can just grab and I incorporate it into my lessons. I don’t use it verbatim because it’s honestly, I mentioned earlier this is a gifted and talented house, but even for my students a lot of it is inaccessible. But it’s nice for looking at maps, they have, like, good pictures for primary sources.

Anita determined the content, or the presentation of the content, contained in her social studies textbooks, to be “inaccessible” to her students and so she redefined what learning and knowledge would look like in her classroom so students could access the content. The content of the textbooks are the part that she loves, and the way that content is presented is what she hates; so, she had chosen to keep the content and modify the presentation. Her lesson on the day of my
observation was a description of the pyramidal social structure in ancient Mesopotamian society; rather than reading about this class structure in the textbooks she had found a simpler text that had clear and well-organized blurbs for the four main social classes she wanted her students to know.

In Paige’s Living Environment class, she also made major decisions about what to teach. Though her choices were informed by a required state exam that all of her students had to take at the end of the year – the New York State Living Environment Regents Exam – she was very much in control of the process:

I just kind of make it up. I just analyze past Regents exams, and I think it’s subjective, honestly. I take the topics that are most highly tested, and only pick from that bank of questions. But then I narrow it down even more with things that are important, like science content or skills for students.

Though she is presented with certain constraints by the existence of the exam, Paige has identified a space of subjectivity and steps in to use her agency in making choices about what is “important.” As she seeks to “narrow it down,” she is prioritizing some content that she either deems valuable or helpful for the upcoming exam. This decision-making entails excluding significant parts of the state-designed curriculum based upon her own judgments. She chooses topics that give her students the best chance at success on the exam, and sees anything else as a detraction:

Generally, I’m really not about B.S. vocabulary words. Like, “Oh, I’m going to teach you this one word that’s not anything about anything we’re ever going to talk about because you might see it on the Regents once.” I don’t really agree with that, and so I teach, like 40 standards. I had a hard time with this last year. This year, I think I’ve taught like nine standards. But we talk about it a lot, and it’s in very meaningful ways, and they do need to know it. My kids will rock this ecology section on the exam.

---

8 This conversation took place in mid-November.
The exam, one of several state-wide exams required for high schoolers to pass in order to graduate in the state of New York, includes a broad range of topics, content, and considerable content-specific vocabulary. The entire curriculum contains over eighty standards (New York State Department of Education, n.d.), though Paige intentionally jettisoned several standards and words that she considers to be “B.S.” She believed that by focusing on fewer topics, her students would be better positioned for success on the exam – they would “rock this ecology section.” As I’ll show below, this perception of certain topics as worthless freed her to spend instructional time on topics that she felt were more meaningful and engaging (such as environmental justice, which I’ll describe below). In both instances, Paige and Anita were exercising their agency to make decisions and exclude certain types of content in their teaching in the interest of their students’ learning. For Anita, by excluding certain types of resources she was allowing her students to access learning that she viewed as important. Paige narrowed the scope of what was important to help her students perform even better on the state exam. Both teachers were also resisting knowledge that had been determined to be relevant by outside sources – a major textbook in Anita’s case, and the New York State Regents Exam in Paige’s case. Thus, teachers shaped the scope of learning by deciding what topics to include and exclude.

Such decisions extended to defining the precise meaning of content in their classrooms. Broad topics were turned into specific strings of discourse that became the “knowledge” teachers expected students to know. For example, Chiemeka explained how his unit on chemical reactions could be boiled down to a few key statements that students should be able to produce. He was looking for these statements in his “Do Now,” an opening activity many students use to start their lessons:

I’ve given the same Do Now for four days. I’m trying to hammer that when you see a chemical reaction, how can you tell a chemical reaction is happening. And I keep on asking “What are two ways?” And we did the lab last week, exothermic and endothermic.
Learning in Chiemeka’s class had been narrowed to knowing the two different types of chemical reactions, exothermic and endothermic, and the nine different ways you can tell a reaction is happening. A student being able to reproduce these strings of language would be said to have “learned” this particular topic. Chiemeka was “trying to hammer” a limited collection of phrases and sentences around chemical reactions, an image of pounding knowledge into his students’ heads. This particular conversation was taking place as Chiemeka explained to me that he was surprised his students hadn’t learned this knowledge as he had spent the past four days asking the same questions.

Chanda, similarly, was very specific about what she expected from her students as they wrote a “discussion” essay. Her class was studying the Reconstruction in post-Civil War United States, and the Jim Crow laws that were pervasive in the American South. During this lesson she wanted her students to write a thesis statement for an essay that discussed the progress and obstacles African-American faced during this period of time, then start an outline for the essay. This was a type of essay that I had never heard of before, and Chanda explained to me (and earlier, to her students) the different points that made a discussion essay different from the more common argumentative essay:

They’ve never written a thesis like this before. They’ve usually only written a claim and two reasons. But that’s their own argument, [it’s] completely different. For this, they’re just presenting both sides of the story, so they were supposed to write, “African-Americans made significant progress because they gained rights,” or “because they gained freedom, but they still faced racism,” or “but life was still harsh for them.” So, they’d never written that before, which is why I modeled it for them because I realized that a lot of them were confused.
In her class she modeled a sample thesis statement on the board for her students, writing “African-Americans made significant progress during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow period, but they faced struggles as well.” She also provided a sample discussion essay about the suffragette movement where she highlighted the structure of the thesis statement. Her emphasis was on the thesis statement format as she circulated during class while students were working. At one point, she stopped and called out to the whole class, “Your thesis statement should have a ‘but’ in it.” In checking on several students’ work, I saw their thesis statements following this format with small variations on the phrase “…but they faced struggles as well.”

For students who moved on to the outline, Chanda had provided a structured graphic organizer (Figure 14) with boxes for different parts of the essay labeled G, S, T.S., E1, and A, which stood for “General”, “Specific,” “thesis statement,” “Evidence 1,” and “Argument,” respectively. She found this format helpful in ensuring students were meeting her requirements for the essay: “I think it’s good for the majority of the students because it ensures that they have everything done but also that their outline, their essay, is in a correct order rather than just scrambled up ideas.” Chanda wanted her students to create essays that are clear and legible to her, where the students’ grasp of the concept of essay writing is easily assessed rather than “scrambled up.” The graphic organizer is a creation that helps students arrange their thinking into concrete and easily identified segments of information that are produced as an “argument” or a “General Statement.” Her control of the process can be modified for the needs of her students:

Depending on who the student is, they don’t have to do the G and the S. Some of them only have to do one evidence and analysis per paragraph. Some of them just have to have one body paragraph. Their conclusion is modified. So for my lower level kids, and my grade level kids, I think it works.
Designing the essay format and being clear on her requirements allowed her to match the difficulty of the task to her perception of student ability. She exempted her “lower” students from parts of the essay and reduced the rigor of the task, and because it “works” she was able to validate her initial judgments about student ability. She expressed wanting to give greater freedom to the students she perceived as more advanced, but even then she noticed an interesting result to her structuring of the activity:

I wouldn’t do it for this essay because it’s their first essay, but I have like a group of high level students work outside in the hallway and they make their own outline. But it’s very interesting because when they do that, they just make the same outline because they are so used to it. That’s what they do…They know this by heart, like even if I gave them a blank piece of paper and said, “Draw the outline,” every single one of them can draw it.

The way Chanda had structured knowledge of the discussion essay format in her classroom created an acceptable way for students to present their learning. It had become so well accepted that students could reproduce this process even without the direct support from a worksheet or the explicit guidance of a teacher. Like the specific phrases around chemical reactions that Chiemeka was looking for from his students, Chanda looked for specific elements of an essay, each identifiable by labels she had taught her students. The classroom knowledge valued by both of these teachers was narrowed to discrete elements that a student was to produce and a teacher could assess.

Chanda’s choice of an outline format represented how the constructed knowledge in her classroom was connected to dominant cultural norms of accepted writing. Her school had adopted the Hochman method for teaching writing; every classroom had large and prominent colored signage in the front detailing important grammar tips, a reminder of the influence of centralized decisions on the work of teachers (Figure 15). The Hochman method was developed with the belief that that academic writing should be seen as a collection of individual
components to each be taught explicitly and repeatedly practiced. One of those skills, the use of appositives, was a very culturally specific phrase that I had used in practice often but had never actually known the name of. Chanda pointed to one of the giant posters in the front of the

![Figure 14](image1.jpg)

**Figure 14:** Chanda’s Graphic Organizer that she designed to help Students prepare for their essay. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, this was printed on bright green paper.

![Figure 15](image2.jpg)

**Figure 15:** Large Posters in the front of Chanda’s classroom, posted over the white boards, with guidelines for writing based in the Hochman Method.
classroom and explained the definition (“‘Appositive’ is like when you add something extra about the thing before,”) and then describe how she used them with her students:

It just makes their writing so much more…for them to be able to look at a sentence, and then, if a teacher can remind them “Add an appositive,” and just see that sentence transform.

The Hochman method was designed to teach students concrete skills in writing. These skills were taught with the purpose of making student writing better understood by teachers and accepted in domains where a dominant culture of academic language pervades, for example, in schools. As the authors of the Hochman method wrote in their book:

…many students produce writing so incoherent that readers are unable to respond. We need to equip children with the tools that will give them confidence as writers and enable them to express themselves in a way that others can understand. And far from feeling that practicing the mechanics of writing is drudgery, students often gain a sense of pride and mastery from learning to craft well-constructed sentences and logically sequenced paragraphs. (Hochman & Wexler, 2017, pp. 9-10)

Like Chiemeka hammering chemistry details into students, the Hochman method is designed to “equip” students with the important tools of writing. Another level of learning, “mastery,” is introduced here, and Chanda had created a lesson where she can determine if her students have in fact achieved mastery on specific writing tools. Skills like using an appositive, planning an essay with a specific outline, and including key words like “but” in a thesis statement, were all the part of a project to “equip children with the tools” to be successful in the culture of schools and mainstream white society. The use of the word “but” becomes the evidence of mastery of writing a strong thesis statement. Chanda is a social studies teacher, and she is certainly also teaching important facts about post-Civil War society in the United States. But in her approach to designing lessons that teach writing, her purpose is to help students acquire the important skills to prepare them for the future:
It’s important to do a Discussion essay so that they are not only doing argument writing. And that’s an important skill to learn because you need it in high school and college and when you talk to people. I don’t know, it’s just, I think about it, being able to have a discussion is important if you’re writing it down.

Common to several classrooms was the importance of vocabulary. Indeed, in Sophia and Paige’s class, the lessons I observed were almost entirely about learning content specific vocabulary. “The thing is,” Sophia explained to me, “with this [anatomy] class, they need to know their vocab.” To teach vocabulary she used a graphic organizer called a Frayer model. This graphic organizer consisted of a large square divided into four equal boxes and with a bubble in the middle where students were to write the vocabulary word. In the surrounding four boxes, students were supposed to write the definition, characteristics of the term, examples, and non-examples. Using Frayer models was a way to push students beyond repeating a definition and having to apply their knowledge in different ways. Vocabulary was so central to Sophia’s class that she had decided to have “vocabulary Fridays” every week. Though I observed her class on a Wednesday, vocabulary was the main focus of the lesson I observed where students spent about fifteen minutes labeling a blank diagram of the human skeleton by referring to their collection of Frayer models. Sophia brought the class together to go over the diagram together, and the remainder of the class was reviewing the diagram:

SOPHIA: What are these little piggies called? If you watch Friends, you might know this one.
STUDENT: Phalanges.
SOPHIA: Phalanges! Love that word. Phalanges – these are the phalanges right here. Your fingers, and your little piglets (pointing to her model of a skeleton).
SOPHIA: Alright, what’s the big thigh bone? What is it, this big thigh bone that’s pretty much indestructible?

Several seconds of silence. Then, someone yells out “femur.”

SOPHIA: What? I can’t hear him….take a guess.

A student repeats “femur,” but Sophia chooses to call on a student with their hand raised.
SOPHIA: Alright, Karen, what do you think?
KAREN: Femur!
SOPHIA: Yes, the femur…Is this an easy bone to break?
KAREN: No.
SOPHIA: What is your…what is your kneecap called?

_A student, Chris, calls out “patella”._

SOPHIA: What? Chris, did you memorize this skeleton before I gave it to you? Patella. Those who are athletes, you guys might be able to see any type of dislocation to the kneecap, it’s actually very disgusting to look because you can see it move in weird places.

The last twenty minutes or so of Sophia’s lesson followed this pattern of asking a question about a specific part of the diagram, waiting for an answer, and then validating that answer (or providing the answer if none was forthcoming). As she did with the patella or phalanges, she often provided a quick contextual note or made a connection to help students remember the word. By connecting to the popular television show _Friends_, she is also drawing on a massive cultural phenomena steeped in white middle class society. Knowledge in this lesson, then, consisted of an ability to correctly label a skeletal diagram with the proper term.

Likewise, Paige emphasized vocabulary in her Living Environment class. Paige had designed an engaging matching game for her students. In groups, they were given a collection of cards that had matching pairs of vocabulary words like “mitochondria,” “lysosomes,” “ATP,” or “cytoplasm,” and their respective definitions. At one moment, while a group was staring at the card for ATP, Paige came over and gave a gentle reminder: “ATP is….? Do you guys remember this one from class?” There were some puzzled looks among the students before Paige jumped back in, “ATP is energy!” ATP, an acronym for the adenosine triphosphate molecule stores energy in cells, was transformed by Paige into a specific vocabulary word “ATP” with the simpler definition of “energy.” To have learned about ATP in this class, then, was to be able to equate ATP with energy.
Even when Paige moved beyond vocabulary to other more substantial topics she deemed worthwhile, the thread of learning as acquired was present. Environmental justice was a highly engaging theme that she brought to her class and she described a discussion that she was able to foster:

We did a Socratic on who owns the resources of the world. It blows my mind [that] students of color don’t recognize levels of oppression in this country. The essential question was “Who owns the resources?” and “Should a country or government have the right to restrict resources to certain people?” And we talked about indigenous land rights, and fishing companies and all these different things, and environmental racism. The kids’ minds were blown. They had no idea.

