

**TEACHERS' CHALLENGES AND THE PROMISE OF EQUITABLE CLASSROOMS:  
Why Students Who Need More Get Less**

By

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Bachelor of Arts (Cum Laude), Columbia University, 2015  
Associate of Arts (High Honors), Santa Monica College, 2009

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## **ABSTRACT**

The education of youth in the United States has become a highly contested subject over the past decades. This thesis argues that one of the earliest institutions American citizens encounter – the public school system – organizes the work of many teachers in ways that reproduce inequality of opportunity for students. Drawing on qualitative data from fourteen in-depth interviews with experienced elementary school teachers in Los Angeles, this thesis illustrates how teachers experience and navigate specific structural barriers to the pursuit of equity in the classroom. Applying social reproductive theory to teacher interviews, this research discovered how, despite rhetorical commitment to equality of opportunity in education student outcomes continue to vary according to the socioeconomic status of the student population. This will help us understand systemic barriers built into the structure of the education system. These barriers operate as obstacles that teachers and students must navigate, in order to achieve success. This thesis argues that teachers should be given more flexibility to assess the needs of each specific class and adapt their curriculum and strategies to meet those needs. Unfortunately, in the current test-score driven system, schools with the lowest performing students are the ones whose administrations are under the most pressure to improve the low scores rather than fix the problems associated with low scores. As such, the teachers that need this flexibility the most, are the ones whose administrations keep them on the tightest rein, further reducing their ability to utilize their knowledge and implement effective strategies in the classroom. The result is the self-perpetuating cycle of inequality reproduction that we can see across North America today.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Supervisory Committee.....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Table Of Contents .....	iv
List of Tables.....	vi
Acknowledgements.....	vii
Dedication .....	ix
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL OVERVIEW &amp; LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Theoretical Overview.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Cultural Reproduction Theory.....	5
Institutional Ethnography as a Grounding for Theoretical Framework .....	6
Symbolic Interactionism .....	7
<b>Literature Review .....</b>	<b>9</b>
Dimensions of Social Stratification .....	9
Education on the Western Frontier.....	12
Education as a Form of Social Control .....	13
Moving Toward Transformation.....	15
Considering Feminist Pedagogy .....	17
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Informal Conversation Interview Framework .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Transparency and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Social Positioning of Researcher.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Geographic Location of Research .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Recruitment.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Research Sample .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>GATHERING THE DATA: The Interview Process .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>FOCUSING THE DATA: Considering Key Themes and Research Question.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>ANALYZING THE DATA .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Choosing Quotations for the Written Report.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Considering the Ethics.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Protecting the Data.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>A Brief Foray into the Recent History of US Education Policy.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Students and Socioeconomic Status .....</b>	<b>47</b>
Socioeconomic Status .....	49
Challenging Behaviour in the Classroom.....	49
Increases in Attention Deficits.....	51
Increased Pressure on Students.....	52
<b>Administrative and Bureaucratic Constraints .....</b>	<b>53</b>
Funding and Resources .....	54

Relationships .....	62
Curriculum.....	64
On the Importance of Teacher Adaptability.....	74
<b>Teacher Pressures, Accountability and Assessment.....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Technology .....</b>	<b>78</b>
Access to Information .....	79
Maintaining Focus .....	82
Learning New Technology .....	85
<b>CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>A CASE STUDY: Collaborative Group Work.....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>THEORETICAL ANALYSIS: the intersection of Class, Ethnicity and Gender.....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Tying Theory and Literature to the Findings .....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Considering the Emancipatory Potential of Education.....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Limitations.....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Some Recommendations.....</b>	<b>104</b>
Teacher Collaboration.....	104
Progressive in Nature .....	106
<b>Where Do We Go From Here? .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>Final Thoughts .....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>Appendix A: Research Questions.....</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>Appendix B: Consent Form/Participant Handout .....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Appendix C: HREB Certificate of Approval.....</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>Appendix D: Invitation to Participate .....</b>	<b>126</b>

## **LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1.1 (Participant Details) .....	P. 31
Table 1.2 (Code Groups) .....	P. 38