These topics - environmental racism, pollution, and the inequitable ownership of resources – were ones that her students had “no idea” about, and thus became a form of knowledge that Paige, as the classroom teacher, viewed she could transmit to them. Her role as the teacher was to help her students recognize something – oppression – of which they hadn’t before been aware. By communicating new information to her students, she was able create a situation where their “minds were blown” through confronting something they had never before considered. Knowledge and identities intersect here as Paige sees her awareness of what she terms “levels of oppression” to be greater than that of her students of color, and by structuring this discussion she is hoping to bring that awareness to them. She found her students to be very interested in the discussion, and their answers showed her a space where as a teacher she could fill a void:

Just hearing their answers about who owns the resources, so many of them were like, “Oh, the rich governments.” And they weren’t really upset about it or understand the implications of their own lives, and I talked about the Gowanus Canal, and how it disproportionally affects people of color that live around these areas.

As other teachers had done, Paige was exercising her agency to frame the content of this lesson, although instead of seeking to transmit content she positioned herself as a conveyor of a
political position on global resource use. By saying “they weren’t really upset about it,” she was suggesting that students *should* have been upset about the pollution of the Gowanus Canal. This type of lesson is well outside the bounds of the standardized curriculum outlined by the Regents Exam, so Paige was an active creator of a new type of learning. She saw the fruits of her efforts resulting in a real change in students as she comments that “the kids’ minds were blown. They had no idea,” suggesting a belief that a type of consciousness raising has taken place. Students, of course, likely have ideas about oppression and other political topics from their own experience, but in this specific context Paige wanted students to recognize oppression in a particular way that she had defined. Recognizing oppression, being aware of discrimination, and identifying harmful misuses of natural resources, are no doubt worthy and important topics.

What is interesting from the perspective of the nature of knowledge and learning is how Paige positions herself as the person charged with educating students of color about these specific issues – of blowing their minds – rather than positioning students as constructors of this type of consciousness.

In this section, I’ve argued that teachers shape the bounds of classroom knowledge in a variety of ways. They intentionally decided to include and emphasize certain topics, often influenced by larger considerations like state exams, their administration, or their own interests. Similarly, they excluded certain topics from their instruction, as Anita did for reasons of accessibility and Paige did when she considered something “B.S.,” with the goal of making their lessons more supportive of their students. Teachers worked to translate knowledge into manageable and discrete chunks of discourse, often key phrases or important vocabulary. Collectively, this was an enactment of teacher power, a set of decisions that define what was important and valued in classrooms. This continued a process that starts at higher levels of the
educational bureaucracy, with curriculum designers, authors of state exams, and administrators, and continues as teachers work to define what counts as knowledge in their classrooms. It also represents a particular viewpoint on the nature of knowledge and learning. Knowledge becomes positioned outside of individuals, and the teacher’s role becomes one of transmitting this knowledge inside the minds of students. In the next section, I will look at how the construction of a formal set of knowledge forms the basis of a classroom script that meets up against student-created ideas of knowledge; though these ideas clash, they often operate in parallel and sometimes can create spaces for jointly created knowledge.

Student Agendas in the Classroom

The “official” classroom was built by teachers around their definitions of relevant knowledge. In observing the classrooms of my participants, I noticed that alongside this agenda of heat transfer, essay outlines, and vocabulary, a very different type of agenda was being carried, this one driven almost exclusively by students and grounded in their own ideas and interests. At times they converged with the teacher’s own goals, but more often they were enacted parallel to the official discourse with students seamlessly switching between both worlds. Sometimes teachers were aware of these undercurrents, sometimes not; sometimes the two very different types of projects in the classroom merged to form a shared and altogether new type of classroom agenda.

Sophia’s vocabulary instruction described above is one example of the “official” class discourse, created and prompted largely by the teacher with intermittent involvement from a handful of students. Chiemeka’s classroom offered another example; his students had a worksheet (Figure 16) in front of them with two diagrams representing the molecules in a hot
cup of soup before and after a hypothetical cold spoon was placed in the soup. Students were to draw motion lines on the “after” diagram to represent the relative movement of molecules:

CHIEMEKA: Now, let’s do some modeling. How many motion lines does the spoon have?
STUDENT: Two
CHIEMEKA: How many does the soup have?
STUDENT: Three
CHIEMEKA: Now in the “after,” when the spoon goes, what happens? It’s your job…let’s do it together.

Chiemeka’s discourse urges students to represent a specific type of annotation on the diagram. Some students voluntarily participated by contributing responses and, depending on the teacher’s judgment, their contributions were accepted into the formal narrative. As we’ll see below, while this was happening, a robust underlife unfolded in his classroom within unofficial spaces created by students. At times, when teachers noticed that students weren’t participating enough in their official discussion, they would reach out and urge their students to engage. Chiemeka was able to bring several students in as he explained the process of heat transfer between a cold spoon and hot soup:

Energy is being transferred from the soup molecules, to the soup…um, spoon molecules. They start to move slower, around when they give that energy, and the spoon starts to move faster. That’s why when you take the spoon out of the soup, it stays hot for a little
bit, it has to lose that energy, alright? Energy moves from where to where? Someone raise their hand. Energy moves from where to where? I should see way more hands, this is a fundamental question that you must be able to answer.

At the beginning of this mini-lecture, several students were engaged in private side conversations or other projects; one student was out of his seat by the window. But as Chiemeka appealed to his students by repeating his question and saying “I should see way more hands,” calls of “Oh, yeah,” and “I remember” were heard from the class. Similarly, as Lydia reviewed the work from the day with her students, she expressed dissatisfaction because she didn’t have enough students participating:

Question number three, read the question for us, and then answer it. Somebody I haven’t heard form. [A few hands are raised]. I’m talking to the same people, I’m getting bored. I know you guys know it. I need to know why other people are very quiet, because I feel like this was a really simple lesson today, we beat this with a bat, so everybody’s hand should be up.

Lydia felt the knowledge for the day had already been presented. Like Chiemeka trying to “hammer” the concept of chemical reactions, Lydia had taken the learning around atomic structure and had “beat [it] with a bat.” Furthermore, Lydia assumed her students had assimilated it - “I know you guys know it,” – and what was left was for students to join the official conversation. These metaphors of knowledge being hammered or beaten with a bat are suggestive of learning viewed as something that can be imparted to students with force and repetition; they are indicators of what a teacher defines as the official classroom space. Students, however, didn’t always fully enter these spaces, and Lydia responded in this instance by urging her class with a call for “everybody’s hand should be up.” When she saw the same student hands raised as earlier in the class, she called out for more students to participate. Like Chiemeka’s class, raised hands became a symbol of participation in the official agenda. As the class fell silent and hands remained down, Lydia resorted to a more direct means of bringing students into
the conversation: “C’mon. I’m going to cold call then,” she said, referring to a strategy where students are randomly called upon to provide an answer. She waited a few seconds, then picked a student to read her answer to the question. The student, Shayla, gave an answer that was acceptable and Lydia moved the lesson forward. These examples of student participation, or rather lack of participation, are the first signs that students aren’t always fully involved in the project of learning as defined by teachers.

Not only did teachers want students to be involved, they also wanted students to participate in ways deemed acceptable. In Anita’s classroom, there was a moment where her grasp of the official knowledge was openly challenged by a student. As students were working on the “do now” during the lesson, Vladmir called Anita over to point out a minor typo – an incorrectly capitalized letter on the Power Point slide. Anita then interrupted the class’s work time to get everyone’s attention and proceeded to recognize Vladmir’s contribution in an apologetic announcement dripping with sarcasm:

> Vladmir had so graciously pointed out that the B for “…by analyzing” should not be capitalized. I know that you figured that out on your own, but in case you were freaking out inside like Vladmir was, now you know. It was a mistake. I’m sorry.

The students returned to work and the lesson continued. Whereas at other times teachers strained to bring students into the official script, Anita rejected Vladmir’s contribution as it not only challenged her authority to command the classroom knowledge but also her instructional competence. Her response effectively shut down this type of contribution. Later, she explained her thought process:

> For lack of better words, he’s [Vladmir] such a smart ass, and he’s really annoying. He knows he’s top of his class in all of his classes and he’s kind of developing this attitude that he’s better than everyone else, but like in a really snarky way like that, pointing out the little “B”. It’s something I’ve been talking to him a lot about and trying to get him to hone his actions and also get more positive attention instead of negative attention, so I
pointed that out to embarrass him because he needs it [laughs]… It was a sarcastic shame.

Anita uses ‘sarcastic shame’ to intentionally embarrass a student in front of the whole class. By pointing out a minor error, Vladmir’s participation had strayed outside of the teacher’s acceptable bounds. As a student who has performed well in class, Anita sensed an attitude of being “better than everyone else” – presumably including her. In a moment where he challenged her competence she acted swiftly and curtly to stamp out the dissension and re-assert her dominance with respect to the official knowledge. She expressed wanting to recognize him for contributions that she deemed “positive,” but in this moment Vladmir had broken an unsaid agreement by asserting his own take on the official classroom.

Students were still active participants, but they did in their own ways and on their own projects that often didn’t conform to teacher expectations. This was frequently apparent when teachers called the class to attention. Almost every class used some signal to call students to attention and command the room, including countdowns, repeated signals, and humor, to give students a chance to transition from the spaces of their own conversation to the official space of the teacher. Anita, for example, used a drawn out countdown starting at three – “Voices off in three, combing back in two, thank you Maggie, thank you Sam, coming back in….one,” - and slowly working her way down to allow students to wrap up their conversations. Her approach was an acceptance that students might have their own conversations, but a signal that it was now time for her own more official conversation to take over. Chiemeka used the very common “If you hear the sound of my voice, clap once,” and though few students really clapped he was able to say it confidently and expect most students to eventually turn their attention towards him. Paige also used this call to attention; “It’s the only thing that has worked this year,” she said. By
giving a clear signal and then waiting, she allows student to slowly reengage. For example, here she brings the memory game to a close and prepares students for the next activity:

PAIGE: Alright, if you hear me, clap once. [Some students clap].
PAIGE: If you hear me, clap twice.
PAIGE: Alright, if you hear me clap three times.
[twenty-two seconds of waiting]
PAIGE: Boys...boys in the back...
[ten more seconds]
PAIGE: we don’t ever do that [to two boys playfully hitting each other]
[twenty more seconds]
PAIGE: Guys, I know we’re hyped up, but I got to wait so I can give instructions…
PAIGE: [One minute and eight seconds after she started] So there are a couple things…

This exchange could be interpreted as a waste of time – it took over a minute - and Paige acknowledged that it wasn’t perfect: “Today they were definitely, like, driving me a little crazy,” she mentioned. But she also didn’t seem bothered by this investment of time. The moment wasn’t one where a teacher stood waiting while the class went out of control. The students had been playing a very energetic and engaging memory game, and the waiting period was more like a settling down of sediments on the sea floor after the churning of a boat. It was a negotiation of sorts between the students’ energy and the need to turn their attention to new matters: “Today they took forever, too. It was like, ugh, I’m going to wait forever until we’re quiet. Sometimes I’ll be like ‘If you can hear me, clap 15 times really fast’ and they think that is hilarious, they, like, really love it.” She did indeed wait a long time, but as time elapsed the weight of her presence at the front of the room brought all the attention back. Paige acknowledges that students are not entirely with her, and accepts the need for a period of transition before they can come back to her.

The spaces that students created for their own projects were sometimes acknowledged by the teacher, and sometimes they went undetected. In an example from Chanda’s class, one student named Zion got up from his seat while most of the class was working on their thesis
statements. He weaved his way across the room towards Maria, the student who had the job of keeping track of everyone’s individual “paycheck” points. By this point in the lesson, Chanda had deducted several points from Zion, so he quietly asked Maria for an update on his weekly points. Maria, engaged in her essay writing, was between caught doing her work – the officially sanctioned activity - and giving in to an insistent classmate. She tentatively showed Zion the binder where the points were tallied while also trying to keep focused. Chanda didn’t notice this particular exchange, but she was well aware that Zion was a student who “lost of bunch of points for being out of his seat.” Zion’s goal – an investigation into his weekly points – was related to a larger school structure of disciplinary tracking but outside of the formal space created by Chanda within the classroom. His actions also tugged at other students – in this case, Maria – to move in between spaces.

Students in one of the groups in Paige’s class created their own type of discussion that built off the guidelines for the memory game. Paige had instructed her students to take turns, with the youngest student in each group to start first. This group of five boys, including Joseph and Anthony from earlier, had fun with the process. Their exchange was rapid and excited and I had a hard time keeping track of who was speaking:

JOSEPH: It says the youngest player goes first.
STUDENT 1: I’m the youngest one.
JOSEPH: I’m the youngest one!
STUDENT 1: I'm the shortest one, so…
[Laughter]
STUDENT 2: That don’t mean nothing!
ANTHONY: I’m 12
JOSEPH: You’re twelve?
ANTHONY: You’re lying!
JOSEPH: Wait, when was you born?
ANTHONY: Wait, I’m the youngest.
[Paige comes by to help with the cards: “My dearest, spread them out just a titch because when you flip them over you don’t want to mess up the other ones.” Then she moves on]

---

9 I later asked Maria if students gave her a hard time about keeping the points in a binder. She was hesitant to respond, but murmured “Um, it depends,” as she tried to get back to her work.
STUDENT 1: Y’all born on the same day?
JOSEPH: Are you kidding me? I’m August the 4th.
STUDENT 2: I was born two thousand and six
STUDENT 1: I was born 2007.
JOSEPH: I was born 2012.
STUDENT 1: I was born 2018.
JOSEPH: Alright, I’m going first because I’m the youngest.
STUDENT 1: I don’t care – he’s the shortest.
JOSEPH: So? He has a whole mustache!

This conversation, a burst of back and forth comments filled with good-natured attacks ("You’re lying!" "He has a whole mustache!") and humor around birthdates veered off course from the official discussion that Paige had designed. Her direction to start with the youngest student was meant to avoid a debate about who would start first, but in this instance it was appropriated by the students in this group for their own purposes as they created a brief and fun diversion. Students were supposed to be engaging with science vocabulary and instead were creating space to enjoy each other’s presence. A few moments later, Joseph, an assertive student, simply started the game and the group refocused.

These examples show how teachers can have varying levels of awareness of the parallel culture in their classrooms. Sometimes this was a sign of a refusal to participate, for example in the case Zion here or Henry (described in Chapter 5, a student in Sophia’s class who initially sat by himself). In Paige’s class, the students were still very much invested in her learning activity, but they momentarily created their own space to enact a different type of spontaneous activity. The official projects of these classrooms were largely based in teacher notions of what counted as official knowledge, while student discussions and activities were reflections of their own ideas, interests, and skills. Teachers had different ways of recognizing and processing these assertions of student agency, and different strategies for getting student engagement and participation.
The robust student underlife that flourished in Chiemeka’s classroom is an interesting case of how a teacher responded to student agency. At one table where I happened to be sitting, a group of four students somehow produced a collection of snacks, including a noisy bag of Funnyuns.\(^{10}\) They were asked by Chiemeka to put the snacks away but as the lesson proceeded the snacks stayed out. Florence was one of the students here and engaged in a deep discussion with the girl next to her that carried on for most of the class period; their topics ranged from the Funnyuns, to the goings on in another class, and other subjects I couldn’t quite hear. At one point, they turned their attention to the boy across from them, Omar, who had spent several minutes ripping the plastic liner from his 3-ring binder. Florence asked Omar, somewhat derisively, why he was destroying his binder and he simply shrugged and returned his attention to his project. A new bag of Funnyuns appeared from somewhere and was passed around. However, when Chiemeka came around to this table to investigate their work, he noticed written responses on everyone’s worksheet that pleased him – correct motion lines and descriptions of molecules - so much so that he wanted Florence to share her answer with the whole class. This group was particularly participatory and provided several correct responses to whole class questions. Florence was perhaps the most skilled at momentarily jumping into the stream of the official class discourse by providing a model answer, and then expertly re-joining the discourse she was sharing with her table-mates.

Across the classroom, River and Nineveah were two girls who quickly completed the worksheet and then promptly engaged in an over twenty minute session of hair-braiding. River was doing the braiding, but only after she successfully and publicly answered a Do Now question at the beginning of the class. She also occasionally paused her efforts on Nineveah’s hair to jot

\(^{10}\) A crispy, chip-like snack made like an onion ring.
answers on her worksheet. Reflecting on the hair braiding, Chiemeka described his reaction as follows:

At the moment, for some reason it didn’t bother me. I don’t know why. I think it was just because they were just so good. I was in a happy mood for some reason. I was just in a good mood. Maybe it didn’t bother me, they would get their work done. I don’t know. I did say something one time, I remember saying something, but, her work was done, so whatever. It was more like, it is what it is. It was one of those moments, like, she got her work done… It did go on for a while. Looking back, that was crazy for me to let that go.

Chiemeka tolerates the hair braiding; “It didn’t bother me.” While the braiding was not in line with Chiemeka’s official lesson, the students were not only not disruptive, they “get their work done.” In reflecting on it, Chiemeka is searching for his beliefs about the moment, twice saying “I don’t know;” he acknowledges that it was “crazy for me to let that go,” a sort of meta-commentary on his reflection and potentially a signal that he may be creating new meanings about the exchange. At the same time, he also mentions the students were “just so good,” presumably referring to their classwork. Chanda had a different reaction to the braiding of hair in her class. Portia – the student from earlier who made beautiful post-it sculptures – was braiding a boy’s hair as the rest of the class was working on their thesis statements and essays. While Chanda didn’t notice immediately (she was circulating giving essay feedback), she immediately deducted a paycheck point from both students when she did. This behavior, a student-initiated project, was outside the bounds of what Chanda found acceptable and she believed her students agreed: “Braiding someone’s hair, even [Portia] knows, she’s not going to put up any sort of fight with that because she knows that we’re not braiding hair.” Teacher and students, then, both collaborated to set terms of what types of activities might be acceptable, and these determinations varied from class to class.
One reason why Chiemeka may have given a pass to the braiding and other minor behaviors like talking and eating snacks, was that they fell into a category of actions that were tolerated in exchange for students participating in the official classwork. When called on, these students willingly participated and provided responses in line with Chiemeka’s construction of official knowledge. Omar, for example, was singled out several times for his use of vocabulary – “Omar, you’re a good man!” – and then would return to his binder-ripping. Students carved out a space for their own projects after paying a certain allegiance to Chiemeka’s directions; Chiemeka, in turn, was content to let his students’ own activities play out as long as they could also participate in his lesson when required.

In Anita’s classroom, a high-tracked group of students who were generally respectful and studious and where compliance was the norm, there also was a lively and fascinating underlife that co-existed with Anita’s official lesson. I observed a lesson in Anita’s class that was centered on social hierarchies in Mesopotamia. She wanted students to understand the fixed nature of social classes in the ancient Sumerian civilization, and to get there she directed several stretches of quick questions followed by student responses. The questions were mostly constructed with a small range of possible answers, and as she directed the whole class discussion she was circulating to ensure that students were following along. Here is a sample of some of the questions she asked:

Why was the social hierarchy important?
What is social hierarchy in your own words?
Mesopotamia is here, it’s surrounded by two rivers, what are the two rivers called?
Why were [the rivers] important?
What did [the rivers] lead to?
What did the city-state lead to?

Later in the lesson, she asked students to read a short passage describing five social classes (kings, priests, working class, slaves, and craftsmen) and to then rank them from highest
to lowest class. She followed this with a whole class question and answer exchange to validate the correct order:

ANITA: “Ok, Let’s go over the first box, it says traders, workers, and farmers, the working class, what number did we put for the working class…Alexa?”
ALEXA: Four
ALEXA: Why did you put four?
ALEXA: [answer inaudible]
ANITA: Great, Jonathan, do you agree or disagree with that?
JONATHAN: [answer inaudible]
ANITA: Good job, thank you for that explanation. Next one is slave….

Earlier in the lesson, a student mispronounced the word “hierarchy.” The answer he was formulating began “The reason that social high-arch…,” and before he could finish the class quickly dissolved into laughter. Anita confidently seized control of the class again and led the students in a choral pronunciation of the word: “Can everyone actually say…higher-are-key?

Ok, class, let’s say it on three. 1, 2, 3.” The majority of the students then joined in pronouncing the word together. Anita found a vocabulary word and after noticing a natural attempt by one of her students to pronounce it, she jumped in and gave an officially sanctioned pronunciation. In both examples here, Anita used her formal authority gained by virtue of being a teacher to determine the direction and content of the lesson, which, as we’ve seen above, grew out of her official definitions of knowledge. This lesson, then, was well-organized and structured as Anita directed questions and reinforced vocabulary while a range of students actively participated.

Still, as the lesson progressed, there unfolded a complex set of activities propelled by students. The class was grouped in fours and I had joined a group in the back where one quiet girl, Amira, was following along with the lesson. Suddenly, a small strip of paper appeared beneath her chair. She bent down to retrieve it, unfolded the paper and then made a quick mark on it with her pencil before sending it back towards the next table group. I was sitting next to Amira so I quickly asked her what the whole note was about; at first she was shy and reluctant to share, but pretty soon the paper re-emerged below her chair and I was able to see its source, a
bubbly and wide eyed girl who I later learned was Diamond. This time, Amira showed me what Diamond had written, a simple question: “Do you want to have a boy or a girl?” Now that I was in on it, Amira didn’t seem to mind writing an answer in front of me (boy) and threw it back to Diamond. As the lesson transitioned to a small group work activity, the note returned again a few moments later, but this time Anita was able to quickly notice that Amira was off task. Rather than call out Amira, Anita simply approached the table and started asking questions about the task at hand relating to why city-states offered certain advantages. As she walked away, Anita gave Amira a quick look as if to say “Focus.”

Meanwhile, it became clear Diamond’s note to Amira was just one dyad in a multi-nodal web of conversations. Diamond was directing and leading all interactions at multiple tables simultaneously, and the focal point was a game called “Fortune Cookie,” wherein the leader (in this case Diamond) uses a complex origami-like folded paper device to select from a variety of possible choices to a pre-determined question. Diamond was an expert at using the fortune cookie and was asking questions and sorting responses from students across three different tables. Anita never seemed to notice or catch on to any of it. At the end of class, I asked Diamond to show me her fortune cookie; it had a variety of questions about future couples and family arrangements (some of which she wouldn’t reveal).

Amira had her own small empire of activity. In her desk, kept neatly in a small Tupperware container, was a mass of purple slime. Every so often she would go into her desk, open the top, and handle it. I had heard that this was a new trend in middle school but this was my first time seeing it in a classroom so I asked Amira about it. She let me touch the slime, then explained that she had made several batches for her colleagues. I must have looked like I didn’t
understand because she then pointed out other students in the classroom who had the purple slide: Layla’s was out on her desk in plain view, and Diamond’s was in a plastic bag.

These were only two students in a class of 28, but they indicated a rich student-driven underlife that ran counter to a lesson centered on the social order of ancient civilizations. In our debrief interview, I asked Anita about these two students and her response was telling:

*Regarding Diamond:* She’s interesting. She has a lot of really good thoughts but she’s one of the lower level students. Um. Her comprehension isn’t that high in reading, she doesn’t perform well. She’ll do all her homework. She’ll do her classwork but she does take a little time and I see a lot of the times she’s lost. But since she’s eager to participate, when she can, she’ll always find a time in class to participate, but she is very easily distracted

*Regarding Amira:* Amira is really funny. Um, Amira, after their reading test came out, I was actually really surprised because Amira in the beginning of the year was my biggest participator. We did a unit on climate change and she was super into it. She would be drawing all these posters for me during class, which I was fine with because it was related, but then I realized that it was just because she was really hooked into the subject and her reading level is also pretty low. So [Amira and Krystal] will find ways to distract themselves a lot.

When asked to tell me about both students, Anita’s description centers largely on official evaluations of the students’ academic levels. Diamond has low comprehension, though she does all her homework; Amira is a big participator but also has a low reading level. Both Amira and Diamond are being portrayed through official measures of where they should be as students, an understanding grounded in the constructions of what is dominant knowledge. Still, Anita notices other characteristics; Amira is “really funny” and Krystal is “interesting” and “easily distracted.” Anita allows for the existence of other qualities, though by characterizing it as a distraction she is perhaps relegating their activities to an inferior status.

Anita’s perspective turns out to be more complicated than reducing Amira and Krystal to their academic qualities. She explained that distractions like the note-passing are small
subversions that she will tolerate because they are moments where she can build trust with students:

Amira with the notes…like, what are you doing?!? I don’t like to take those things from kids…. I think it just ruins that trust. And I think by saying “I’m not going to look at it, just put it away,” because they’re going to do it anyway. I think by taking it, it’s like, yeah, you’re stopping the situation in the moment but they’re still going to talk about whatever they’re talking about eventually, so, I think a better way to stop it is to tell them to stop it. Sometimes I’ll be like “Give it to me, I’m not going to read it but I’m about to throw it out, because this is ridiculous,” so at least telling them, there still is trust there.

To a certain extent, Anita allows the note passing to occur – “they’re going to do it anyway.” She expressed a similar sentiment about the slime, which it turned out she had noticed but didn’t know that Amira was the source: “I can also trust these kids. I know they’re not going to be having a slime fight.” That Anita is both aware and not insistent on confiscating student objects – notes or slime - is her way of building a degree of trust with students, a message of sorts that communicates that the actions are noticed and tolerated, and at the same time they are expected to engage with the official activity. She is making clear to students that even though she might think it is “ridiculous,” their actions are understood and accepted.

Discussion

This chapter has been an exploration of how the definition of knowledge can shape classroom discourse and interactions. Ideas about what counts as knowledge are greatly dependent on relations of power both outside and inside a classroom. Larger structures, like standards, administrative pressure, and state exams, combine with a teacher’s own efforts, to define what is accepted as knowledge; but, like the writing conventions in Chanda’s class, this knowledge is also culturally bound with the values of dominant society. Teachers exercised their own decision-making authority to shape the outlines of knowledge, prioritizing content,
translating concepts into discrete strings of discourse, and selecting important vocabulary. Some topics could be viewed as “B.S.,” others became important enough that a teacher might try to “hammer” the concept into the minds of students.

Through their actions to define knowledge, teachers approached their work in a way that reflects a broader ideology about learning as an acquisitive project, an internalizing of a free-standing collection of knowledge that stands outside of individuals. Such an approach to learning positions knowledge as something out there in the world – rather than produced through specific decisions and heavily contingent on cultural values - separate from our internal minds and to be passed on through schooling (Carter, 2007, p. 164). Learning becomes an “unproblematic process of absorbing the given, as a matter of transmission and assimilation,” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 47). Repeatedly, teachers positioned themselves as the holders of an official body of knowledge which they themselves had contributed to defining. Students, then, were expected to incorporate this knowledge and demonstrate they had internalized it by answering whole class questions, repeating vocabulary definitions, completing diagrams, or responding to prompts with approved phrases. This is contrasted with constructivist theories that posit learning as an act of constant meaning making by the learner. That is, ideas about the world are constructed – or rather, co-constructed – by learners as they interact with their communities and environments. The way knowledge is structured in a classroom, and how students are positioned relative to that knowledge, are reflective of relations of power. Students can be set outside of the domains of knowledge that a teacher has created.

The idea of a classroom scripts and counterscripts is helpful to show how official discourses, based in teacher definitions of what counts as knowledge, exist alongside other conceptions of knowledge that have been brought and created by students. Such official scripts
aren’t literal words that are memorized and repeated, but rather an “orientation that members come to expect after repeated interactions,” a culturally bound collection of routines and practices grounded firmly in the values of dominant institutions (Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larsen, 1995). Students bring their own projects of knowledge creation to school which informs a counterscript; these are sometimes recognized and incorporated into the script, sometimes at odds with the teacher’s official script, and often ignored and carried out in parallel with the formal agenda. Student projects, like hair braiding, ripping a binder’s cover, playing around to figure out who starts a game first, or investigating one’s weekly behavior points, are all driven by student interest, skills, and desires. Thus, the counterscript can be considered a form of what Erving Goffman had identified as an ‘underlife’ that grows in response to the structures of institutions.

Gutiérrez, et al, (1995) use the idea of scripts and counterscripts as a helpful heuristic to understand the “construction of particular sociocultural practices in classrooms,” (p. 445). A classroom script reflects the official agenda, largely driven by the teacher, and it shares the social space with multiple student-led counterscripts; this model nicely illustrates how several projects can be carried out simultaneously in the classroom. Power relations between teachers and students form the boundaries of an official social space, and teachers often attempt to bring students into that space to partake in the sanctioned classroom script, for example by asking for more hands to be raised. But power is multi-directional, and students can create their own “unofficial” spaces for a form of underlife to emerge (pp. 445-449). Sometimes the teacher is aware of the competing agendas and will tolerate them, other times a teacher might confront them to bring students back into their formal script, or the teacher may be unaware of such counterscripts altogether. The collection of student-led counterscripts I observed formed a very
different type of “local” knowledge. It was different in form and content from the “official knowledge” of chemistry facts, vocabulary, and writing conventions, and instead based in the interests and experiences students brought with them to the classroom. For example, if we follow Lave and Wenger (1991) in defining learning as resulting from situated activity, the passing of slime can be seen to represent a web of student knowledge about creating the slime, hiding it from the teacher, strategies for sharing it with one another, and investing fellow students in the act. It is local knowledge formed through their interests and social relations with each other, through “fugitive acts of learning” undertaken by students (Patel, 2016b).

Understanding these scripts and counterscripts in action can be a way of observing asymmetrical relations of power. Student actions generally maintain traditional classroom power relations; their projects are done not to challenge and resist the teacher’s authority but rather enacted in the voids of teacher authority. The students in Paige’s class created their own mini-game within a game, one that upheld Paige’s role as a teacher in charge but allowed their own expression. Chiemeka created the outlines of his official script by expecting certain student responses in whole class discussions and on a worksheet. Once these requirements were met, students filled in the voids with their own activities – hair braiding, binder ripping, side conversations, snacking – which formed a parallel and tolerated counterscript. In Anita’s class, the passing of slime and notes was less a transgressive activity than an allowed realm of student-driven activity that became a way for Anita to establish teacher-student trust. Her permitting such activities to continue was, more than a form of benevolence, a multi-directional negotiation between teacher and students. Her interpretation of the exchange of notes was malleable enough to both enforce her official expectations and allow students to pursue their interest; as she said, “Sometimes I’ll be like ‘Give it to me, I’m not going to read it but I’m about to throw it out,
because this is ridiculous,’ so at least telling them, there still is trust there.” As a mutually created construction, the mention of ‘trust’ suggests that all members of the classroom community are engaging in a joint project of school, that the notes are “ridiculous,” and at the same time that she is tolerating their existence. Anita still prioritizes her official knowledge, but she shows an awareness that other ways of learning and being might exist. Others have argued that students and teachers collude to create an agreed-upon agenda of compliance in exchange for passing grades, and pushing conflicting agendas below the surface (Manke, 1997, p. 9). This understanding between teachers and students has been described as “the deal,” or the “agreement,” an informal game of student noncompliance and low standards (Haberman & Post, 1998, p. 97; Sizer, 1992). Gutiérrez et al. (1995) argue that, more than an exchange for peace in the classroom, this negotiated arrangement is a means to solidify identities and roles within a social structure: “…both students and teacher are complicit in maintaining distinct defensive spaces rather than challenging and ultimately transforming the dominant script,” (p. 450). Such a negotiation represents a “symbiosis between the two scripts [that] usually enables peaceful coexistence, but rarely an actual exchange of world views between students and teacher.” (p. 464)

Yet there exist moments, sometimes intentional and sometimes unplanned, where power relations shift and teachers and students can both collaborate in co-creating “third spaces” that move beyond the script-counterscript dichotomy to created mutually constructed scripts. In such third spaces, student and teacher discourses can mutually work to collaboratively build new knowledge together. Student voice, interest, and creations would gain legitimacy and teacher order would provide a frame to create new understandings (pp. 451-454). In Anita’s class, such a space briefly opened up in a fascinating discussion about social classes. As Anita was asking
students to rank the different social classes in Sumer, a student suggested that an analogy could be made between the Mesopotamian class society and the hierarchical management structure of their school, MS 5. Anita paused the lesson to share this observation with the rest of the class:

Jason, I like the point you brought up. We see social hierarchy in a lot of places today. We do see it in school. In MS 5, Principal James would be up top, and then who would be number 2?…Ms. Tyson and the other Assistant Principal, right, and number 3 might be the deans, and number 4 might be the teachers, the paras, and then, yeah, you guys are number 5. [Feigned offence by students] No! You wouldn’t be slaves, you wouldn’t be slaves!

As she finished this brief and humorous explanation, the possibilities seemed endless; a question was raised about how students existed within a quasi-rigid hierarchy and whether they were in fact at the bottom of the school social pyramid. Anita pointed out briefly that there was always the possibility that she could be principal and change her class. A space opened up to explore the different types of power and relationships that exist in school between the different classes, and the extent to which those classes are in fact rigid – especially in a school like MS 5 that so blatantly tracks their students. Then the space closed as Anita noticed the clock, cut off any other student contributions, and moved on to asking students to complete their worksheet. The whole exchange lasted 85 seconds.

There were other spontaneously created micro-moments where there emerged what could be characterized as a third space. One such moment came about in Paige’s class before they started the memory game. Paige was reviewing the different types of cells and was about to start the game when one student paused her to ask, “Wait, I have a question. Is your skin cell different from my skin cell?” This was a fascinating question as Paige and the student had different skin colors and such physical appearances underlie major social issues. In this moment, however, Paige didn’t recognize, or couldn’t fully address, the complexity of the question, and instead responded, “Um, so, everyone is different because our DNA is different, right? But it’s
the same general structure.” It was a race-evasive stance that served to limit the possibilities of a third space emerging. In Lydia’s class, a student named Madison raised her hand in the middle of a whole class discussion to make a clever analogy about the role of electrons in an atom’s structure:

LYDIA: Alright Madison, you want to add on?
MADISON: Basically, when you take out the negative atoms, the positive [unintelligible]
LYDIA: Wait, say that again?
MADISON: Like, if you take out the negative and it’s more positive...it’s like saying there is a loud kid in the class, and you take him out the class and it gets quiet.
LYDIA: That’s a good analogy!

The class broke out into a semi-serious round of applause after Lydia’s affirmation, an opportunity to enthusiastically support Madison and show their solidarity with her contribution. This analogy truly was an original perspective on the effect of removing negative particles on the charge of an atom and pushed a deeper understanding of an often confusing topic. It was a contribution grounded in Madison’s own experience in classrooms where students had been disruptive and removed, thereby changing the dynamics of the room. Lydia accepted and validated the contribution, and other students joined in both celebrating the fresh take and contributing their signal of appreciation.

Both Sophia and Anita intentionally planned to allow for a mutually created type of knowledge to emerge, a third space that was to grow out of students’ own knowledge and a teacher’s willingness to legitimize this local knowledge. Anita’s creation was what she termed the “Highlight of the Week.” As I shared in Chapter 7, the very existence of this activity clashed with what Anita perceived to be the expectations of her administrators, yet she felt it important enough to make it a regular part of her class. It had become a central part of her weekly planning:
I do “Highlight of the Week,” and the kids get to share what they did over the week, and I always say even if you had a bad weekend, you slept, you drank water, you took a step... we don’t know what goes on in our kids’ lives. I want to do something positive, it’s like a funny thing kids do. At this point I can tell when I had a bad weekend, it’s nice to see... “Miss, I drank some water.” So, it’s gotten to the point where the kids like really, really love it and I’ve kind of been planning my Monday lessons to have less content so now everyone wants to share

By creating space for students to share their moments from their weekends, Anita was acknowledging and valuing the experiences and knowledge that students create. She was also accepting her own positionality with respect to knowledge; by saying “we don’t know what goes on in our kids’ lives,” she was implicitly arguing that her students have a knowledge of something that she could never know, and it was important for her to hear that knowledge. It was a humbling recognition of the decentered and varied nature of knowledge, something she acknowledges she may not fully understand. Another benefit was in student engagement; she was noticing that students were looking forward to Mondays and sharing their highlights. Every hand seemed to be raised as she would do the activity: “I’ve noticed recently, like this week actually, in one of my classes, I’ve had every hand up, like, oh my god, [this is] something they are looking forward to do.” This was a stark contrast to when she asked questions related to her official script of social hierarchy, and perhaps an indication that the type of knowledge that defined her official script connected with her students very differently than the opportunity to co-create knowledge.

I had a chance to observe a shortened version of the “Highlight of the Week,” and just as she had explained, almost every hand in the class went up when she opened the activity. The revelations were both mundane and illuminating – one student shared about his turtle that escaped its cage, another about going to a go-cart track with his friend. One girl gushed about putting the lights up on their family’s Christmas tree. For about four minutes, Anita created a space for students to discuss topics that had nothing to do with any official school curriculum,
upcoming exam, or even knowledge that Anita had created herself. Even as students were sharing, others were buzzing with their own anecdotes and sharing on the side. As Anita wrapped up the activity, several hands were insistently raised again and she had to concede and let more students share. The small space she had created in her classroom was precious and at the same time inadequate: “I don't know. I need to figure out a way…because I’m always like, ‘One more,’ and I end up taking two more.”

Sophia had similarly carved out instructional time for a student-driven activity that she called “Words of Inspiration.” This was clearly important to Sophia; she brought it up in all of my interviews and during the focus group, and discussed at length the meaning of this activity to her teaching. This is how she described the activity:

I do something called “Words of Inspiration.” Basically, [it is] random quotes from activists, artists, musicians, authors, whatever, and then I put the quote up, and I just say, “Hey Mike, go pick out a quote,” and they pick it out and talk about it. So I give them about five or ten minutes to talk about it, sometimes it might take the entire period. Like, literally, a week and a half ago, one of my anatomy classes, we took the entire 42 minutes. Because I realized the students who don’t speak, they're speaking. And I sat there, and I’m like, “Alright. Talk!”

Sophia is a science teacher who teaches anatomy, physics, and computer science, yet this activity, completely unrelated to any science curriculum, is a vital part of her instructional practice. She sees students who normally don’t speak participating in class, and thus a space had been created where a different side of her students could be expressed. Though she provides a semblance of structure – a collection of quotes and guidelines about how to listen to one another – students are the main authors of this conversation by both choosing a quote and even influencing the amount of time spent on the topic. She described to me how one conversation went in a previous class:

It was a Tupac quote…it was so good. “To heal a wound, you need to stop touching it.” Cos a lot them, kinda, they went back to their own personal stories, a lot them would talk
about their families. Or friendships, relationships, and they are just like “Nobody would ever teach me how to move on from a wound, how to do this, that,” so, like, so I didn’t realize how awesome this is.

The activity brings a variety of topics that student are not regularly allowed to discuss in a formal forum, such as relationships, pain, and friendship. Yet, Sophia is recognizing that her students have considerable experience with these and other topics, and that they benefit from sharing with each other. When she sees students expressing that “nobody would ever teach me,” the space becomes one where the classroom members can learn from one another.

I had a chance to observe Words of Inspiration in Sophia’ class and how she worked to “bridge the gap.” Sophia had been absent the previous day, so she made room for the activity on the day I was there. A student had chosen the quote “Living in a world full of lies, with the expectancy of becoming the truth,” one for which I couldn’t find an attribution. Still, a spirited class discussion emerged; it was stilted, sharply veering in different directions, not always coherent to me, and at times dominated by one very vocal student. But Sophia also allowed for several students to share their own ideas about a topic – lying – about which students were clearly passionate and knowledgeable. The discussion began with one student’s story about lying to her mother:

Student 1: This one time I got home at like one o’clock. On the train ride home, I’m thinking this whole lie, like, this is what happened, and this is what happened. It lined up so well, when I told [my mom] what happened, she was like, ‘oh, ok.’

Sophia responded by asking if it was a good thing if every lie is successful: “Wait, I’m going to challenge that…. if [the lie is working] on occasion, you’re going to start saying every moment is an occasion now.” The conversation was momentarily overtaken by Jamison, a particularly vocal student, who in an exchange I described in Chapter 5 launched into a back and forth about the ability of girls to detect if their boyfriends were lying. This played out for some
time, with Jamison momentarily relishing the energy of the discussion, but another girl, Jessica, brought it back to Sophia’s original question about the suspect value of having a lie accepted, which prompted a question from a peer:

**JESSICA:** You know how you were talking about “on occasion”? And then you said, ‘alright,’ and you make every moment an occasion? Yeah, I have an example, not me, but you know, but somebody I know [laughter], a cousin, was like, be like [gesturing] and it became so often, the same lie over and over, that it had to change the lie, so it’s, like, it’s pretty hard to keep up.

**JAMISON:** You never lied in an instant, in a moment, you don’t have to lie, and then you did it….and then you think… “Why did I just lie? I could have said the truth!”

As Jessica spoke, another student called out encouragement. Other than re-directing Jamison, Sophia had been outside of this conversation for several moments. But she jumped back in with her own story from her childhood:

**SOPHIA:** I think that’s a lot of people [who lie]. That’s everybody. I can definitely attest to that. Trust me, I grew up with very strict parents, like, I had no friends in high school, I couldn’t go out, so like, when I wanted to, I would be like “Yeah, this is what’s happening.” And my sisters would have to be on with me with the lie because they’re my ride. So, you know, that was fun,

The conversation had ranged across several topics, and though only a handful of students spoke, Sophia accepted the nature of her student comments and the experiences they brought. She even communicated her own story from growing up, and together her classroom community cobbled together a shared understanding about the complicated nature of lying built from the memories and learning of the classroom community. Beyond the content of this conversation, Sophia later explained to me how this collaborative project was a way to communicate something deeper to her students:

I feel like there’s a very large disconnect between students and teachers. Like, we’re humans. We have our own story, and teachers are so scared to share their stories with their students, but in reality students want to hear that because they want to see themselves in you. …and I get it, some things are super personal but with something like
this you can talk about a friendship that went wrong and students will be like “Holy crap, you went through it, I went through it too.” So I don't know, and that’s why I like it.

In this very different type of classroom space, Sophia found meaning in appearing fully human to her students. Earlier, in Chapter 5, Paige shared a similar thought when she said “I think it’s important that you act like a human.” It is a rejection of the identity of a one-dimensional bureaucrat locked into a hierarchical relationship of authority with students. Moments like “Words of Inspiration” create a space where Sophia can cease to be a “teacher,” and her students can cease to be “students;” Sophia instead becomes “human,” and the relationship perhaps maintains the echoes of authority but moves towards equality on a personal level. It is a third space because the official ways of knowing, grounded in scripts of state sanctioned curricula and bureaucratic labels, are pushed aside. Likewise, student counter-projects are raised from a position in the school underlife to the surface of the classroom space. The third space is a new, situated, community-driven way of knowing and being, built of the interests, ideas, reflections, and experiences of the members of the classroom, students and teacher, away from the curriculum or officially sanctioned knowledge, and driven by a shared commitment to interpersonal connection.
I have always been interested in the ways we transform, as individuals and as members of a community, when we participate in bureaucratic institutions. “Participate” may be too passive a word to capture the relationships people have with institutions; after all, institutions are collections of people and are actively created and shaped by its members. Yet, institutions are also a major ordering force in society. They direct actions, structure hierarchical relationships, and communicate expectations and values; institutions consolidate power and legitimize symbols of authority. Thus, they have both material and symbolic significance that can include directing as much as participating. Exploring the experience of institutions is a valid and interesting entry into one of the longstanding topics of interest in the social sciences, the competing effects of structural and cultural elements on communities (Portes, 2012; Evans, 2004).

In my own experience as an educator for several years I’ve felt – and perhaps caused – the many impacts of an institutional setting, including the feelings of being coerced to take certain actions, the fears of not complying with certain regulations, and the limiting effect of being assigned, labeled, and moved around in various ways. As a teacher I’ve played this role with students, as an administrator I’ve done the same with teachers. Public schools are of course a unique institution; they have a rigidity resulting from the many rules, the massive human scale, and the hierarchies of management. This coexists with a vagueness in the purposes and products of education; the result of these two very different types of being is the creation of pockets of autonomy for teachers (and students) within a lattice of disciplining and surveillance. In such a place, power is everywhere. That’s likely what attracted me to the topic initially; power is
alluring and mesmerizing in the way it can convey strength and safety and direct the actions of people (Sennett, 1980). Another way to characterize this project, then, is as an exploration of how people are affected by their confrontations with power and their experience in positions of authority to channel power.

I’ve tried to argue in the preceding chapters that such an interpretation of power is incomplete. As Cornel West (1994, pp. 18-20) has pointed out, the distinction between structure and culture in social analysis is a false one. If culture can be said to be the realm of our norms and values, and structure to concern the rules, restraints, and systems of power, then the words of my participants present a range of experiences that are mutually constructed by elements from both domains. Teachers often encountered and wrestled with rules that were guided by deep-seated values, and also had ideas about what “ought to be” that were shaped by structural forces. Chanda shared an example of this when she reflected on her formal position as a teacher within the institution of school in enforcing a uniform code that required boys to tuck in their shirt, but not girls:

I disagree with the fact that only the boys have to tuck in their shirt because our girls don’t have to tuck their shirt in. We brought that up recently with management and the rationale is that girls in this age group have a lot of body image issues and [teachers] try to enforce it but a lot of the girls were just very uncomfortable tucking their shirt in for whatever reason, and, that boys when they go and work they are going to have to tuck their shirt in. But I think that boys can also have body image issues and, if we make a rule we should have it for everybody.

Through her role as a teacher, defined by the structural system of education, Chanda had a responsibility and an expectation to uphold this gender-based rule about school uniforms. She was well aware of those structures, referring to her supervisors as “management” and inferring her place in the hierarchy. She also was well aware of the influence of dominant cultural norms that transform boys’ clothing into symbols of readiness for the workplace. As she was thinking
about how the dimensions of power intersected with gender, she also provided a window into her own capacity for agency, which I later saw her turn into practice when I visited her class. A student of hers named Jackson identified as transgender and had in the past challenged another school policy of creating separate boys’ and girls’ lines to exit the classroom. Before I knew this context, Jackson and I had a nice conversation about books because he was reading straight through the “Do Now” at the beginning of class; Jackson had just won a “Readers are Leaders” award at the school and was embracing the title. I also noticed that Jackson wasn’t asked to tuck in his shirt. “No, he did not tuck in his shirt,” Chanda said when I asked her about it, “I don’t know. Maybe I should talk to him.” Chanda’s reflections show her wrestling with a rule she doesn’t fully agree with and a student who is challenging cultural ideas. In this and other examples throughout this study, the typical distinctions between structure and culture quickly crumbled in the various and manifold ways teachers interpreted the assertion, negotiation, and sharing of their authority with people in school. More interestingly, these interactions reflexively shaped my participants’ very identities and conceptions of who they were. Their work in schools represented a fulfilment of defining their place within the complex relationships of authority, and in this process they were creating themselves.

I began this work by describing the theories of power as a productive force, one that creates certain truths and ideas about who we are as individuals. I also developed a malleable conception of authority as a relationship amongst people, one that can be used as a lens to understand how people interpret their position within this relationship and within the conditions of power. With these twin concepts, I turned to the experiences of my participants as third year teachers. In this final chapter, I want to highlight the ways that in confronting power and

---

11 This is the pronoun that Chanda used in reference to Jackson
authority teachers engaged in a fascinating process of transformation, a self-creation that involved producing new identities for themselves. I’ll conclude by arguing that this process contains elements of a refutation of the stultifying and oppressive effects of power on individuality theorized by Foucault. Instead there opens a hopeful space for new ways of becoming.

These two new concepts, identity and becoming, are absent from my conceptual framework as I began this project failing to recognize the importance of either. Their emergence is the result of a methodological stance in grounded theory; only after repeated listenings and readings of the words of my participants did their searching and inward looking projects start to form a narrative of personal transformation through community action. Evidence of teachers experiencing marked changes in their identities, a “becoming,” is present throughout this work and I’d like begin this conclusion with a few examples contained in the previous four chapters.

Teachers supported and legitimated their authority by making intentional decisions in their classrooms about the use and organization of time, space, and materials. Decisions around how desks were organized, which activities would be prioritized, and how resources in the classroom were to be managed, all underscored different ideas about how teachers and students could and should relate to one another. For example, Sophia’s intentional positioning of the desks in clusters, combined with her prominent displays of student artwork and aspirations, aligned with her vision of a classroom where student voice was paramount and a teacher’s giving of respect was critical. As she said, “[Students] get really, really, excited and I kind of dig that. So that’s why I’m not like, ‘Oh my god, shut up!’ … I’m not that kind of teacher just because I don’t want to shut down their curiosity.” These efforts were supported by teachers’ multiple efforts to build relationships with students as a way to support their visions; Paige opened her
class tour by saying “I’m really big on life,” and not only did her classroom literally match this with plants and animals everywhere, she connected her work to the people-first approach of Starbucks that built social capital. These statements show teachers defining themselves by their own interests and beliefs.

Sometimes, teachers resorted to “laying down the line,” and in chapter six I described the upholding of certain norms and expectations in classrooms. They displayed an ability to change their authoritative positions in remarkably fluid and shifting ways, negotiating the meaning of rules and terms like “respect,” and adopting stances of empathy when students were working against class rules. This wasn’t always completely true, as Franklin demonstrated when he described, in a firm and commanding tone, one of his approaches to misbehavior: “One thing I do say to them is, ‘I’m different. Stop playing with me. I am not the same.’” He drew a sharp line between himself and his students, but others described multiple times when they opted to blur that line. For Sophia, these were critical moments: “I absolutely hated when teachers talked down to me - don’t talk to me as if I’m a child!” Later, when I asked her why she had decided to return for her third year of teaching, Sophia said “I want to be the teacher that I never had growing up… Someone who listens, like, opens your ears, actually listen to what students are saying.” Chiemeka knew that his classroom had to be a place of negotiation – “I’m not one of those people that feel like my classroom is going to 100% perfect,” he said. As I showed in that chapter, since he saw himself as a person who didn’t expect a “100% perfect” classroom, he had developed other ways of being that included empathetic approaches to students who gave him difficulty and using questions like “Tell me why you’re mad?” and “What can I do to help out?” These statements are remarkable not only because of the insight they lend into how teachers approached delicate decisions of making their authority visible, they are statements about who
these teachers are as people. They are using key phrases such as “I am” or “I’m not” to give a clue about what is happening to their perceptions of their selves.

The work of teachers in classrooms takes place within the institutional context of schools and it was subject to formal and informal controls through manipulations of the schedule, the course they taught, and class sizes; these had significant impacts on how teachers carried out their work. Teachers were required to enforce administrative rules around school uniform and discipline that they may not fully support, but they also showed incredible savvy in navigating complex relationships with colleagues and supervisors to carry out their own projects. The assignment of emergency coverages was an example of how some teachers, like Anita, experienced a feeling of powerlessness in their schools and observed how their colleagues could take advantage of school structures. Others found agency in coverages, as Chiemeka did when he accepted the assignments and could find value in the loyalty he was showing. Grading was a structural requirement to evaluate students that teachers used to enact their own vision of school; Anita, for example, called on her own experience as a struggling student who was given multiple opportunities, and incorporated it into her approach to grades even as other teachers in her school adopted a less flexible dynamic; grading combined with her efforts to offer extra help as a way to show her students that she was a person who believed in their potential, saying “That is also why I give my kids, like, a million and five chances because I’m not going to let you fail, but I’m also not going to let you take this home for homework. Like, you have to come at lunch and do it and I will sit with you at lunch.” Within school teachers experienced sites of evaluation like examinations of their lesson plans and formal observations. These were something of a ritual that teachers had to carefully navigate, and also presented an opportunity to embrace the pride of being legitimated by the official truth-producing process of the formal observation. Paige
revealed how this interacted with her identity, saying “I’m highly effective” to describe herself and using the evaluative and official language of the formal observation.

In Chapter Eight, I discussed how power and knowledge are closely connected, and how teachers used this relationship to cement their authority while at the same time their authority helped create the bounds of what counts as knowledge in their classrooms. In their decisions around such issues, teachers showed their agency in making decisions about what knowledge to include or exclude, as well as what types of strings of discourse or key words would count as acceptable representations of knowledge. These decisions built teacher ideas about themselves; “I’m really not about B.S. vocabulary words,” Paige said, setting herself up to be a teacher who will deliver authentic, meaningful lessons. She showed this later by discussing how her role as a teacher could take on the purpose of ensuring her students’ “minds were blown” through the engaging and relevant topics that she introduced, like the ownership of natural resources or the pollution of the Gowanus Canal. Knowledge wasn’t the sole province of teachers, however, and there were multiple moments when they had to recognize and think of a way to respond to the agendas of students, complete with its own world of interest, ideas, and knowledge. Their responses weren’t always fully formed; Chiemeka, for example, said at first of the hair braiding he noticed in his class that “for some reason it didn’t bother me,” and then a few beats later he shifted to “that was crazy for me to let that go.” His understanding of the moment was developing and changing as he talked it through and tried to verbalize what he himself thought to be acceptable behavior. However, teachers also intentionally worked to create third spaces where they could engage in joint projects of knowledge creation with their students (Gutiérrez et al, 1995). Anita’s efforts to do a “Highlight of the Week” activity allowed her to hear about her students’ lives in their own words, and it led her to comment “at this point I can tell when a kid
had a bad weekend.” Sophia similarly used her “Words of Inspiration” activity to connect with her students and have them generate their own perspectives on interesting topics. It changed how she wanted to present herself to her students, saying “I feel like there’s a very large disconnect between students and teachers. Like, we’re humans. We have our own story.”

There is a unity in the quotes I’ve highlighted above, a common thread of teachers seeking out who they are and who they are becoming. Whether it is Paige saying “I’m big on life,” or Anita claiming “I’m not going to let you fail,” whether it is Franklin staking out his differences from his students by emphasizing that “I am not the same” or Sophia saying “I’m not that kind of teacher just because I don’t want to shut down their curiosity,” the teachers in my study were actively making sense of what they believed and who they were as people.

Throughout the chapters of this work, I have tried to show that teachers reckon with their perceptions of power in their school settings in ways that inform their own personal projects of establishing themselves as legitimate figures of authority, a position that in their own way and in multiple modes they sometimes seek to strengthen but also to intentionally undermine or redefine with their students. There exists a close link between facing up to the dynamics of power and questions of identity, and in the fields where these two meet teachers experienced a process of transformation. This is the terrain that I will be exploring in the remainder of this conclusion.

Power, Authority, and Identity

The concept of identity is central to teachers’ work with authority both in their classrooms and in the school system at large. They mutually construct one another in a complex and dialectical relationship. An individual’s identity informs how they resist and reshape
existing power dynamics; this significantly shapes a teacher’s outlook and approach to their work in schools. Simultaneously, institutional structures and the very act of teaching can produce and shape new and different identities in an individual. Establishing authority in the classroom, making sense of student resistance and voice, receiving validation or challenges from supervisors, these all contribute to a transformation of self, a creation of new identities.

The concept of identity defies a singular and static definition; theories of identity have presented varying perspectives that agree only on its dynamic and fluid nature. Authors have linked the development of identity to theories of the self, of emotion, and discursive practices. From this complexity, identity emerges as both a product and process. It is a product insofar as it can be interpreted as a semi-concrete (yet ever changing) collection of the varied ideas that momentarily define how a person acts, understands, and exists. And it can be seen as a process because identity is made through experience and practice (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Olsen, 2008). An understanding of identity, like authority, is constantly (re)negotiated. Even the verbs used to describe how identity comes about—produced, constructed, developed, shaped, built, formed—point to an uncertainty about its genesis.

Gee (2000) offers one framework for interpreting the fluidity of identity by defining it as “being recognized as a certain ‘kind of person,’ in a given context,” (p. 99), and while there may be a core identity there still is a tendency to be highly responsive to a situation. This definition hints at how identity is both self-realized and socially ascribed. Gee has provided a theoretical framework to organize the different forms of context-dependent identities. Institutions can impose an identity, or individuals can seek the legitimacy of institutional labels such as “teacher” or “professor.” An identity can be bred through voluntary (or involuntary) participation in groups, for example through developing a shared affinity for playing sports. And, identities can
be brought forth and reinforced through social relationships and self-descriptions, ascribing traits like ‘caring’ or ‘thoughtful’ to a person. Acknowledging a post-modern perspective, Gee argues that identity is socially constructed and thus subject to the dynamics of power; identities are products of competing discourses which are promoted within a field of power relations that allow certain descriptions to eventually prevail (pp. 114-115). Identity, then, is a valuable concept to bring to educational research about power.

Though he didn’t use that term identity, it was of deep concern of Foucault; his work probed the forms and modes of society through which “human beings are made into subjects,” (1982, p. 777). Bodies of governance used scientific practices, rationality, discourse, discipline, and a host of other means of managing populations to ultimately produce the knowledge of an individual (Foucault, 1995; Foucault, 1982). To participate in modern society was to be created through a different form of power which, in another of his neologisms, he termed ‘subjectification;’ he meant that to be measured, defined, and described by experts and officials was to be produced by the state as a certain person, a subject with definable qualities. This term is somewhat confusing, however, as some have argued that the modern social technologies emerging in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries worked to precisely describe individuals in a way that turned them into legible objects (rather than subjects) that could be ranked, ordered, and understood (Dreyfuss & Rabinow, 1982, pp. 154-170). Some have suggested Foucault’s work – like postmodernism in general – insinuates that the very idea of the individual might be lost in the discursive creation of power structures (Olsen, 2008, p. 11; Stetsenko, 2017, pp. 74-76); but Foucault’s argument was not that individuals disappeared, rather that the “individualizing power” of the state could create a personhood sketched along the pre-determined outlines of a bureaucratic appartus.
The echoes of Foucault’s theorizing of power can be heard in some of the comments of my participants. When Paige claims that she is “highly effective,” or Chanda compares her administration to Orwell’s Big Brother, there is evidence of a complex system of locating and defining teachers in a certain way. Frequently, students and entire classes were described as “my best class,” “high performing,” “crazy,” “low reading level,” even “smart ass.” These labels, while likely not entirely static, were also interesting terms to attach to students and formed part of the way schools have truth-production systems that label individuals. Often, when I asked about a particular student outburst or confusion, teachers first responded by referring to an IEP as a starting point for explaining the situation. Behavioral descriptions were also common, ranging from “good” for a compliant student to “a talker” or even “atrocious” to describe students.

Other theorists have sought to reclaim the formation of identities from disembodied structures of power by arguing we are not just passive products of a productive machinery but co-creators of our identities through communal acts. Foucault, Stetsenko (2017) argues, sees the individual as trapped within structures of power without accounting for the “agency and resistance of individuals and communities,” (p. 218). Stetsenko sees that last word, communities, as vital; we cannot create ourselves in isolation because identity is not separate from the social world, identity is a “fully social, embodied, material-discursive process” that emerges through praxis (Stetsenko, 2013). Again, the structure/culture dichotomy is blurred and identity becomes more than simple biographical details, membership in a group, or institutional definitions; it is something that individuals create through their situated interaction with complex and multifaceted social worlds (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

One way teachers engaged in this project was through their use of language. After over two years of being a teacher, their speech was laden with educational jargon and reflected
common themes of teacher talk. My interview transcriptions are filled with the verbal currency of educators, with references to “Do Nows,” learning objectives, standards, differentiation, and unit plans. A passage from Chiemeka illustrates the extent to which this way of speaking was ingrained:

I try to have a lot of turn and talks, keep the engagement up, everybody writes, so I’ll do the Do Now, then right after that they have to write about something, they turn and talk about it, then going into the quick mini lesson, independent practice, exit ticket, something like that. I’m just going to say labs…inquiry based, where they actually doing a lab, it’s not just me talking, lectures, so that keeps the engagement up. They love discussions, this group loves discussion, so I have a lot of discussions, so they ask a lot of questions, which sort of kills time a lot.

Chiemeka was responding to my question about how he keeps students engaged if he doesn’t have a lot of rules, and he can be heard rattling off common educational terms (mini-lesson, exit ticket, etc…). He also reveals a common theme in discussions amongst teachers – how to ‘kill time’ during his lesson. Similarly, Paige earlier talked about using relationships to “hold [students] accountable,” using the word “accountable” to connect with common management-speak and educational talk of upholding expectations. This education-specific jargon could be evidence of the way that institutional efforts within the field of education get teachers to use a common language and is reinforced by other teachers and administrators. But the ease with which teachers effortlessly use this discourse is also of a symbol of a growing affinity with the teaching profession, a solidifying professional identity as a ‘teacher’ (Gee, 2000; Olsen & Buchanan, 2017).

Feelings of competence (or lack thereof) can also influence the development of a professional identity. The sensation of success while teaching can positively impact one’s idea that “I am a good teacher,” while repeated and consistent feelings of failure can raise doubts about the applicability of the teacher label to one’s identity. Franklin had begun to think of
himself as a leader at the school through no official designation but instead through his
interactions with his supervisors and his feelings of competence with his students in creating an
ordered classroom:

I’m just going to call myself the leader. It’s been implied by administration because…I
have some sort of favor [with] administration. Not that I’m the most highly effective
teacher but, I like to get my hands dirty. I have the best class management out of all the
teachers.

He is referencing the official label “highly effective” to ensure that he isn’t claiming the
highest levels of competence, but he also surfaces one of the hallmarks of teacher success
(Lortie, 1977, pp. 118-120) by saying “I have the best class management.” Along the way, he
senses himself becoming a leader and begins to adopt that identity. Lydia also discussed how
her perceived stature with students had changed her self-perception. She described initially
feeling like a teacher who was not taken seriously because of her apparent youth and because she
didn’t meet the image of a stereotypical science teacher. But now in her third year, she felt like
she had a different presence in the school:

I think people respect my connection with my students. Even admin has said to me, the
way that students react, just for instance, if I walk out to that hallway right now, there are
people that will walk out in the hallway and the kids will walk by them like they’re a
student. If I walk out, the kids will move out of the way. There is a sentiment there, a
command of respect. You know, it’s not like I don’t think they’re scared of me, I think
that they respect me and I respect them.

Lydia’s idea of herself is contrasted with other ‘people’ who she imagines are viewed not
as a teacher but rather “like they’re a student.” She, on the other hand, sees herself as someone
who carries a certain authority, who has the ability to make her presence felt in the hallways.
This perception is partially observed independently and partially buoyed by the words of
administrators who have commented on her effect on students. Both Franklin and Lydia, then,
experienced a sense of competence by virtue of their command of authority that shaped their professional identity, and it is a sense of self that has been developed socially.

“Identity,” in another sense, of course refers to common markers of demographics like gender and race and they can have an integral role in how people understand themselves. Franklin, for example, when asked to describe his identity, said “I’m black. I started dabbling in Pan-Africanism, so I say I’m African. I’m Haitian, and I’m, that's about it.” His identity is multiple and in a state of flux as he is “dabbling” in Pan-Africanism, and these shifts are taking place as he works with his students. Earlier I shared his retelling of an interaction with one of his students, R.J. Through practicing authority with R.J. – sometimes showing affection by picking fuzz out of R.J’s hair, sometimes flexing his power by yelling and cursing – Franklin found his blackness, or rather his blackness and maleness, to be surfacing and solidified. Sophia identified strongly as an immigrant, especially when it came to characteristics like working hard, staying close to family, and the absorbing the pressure of earning good grades in schools. She shared with me at one point:

   Even growing up I saw this, like, me and my sisters, our mentality was a lot different than people who don’t have immigrant parents. The mentality is, growing up, my parents did not waste their time to come to this country, literally leave their entire family behind, leave their well-being behind, for us to have a better opportunity here.

As I shared in Chapter 5, this identity is brought out when she seeks to connect with other students who might have to work a job during high school or have strict parents; by finding solidarity with her working students, Sophia is solidifying an image of herself as an immigrant doing what’s necessary to survive. Chanda described herself as British and Indian, designations that in our focus group caused shouts of surprise as her appearance and accent made her identity difficult to fit within commonly noticed markers. But this self-description was further solidified through her teaching as she found grounds for solidarity with her students:
Well, we talk a lot about ethnicity and race, I tell them all the time that I’m Indian and that I’m from England…Race is very difficult to talk about. [Students] have a lot of misconceptions. They do a lot of light skin, dark skin amongst the Dominicans, where if they are light skinned they think they are white. They’ll point at a clearly Dominican student who is fairer and say “But, he’s white,”…I don’t know where they got it from but they thought this their entire life, so they get it, and I’ll say “Nope, we’re all people of color.”

Chanda made a point with her students to use her self-identity, saying that “all the time” she is telling them about her background as an Indian from England. Her explanation is a fascinating example of how she uses her authority as the teacher to shape ideas about what student definitions of identity, including challenging the distinctions she hears of light and dark skin as well as labeling a thought as a misconception. Yet, her position in this relationship of authority was also influenced by the social relationship with her students; her own self-conception was changed and shaped as she created the space in her work with them to share an identity, saying “we’re all people of color.”

These examples from my participants provide a window into the complicated nature of identity. Identity is deeply intertwined with a teacher’s own exercise of authority; their ability to be strong and competent figures of authority in the classroom provides a sense of competence that solidifies themselves as a teacher. At times they drew on identity to work with and connect with students; at other times, as with Chanda, their very idea of identity was reflexively shaped by their social interactions with students as she found herself more than British or Indian, but becoming a person of color. Indeed, these examples and others uncover not just a changing set of self-perceptions, but a larger transformation in self, or rather the creation of new selves; a “Becoming.”
Teaching as an act of “Becoming”

Foucault sought to build a theory of how power can create individuals, but as I mentioned earlier this fails to account for the possibility of human agency in the resisting of structural forces. Agency is seen throughout this dissertation as teachers made intentional choices to order their classrooms, respond to students, navigate the complexities of schools, and shape and define knowledge. They also made conscious efforts to support their students and question the unbalanced relationships of authority that have come to define modern schooling, for example through their relationship building, efforts at empathy, and the purposeful creation of shared spaces. Beyond developing an identity, these actions speak to a deeper transformation of self. That is, teachers weren’t only creating new conceptions of themselves, but were actually creating new subjectivities through their work with others. Stetsenko (2017) has countered the dualistic and disempowering views of individualization found in theorists like Foucault, where the individual is stranded outside the functioning of power, and argues that individuals can act in concert with the world around them to create transformational change. This is a project that actively creates a selfhood, but it is necessarily carried out jointly with communities of practice and in working towards shared goals:

People come to know themselves and their world and ultimately come to be human in and through (not in addition to) the processes of collaboratively transforming their world in view of their goals and purposes. (Stetsenko, 2010, p. 8)

Teaching can be considered a situated practice, taking place within a community of the school. In this sense, teaching is not an activity that conveys information to passive students; instead, teaching is an identity-making activity, an embodied and socially situated learning experience (Lave, 1996). It may be confusing to consider teaching as learning, but this confusion only stems from long-held ideas about knowledge and learning as independent and
isolated realms connected through the act of teaching. However, just as identity and authority are mutually and dialectically related – where one’s identity shapes the approach to authority and one’s approach to authority shapes one’s identity – the subject (the learner) and the larger community are mutually constituted. Lave argues that we must reject a dualistic portrayal of knowledge and learning. Teaching, which is essentially a form of learning-through-action, is a process of becoming:

Crafting identities is a social process, and becoming more knowledgeably skilled is an aspect of participation in social practice. By such reasoning, who you are becoming shapes crucially and fundamentally what you “know.” “What you know” may be better thought of as doing rather than having something – “knowing” rather than acquiring or accumulating knowledge or information. “Knowing” is a relation among communities of practice, participation in practice, and the generation of identities as part of becoming part of ongoing practice, (p. 157).

The act of teaching is an act of learning, a practice where the “doing” of teaching itself is a form of knowing; “Learning thus implies becoming a different person,” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 53). Identity is no longer a static trait but constantly re-created in “the real work in which the self is born and enacted through the ways in which we do and perform.” (Stetsenko, 2010, p. 10). This provides the connection between selfhood and community. Human agency is a contribution to a greater social reality, and individuals are “not so much products of society but its producers,” (Stetsenko, 2017, p. 211). Teachers produce and create new social worlds through their highly relational work with others, and these contributory efforts are the source of their own becoming.

As I’ve tried to show so far in this conclusion, there were many moments in speaking with my participants where “the real work” of the transformation of the self could be observed. These experiences were deeply connected to teachers’ growth in the profession, as Anita showed when she reflected on how she had changed from just three years earlier: “I would never have
thought I was going to be a teacher, honestly, it’s so funny to me.” Her first two years, as I’ve detailed, were a struggle, and her outlook now was quite different, “I don’t feel like a deer in headlights anymore, which is really awesome. I just, I know what pushes kids. I know how to de-escalate, um, and I think I’m, definitely still perfecting, like, my pedagogical skills.” Something that a few years prior she couldn’t imagine, she was now able to speak confidently about; the landscape of teaching wasn’t paralyzing to her and she was no longer a “deer in headlights,” instead she was surprised to find herself equipped with pedagogical skills and insights to be a successful teacher. Participating in the study was for Anita a chance to reflect on these changes; towards the end she sent me a text message showing how much thinking about her experiences had mattered, saying “that initial interview really was like therapy…[it] helped me reset my goals for the year.” Lydia also described how she had changed through teaching; “I was so clueless,” she said of her first year teaching, continuing on:

I think that on some levels, and this may also have to do with [the fact that] people also thought I was a lot younger than I am, I think that coming into this a lot people thought I was not qualified because of the way I look. I thought it was because they thought I was really young. But I also think that, I’m not sure why, to be honest, if it was the way I look, or where they think I’m from, but I do think that people have come to respect me, though, over the years. I think just watching me work and seeing how I’ve grown, that I can really grow, I’ve adapted.

Lydia sees herself as a very different person than she was in her first year. Part of this is because she believes her colleagues might have judged her based on “the way I look.” “I’m very woman,” was how Lydia described herself at one point, “Woman first. I think I’m very, like, indigenous. Latina, but indigenous…I do identify as a minority for sure.” All of these markers no doubt had significant impacts on how she related with students and perhaps formulated ideas about others. But for the purposes here, they are also relevant to how she saw her colleagues perceiving her, a science teacher, as young, minority, female, and thus not competent. She also had described herself as a “a very around-the-way girl,” and her strong New York accent, at
times brash attitude, and frank similarity to her students, all may have contributed to a stereotype that she had the same deficits other teachers had perceived in her students. Lydia told me how she worked actively and diligently not only to combat this but to create an entirely new person to be respected and recognized. I’ve already described the incredible intentionality she had put into designing her room, and the strength from which she acted when working with students who breached her norms. But she also told me about the summers she had spent learning her science content and building her confidence: “Honestly the first two years I was shaking in my boots. I felt very unprepared, uneasy. Unqualified, you know? But I made it a point every summer, I just read, and I’m teaching myself.” As I wrote in my participant profiles, Lydia was my former graduate student and I had seen firsthand her diligence and commitment to studying and bettering herself. I didn’t realize it was relevant at the time, but she would come to Saturday workshops, ask for extra help in preparing for certification exams, and eventually earned a Dean’s award for her academic work in graduate school. Through these experiences she has “grown” and “adapted.”

Now in her third year, she confidently described herself as “caring-controlling,” reminiscent of the warm-demander approach in education (Bondy et al, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Lydia had shared several examples of the ‘controlling’ side of this dyad, describing how she cultivated a personality of craziness so her students never quite know what to expect. But her caring side was also evident when I asked her about the purpose of school. She started by saying that she felt school is designed to prepare students for society, and indeed many of her comments from earlier in this work show her subscribing to just this belief. But after a halting start she shared a broader idea about school and her role in it:

My idea, though, is I feel like it’s not, it is a place to get you ready for the real world, but I feel like it can also be a home. You know, because, what I realizing is that, so many of my kids don’t have what I, what me and you think of as a home. And I’m not talking
about a roof over your head, I’m talking about a family, people that will take care of them...And I feel like this can be safe for them, and that’s a big deal for them in my room.

Of all my participants, Lydia consistently displayed a harder line in articulating responses to student behavior and spoke of being real with her students about the world they faced. Here, she paints a vision of school as a “home,” an understanding that she has realized in working with and hearing from her students; she has found power in a caring stance (Noblit, 1993). From being “clueless,” Lydia had thus experienced through her confrontations with power a process of “becoming” a strong and moral authority figure who could provide a space of familial support within an impersonal and difficult system.

The changes in selfhood are not necessarily linear. Paige, for example, said that her students “treat me like the school mom” and talked of the ways she used touch and humor to build relationships with her students. Some of her students even called her mom, and she relished holding a space for them at lunch or after school, providing food, and taking care of them. However, as I shared in Chapter 7, she also distanced herself from that characterization in one case when a particular student resisted doing the classwork, saying to him “Listen, like, I’m not your mother, I’m not going to stay here. You’re a young adult, and you know what you’re supposed to be doing.” Paige had developed many ideas of what it meant to be a teacher, including about relationship-building, preparing students for exams, and working with her colleagues; here she simultaneously occupied contradictory understandings of teaching and mothering in the context of her work. For Paige, she was becoming a community builder and a forger of relationships.

Chiemeka provided yet another example of the uncertainty that can result from being a teacher; as we were wrapping up our final interview I asked him if there was anything he wanted to add about his background. He paused, considered my question, then responded:
I think I’m always myself, in a sense. But, I feel, like, that nagging “Education is important,” that nagging “Respect is important.” And, I’ve caught myself many times this week, like, almost blowing up at kids because of stuff like the talking back, like, oh my god, it boils my blood! I just feel like that insubordination drives me nuts, because, how can they get away with that? If someone’s older than me, it’s “Sir” and “Ma’am.” That’s just how my culture is, it’s just respect. So, how you telling me “No?”

Earlier, Chiemeka had described himself as “chill.” He carried his athletic build with an assured grace, conveying a calm strength through the even and firm way that he spoke. His Nigerian heritage was an important part of his identity that was also a “nagging” reminder of messages to always be respectful to elders and to always prioritize his education. Though he was no longer a graduate student in my class, he had a hard time bringing himself to call me by my first name after I had repeatedly invited him to do so. Yet through teaching, there were times when he found fundamental parts of himself to be challenged; he even expressed a hesitancy in the way he locates himself in the above comments. After pausing ten seconds, he commented “I think I’m always myself in a sense.” He had to catch himself “almost blowing up,” an image of his identity literally being destroyed, and he went on to share why as he related an incident from earlier that week. It occurred while conducting his required “circular 6” professional duty (called “C6”) of patrolling the hallways during a class period to ensure that students were not leaving their classrooms without proper permission:

Even yesterday, I had C6 where I had to be on the first floor. And, I told a student, “Go to class, you’re already dressed, you don’t need to be out here.” “One minute, one minute.” Like, it just, I don’t know why it just bothers me, like, “What? Go to class!” I’m still telling in a nice tone, “Go to class,” you know, you’re late already. And she said something like “Why are you bothering me?” What? And I did yell at her, cos I don’t know why, I yelled at her. I apologized later because I always apologize, but it’s more, like, you gotta understand this is my job right now!

He became animated in his re-telling, impersonating an attitude of indifference and disdain as he voiced the student’s comments from the previous day. His voice climbed in exasperation and frustration as he shared his reaction – “What?” - and there can be detected a
real confusion when he said “I don’t know why it just bothers me.” After he uncharacteristically yelled he quickly moved to explain that he apologized. As he continued on, the sense of dislocation in his identity became clear:

I don’t get mad easily, but when I do, it’s just a weird feeling. Cos I don’t get mad a lot of times, so it’s like when it happens it’s very, very, weird for me. Like “Why am I...?” It’s a weird feeling and I don’t like it. So I try to rein myself back cos you never know what you’re going to say when you’re mad, might curse her out, might use vulgarity, next thing you know I’m in trouble. You never know what might come out. So I try to catch myself if it does go that far...Outside of teaching I don’t get mad. I don’t really get mad.

In his work as a teacher in the institution of schools, with all the regulations and requirements, Chiemeka discovered a new reaction that he didn’t know was possible. He’s a person who “doesn’t get mad easily,” yet in this moment he finds himself in unfamiliar emotional territory, and in reflecting on it he realizes that “I don’t like it.” A new type of being is uncovered in him, one where he has to “rein myself back,” and it’s possible that as he continues to monitor his reactions he will have a new understanding of who he is, not just somebody who doesn’t get mad but who has access to different emotional ranges. It is unclear what or how exactly Chiemeka is becoming; it’s a “very, very weird” experience – he uses the word “weird” three times - that suggests uncertainty but also an understanding of himself in a setting where others don’t show deference in a way that he fully understands. Through moments of struggle over authority, perhaps he is becoming aware of the variety of cultural expectations, some which clash with his professional identity (“this is my job now right now!”), and he thus is calibrating his own being.

The changes in subjectivity that my participants shared were also impacted by the unique contextual demands faced by New York City Teachers in 2018. Their narratives were filled with the vocabulary and themes of present day policies that shape teachers’ lives in the city. Official observation ratings, upcoming graduation requirements, contractually mandated extra
assignments, all were added stresses that teachers had to understand and make sense within their ideas of who they were as a teacher. However, through confronting the challenges, rituals, restrictions, and possibilities of teaching, and most of all through engaging with their students and colleagues, they were also writing stories about themselves that went beyond an institutionally defined professional identity (Lave, 1996). As Biklen (1993) writes, teachers draw on varied discourses to “explain their positions to themselves, and use them toward different ends,” (p. 172). These self-stories and the new identities that emerged uncover a process of ‘becoming’ that connected participants to deeper motivations for caring about education. And, particularly in moments when they rejected outright the traditional bounds of school-based relations of authority, their stories allowed for new possibilities of what the work of education could be.

Consider typical institutional expectations of the work of teachers. These include supporting students earning passing grades in their class, managing classrooms to be calm and under control, preparing students for required standardized exams, and helping students meet graduation requirements (Lortie, 1977). The professional identity of teachers exists within this specific and narrow policy context (Buchanan, 2015). As many authors have argued, this heavily constrained domain for the work of teachers – and schools - can be fundamentally inequitable and fail to acknowledge the importance of nurturing students and providing opportunities for a meaningful future life (Patel, 2016a; Jordan, Brown, & Gutiérrez, 2010; Nolan, 2011; Carter, 2007). By challenging sanctioned relationships of authority within schools, my participants found moments to redefine the act of teaching; they worked to move schools beyond being sites of oppression into sites of transformation. The classroom became more than a place of “academic” learning (and sometimes academic learning was rejected altogether).
Instead, it became a site of caring, of community building, of exploring political and social issues, of learning about each other. Lydia envisioned schools as a “home,” a place where students could find “a family, people that will take care of them,” and where the classroom could be “safe for them.” Teachers worked to create third spaces where joint projects were pursued with students, and other times found the grace to allow student-initiated counterscripts to play out in pursuit of “fugitive” acts of learning (Patel, 2016b). Sometimes these redefinitions were momentary; at others they were part of a core reshaping of teacher identities. These efforts represent a resistance to present-day policies which don’t serve students’ interests; instead, the new identities allowed new ways to interact that were more compassionate, supportive, and just.

Activities like Sophia’s “Words of Inspiration” or Anita’s “Highlight of the Week” are examples of this, as are Paige enlisting her colleagues through her role as a ninth grade team leader or Chiemeka through his small resistances to the regulations around lateness. Lydia’s belief that school “could also be a home” is an example of an entirely different vision for school spaces. The changes in self-hood that support these activities are not isolated; they are the direct result of active participation within a community. The social worlds they inhabited were integral to the changing people they were becoming – more than an isolated person, they were being created as “persons-in-the-world” shaped by the social relations with their community (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 52-54). Even our focus group, where six teachers sat around a conference table with food and music, was an opportunity to incrementally change self-perceptions in solidarity with others. There was a special energy as the teachers shared their perspectives on coverages, observations, identity, and questions like when or if it was ever appropriate to yell. The next day Anita shared with me that “It’s cool to be in a room with young educators…[we all had] pretty similar mindsets but all different experiences and all different teaching experiences
and I miss hearing about that,” showing how the joint exploration of the work of teaching was an opening to reflect on who she was becoming. Beyond passive spectators existing within a structure, my participants harnessed communal pursuits to push against the deterministic limits of power. Foucault himself later took up this perspective and acknowledged the possibility of agency when he suggested that “critical ontology” was our best way out of domination, a commitment to investigating “the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying,” (Foucault, 1984, pp. 45-46).

Throughout this work, we have seen teachers not only relating actions and occurrences from their classrooms, but also revealing the intense feelings that arose through their embodiment of authority. Chiemeka feels that his blood is boiling; Franklin earlier described yelling and slamming lockers. Paige talked about how building connections with students created a positive feeling. The emergence of feelings in the words of my participants shows how power works in affecting our self-conceptions, identities, and very beings. Sometimes such recognitions of subjecthood pushed teachers to see themselves as not teachers at all. There were times when in not teaching they found themselves more easily able to cast aside the normal boundaries of relationships of authority and, though they were still within an educational structure defined by lines of power, discover even more ambiguous states of being. Paige spoke of her time after school - when she got to work with different clubs – “It’s my favorite part of the day!” she explained. With her clubs, she didn’t occupy the normal role of a a teacher. For example, with the art club, she simply was a partner:

We don’t have art programs here, and it was, like, a need that the kids had, and they were like, “Miss, I really want to do art, can you teach me how to do art?” I was like, “Well, I don’t know if I can teach you, but we can do art together.” So, my first year I just Youtubed everything the night before…it was, like, it was fine, it’s not some professional level course. But they enjoyed the community there.
Her anime club was even less structured; a collection of students simply spent time in her room and talk about anime film. But Paige provided food and for a few moments she joined her students and ceased to be a “teacher;” instead, she was a member of a small community joined by a shared interest.

Chanda, perhaps the most regimented of my participants, also found her identity of a teacher dissolved and recreated in a rare moment of classroom practice removed from typical academics. Throughout this study I’ve described how Chanda utilized a variety of routines and check-systems to build an efficient and structured classroom culture focused on specific academic aims. She was normally at home with being an enforcer of order and was able to effortlessly dispense directions and consequences; in a way her identity had grown to include a comfort with authority. But she shared with me one moment where her regular place in the relationship of authority changed dramatically; a brief window opened up in her classroom and she stepped into the space to create a new person. She told me of her experiences trying to coerce her class into good behavior by dangling the prize of calling and telling her mother that they were her favorite class. This was a fictitious incentive, but one that she had somehow got her eighth graders to care about and that brought Chanda’s personal life into her professional setting. At one point, though, students began asking more about her family:

Last week, Tuesday, was my birthday…I absolutely did not want to teach, um, so I taught all of the day and by the time I got to 802 [the name of this class], I was like, “No!” They were working, and someone asked me about my home in London, or something...so I went on Google Maps, showed them my house, showed them London, my school, and we spent the whole lesson, talking about my school. And then I just told them, “Well, this is what my school was like, this is what we did,” and they had 10,001 questions. And then it was the end of the day…I loved it. I mean I would do it all the time, but obviously there is a lot of work to do. It’s just, it’s different, you’re not, it doesn’t feel like you’re a teacher and they’re a student anymore. I don’t know, it just felt good.
Through an unexpected change in her teaching practice, Chanda had momentarily found a new way of being in the classroom. She briefly changed the equation of authority in her work and no longer felt like a teacher or considered the people in front of her to be children, she had opened up a third space where her students’ questions were valid and worthwhile, and her own background that might normally be considered outside the curriculum were now relevant knowledge. The pressures of the work to be done were there, lingering in the background, but Chanda’s reflection on a small moment show how teachers are learning ways of being, of “knowing,” in conjunction with their students. This was only a small moment; it was soon gone and to be replaced by other more predictable and common teaching actions. But it lingered with Chanda as she recalled the feeling of having a different type of relationship with her students, which she noted by commenting “I don’t know, it just felt good.” She’s not fully sure what to make of the experience, but she likes it, and she uses an affective description – “it just felt good,” - that appears nowhere else in her transcripts. Her experience could be characterized as a sort of Becoming, a dynamic transformation of herself and her relationship with her social world through active practice (Stetsenko, 2017).

The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, from Madeline Grumet, speaks of how important and significant it is to consider the inner workings of spaces like schools that reproduce society. In this work, the phrase “reproducing ourselves” takes on another meaning as well, that of re-producing a new self through the creation of a new social reality. When I began this project, my interest and focus was on how teachers made sense of the dynamics of power in schools. I wanted to explore teacher perspectives on how they understood, acted upon, and felt the power and authority that was both afforded to them and imposed upon them. My participants took this invitation and responded by providing complex personal portraits of power and
authority in schools. Their stories revealed diverse shapes and shades; sometimes they accepted
the roles and rules required of them, sometimes they resisted outright certain restrictions, and
sometimes they transformed their very understandings of authority and power to create new
relationships with their students, administrators, and colleagues. Whether it was Chiemeka
navigating a new discomfort as he saw himself change when his authority was challenged, or
Chanda discovering a new identity as a person of color; whether it was Paige developing a sense
of herself as a community builder, or Lydia finding a new moral leadership, the very act of being
a teacher in the modern school system provided a field within which new identities could be
built. Through in turns exercising, re-forming, reproducing, and resisting power, at times
conceding and other times undermining expectations of them, my participants interacted fluidly
with their students and schools to co-create new selves. That is, how they viewed themselves
and even existed changed through their confrontations with power and authority. More than just
inhabiting the pre-determined institutional role of a “teacher,” my participants evolved into new
people; they transformed. Exploring the contours of power and teacher authority in schools
opened the possibility for questioning the very legitimacy of structural and cultural norms, and
created the space for new ways of being in our institutionalized world.
APPENDIX A:
Interview Questions for Teachers

1. **Classroom Tour:** “Thank you for having me in your classroom and participating in this study. I thought a good way to start would be to first learn about your classroom space. Can you take me on a tour of your classroom?”
   a. May I take pictures of parts of your classroom?
   b. Tell me about how you have arranged the space.
   c. Tell me about how you decide when and how to rearrange desks/tables.
   d. How are students seated? Does your seating change throughout the school year?
   e. Do you ever have to change a student’s seat? Tell me more about that.
   f. Where do you keep classroom materials? Tell me more about that.
   g. How did you create/design your wall-spaces?
   h. How has the arrangement of your classroom evolved over the year? Over your teaching experience?
   i. *Note: Teachers may not have their own classroom, or may share their classroom. This in itself presents an interesting dynamic about how teachers perceive the space of their teaching, what they feel they have control over, and how they intentionally create a welcoming space.*

2. **Personal Background:** “Thank you for that tour; I appreciate the chance to hear about how you think about your classroom space. As you know, for this research project I’m interested in learning more about how teachers interpret the tensions and challenges of creating positive learning environments. So, to get started, can you tell me a little bit about your personal background, for example where are you from, how did you grow up? What brought you to teaching?”
   
   *Opportunity for probing questions may arise:*
   a. How, if at all, do you find your background to inform your teaching practice?
   b. Do you ever think about that as you’re making decisions in your classroom?
   c. How do you notice your students interpreting or considering your background?

3. **Curriculum Questions:**
   a. How do you decide what to teach? Tell me more about that.
   b. Do you create your own learning materials? (if yes) Can you tell me about that process? (if no) Can you tell me how you use those materials?
   c. How has your decision making process about what to teach evolved over time?

4. **Classroom Culture:** What is your approach to building a strong learning culture?
   
   *Follow up Questions:*
   a. How would you describe your approach to building a classroom learning culture?
b. How would you describe your classroom norms? How would your students describe them?
c. Do you have an approach when the norms of the classroom aren’t met?
d. How do you know that a student respects your word? Can you give an example?
e. What are you proud of in your classroom culture? What would you like to see change?

5. Beliefs about Schooling: Describe for me your ideal classroom.
   a. In your view, what do you believe is the purpose of school?
   b. Where do you see this ideal being fulfilled in your class? How about in your school? Where do you see this ideal being left unmet? Tell me more.
   c. How do you think your students would answer a question about the purpose of school?
   d. Where do you see similarities and where do you see differences?
“I really appreciate you giving me the opportunity to be a part of your classroom and opening up your practice to me. As you know, my research is about teacher perceptions of the process of creating strong learning cultures, so your interpretations and perspective are very valuable. I also want to acknowledge how difficult it might be to be vulnerable about your work as a teacher, so I thank you.”

1. What is a moment from your lesson that went well? How do you know? Why do you feel it went well?
2. How do you think your students felt about this lesson? Give me a few examples and tell me why you think they felt that way?
3. Are there any students who you identified as disconnected from the lesson or its goals? What actions/words/behaviors would you liked to see from these (or other) students?
4. What are your reflections on <specific moment>? What do you think was going on here?
5. In thinking about the lesson that was observed, how central was student interest/student voice? Are you satisfied with the prominence of students in the decision making of the class?
6. Why did you (or didn’t you) address <specific moment or behavior>? Is that typical? What do you think might have happened if you (did/didn’t) address it?
7. Do you think you would have approached any of these moments differently earlier in your teaching? Why?
8. Considering what we discussed in our first interview about your background, and your beliefs in teaching, is there anything additionally you would like to share?
APPENDIX C:  
Focus Group Interview

Script: “Welcome teachers! I want to start by thanking you all for participating in this project so far; we are on to the last stretch! I wanted to bring us together to learn and develop our perspectives together as fellow teachers engaged in a similar project of schooling.

“For this group interview, we are going to engage in three different protocols, each will be ‘directed’ by me to a greater or lesser extent. First, I’m going to ask you to interpret your work as a teacher through specific framework of teaching. Next, I’m going to step out and actually let you all lead the conversation see how a shared and open discussion deepens each of your own perspectives. Lastly, we’ll close out with a debrief of the whole process.

Part 1
Script: “So far, this research project has been investigating teacher perceptions of the work of creating strong learning communities & classroom cultures. One tool for organizing how to view your work as teachers comes from the writing of Ted Wachtel, a scholar interested in Restorative Justice.

“Wachtel created a framework, which you see here (figure 4), that helps organize different stances in the classroom. It works along two dimensions of control and support; for example, in a low control but high support environment, students might be encouraged to do make their own choices and teachers are there to provide help and structures as needed. Similarly, in a high control and low support environment, teachers very much determine much of the direction of a class and offer little support for students who don’t follow along.

“In a moment, I’m going to ask you to position yourself somewhere along this framework. I also want to acknowledge that you may reject this framework altogether, in which case I will ask you to articulate your thinking about why.

“So, let’s start. Using Figure 4, where would you position yourself as a teacher along the dimensions of control & support? Why did you choose that place? Can tell me about times in your teaching that helped you determine this position? What do you notice about your colleagues’ placements?

Part 2: Script: “Now that we’ve had a chance to engage in a ‘framing activity’, I’d like to try something different. I’m going to step out of the room and hear some of your reflections on the process. The purpose is to let you, as subjects with your own experiences and perceptions, guide the conversation and create understandings without my interference. I’ll keep the recorder running. You may not agree with each other, but the hope is that you deepen your own perspective. I’m going to leave a few prompts to

\[
\text{Figure 17: Wachtel's (2003) "Social Discipline Window," showing a two dimension framework balancing control and support.}
\]
consider, though you can choose your own path for the discussion. I’m also going to suggest that you appoint a timekeeper and facilitator, though that is also up to you as a group when I step out. I’ll return in 30 minutes.”

Sample Prompts:
- What was your reaction to the previous activity?
- Thinking back to the first interview, you all had thoughts about the purpose of education and about how to build a strong learning culture. What tensions do you see in your ideas and the work of being a teacher?
- Do you, as a group, share ideas about the purpose of school? Where do you agree and where are there differences in your responses?
- How satisfied are each of you that your work in the classroom is furthering your hopes for school?

Part 3: “Thanks for welcoming me back! I’m very curious how the previous discussion went, and I’d like to close with a debrief of that and the entire process.”

1. Now that everyone has participated in the bulk of this study, what are your impressions of the process of this study?
2. What are your reflections on the previous activity?
3. How has participating in this research study influenced (if at all) how you think about your work?
4. Do you have any closing thoughts?
5. “Thank you again!”
### Appendix D: Modified School and Staffing Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Minor</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allocating non-teaching duties</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting administrators</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing salary schedules</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing school curriculum</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating administrators</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining whether to expel a student</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making educational innovations</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding to add/drop students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring teachers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining school schedule</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting course texts</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating teachers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining student tracking policy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding teacher assignments</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing grading standards</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining faculty in-service training</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision</td>
<td>Influence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Setting school discipline policy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Establishing goals for each course</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Determining class sizes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Allocating discretionary funds</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Establishing classroom attendance policy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Determining homework levels</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Selecting classroom concepts taught</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Determining classroom discipline policy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Determining rules for teachers’ behavior</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Selecting Classroom teaching techniques</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Any other comments/thoughts?
REFERENCES