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## DEDICATION

*“One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world”*

– Malala Yousafzai

This thesis is dedicated to every teacher out there working tirelessly to improve the lives and education of children everywhere. It is a long, thankless, uphill climb.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” is an American hegemonic narrative promising freedom and equality of opportunity to its citizens. This thesis will argue, however, that one of the earliest institutions American citizens encounter – the public school system – actually restricts the pedagogical opportunities of certain individuals (teachers), and results in reproduced inequality of opportunity for many students. The United States of America is widely recognized for income disparity, where the wealthy continue to prosper, while the middle and working classes face continually declining opportunities for employment that includes fair wages and benefits (McCall, 2013). This inequality comes alongside the common rhetoric of opportunity, including that promised by the American public education system. Over the previous decades both class and minority based education inequality has become more and more visible (Duncan & Murnane, 2014), initiating many conversations surrounding what the public considers an “achievement gap,” but is recognized among field experts as more of an “opportunity gap” (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks (1994) argues the classroom “remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy,” despite too often functioning as a space of oppression and limitation, where the promise of education is “undermined by teachers and students alike who seek to use it as a platform for opportunistic concerns rather than as a place to learn” (p. 12). Schools are one of few spaces where true potential for liberation exists, but despite the best intentions of many educators and administrators, function closer to sites of oppression. This creates conflicting tensions between the promise of equal education for every child, and the underlying function as a mechanism for

social control. These barely visible tensions have significant consequences from the micro level, in the form of student learning outcomes, to the reproduction of inequality at the macro level.

To complete this research, I sat down with fourteen classroom teachers of students in grades four through six, for approximately one to two hours each. The semi-structured interviews were designed to explore how the conflicting tensions are experienced by teachers, and how they use their knowledge to navigate the resulting classroom struggle. Teacher knowledge is a valuable resource that is under-utilized despite being vital to untangling the complicated paradigms that make up classroom life and affect a student's ability to learn. They have worked with the brilliant overachievers, determined strugglers, and students who would do so well if only they would just apply themselves. Ages nine through eleven are crucial developmental years where students are going through changes both physically and mentally as they reach puberty. They are also considered formative years where power dynamics are established<sup>1</sup> prior to the transition to middle school.

Initially, this exploratory, qualitative research aimed to focus on the ways teachers make sense of competing tensions surrounding the function of education. This included examining contributing systemic features existing within a school's organizational structure, and how factors such as socioeconomic status and bureaucratic pressure affect classroom life and student learning outcomes. It also included ways teachers can foster an environment where students are able to productively learn. These initial research questions were focused on the dimensions of emancipatory and social control. However, upon completion of the participant directed interviews, the nature of the study shifted to a focus on the ways autonomy and constraint affect

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<sup>1</sup> Previous research has shown a substantial increase in aggressive social behaviour between the ages of nine and thirteen (Brown, Birch, & Kancherla, 2005; McConville & Cornell, 2003; Varjas, Henrich, & Meyers, 2009). Anthony Pellegrini attributes this to the: "exploration of new social roles and their quest for status among peers" (2002, p. 151).

teachers' lives and shapes not only their experiences, but also their ability to teach effectively. This shift was the result of the specific information provided within the data, which often occurs with participant centered interviews.

The overarching structure of the education system generates obstacles that teachers must overcome in order for their students to experience genuine equality of opportunity, and these obstacles are directly linked to the socioeconomic status (SES) of the students in the classroom. For instance, the lower the students' SES, the more obstacles there are to overcome. Overcoming these obstacles requires adaptability, innovation, and creativity on the part of the teacher, which is why more teacher autonomy is so vital to the education system. However, it is this very autonomy that educational policy makers increasingly seem to curtail, in the name of equity.

This thesis aims to tell the story of the struggle some teachers experience while attempting to help their students overcome disadvantage and inequality. Chapter two discusses the theoretical lens' used, and provides an overview of previous education research. Chapter three discusses the research methodology in depth. Chapter four presents the results of the analysis, which is broken down into four basic themes. The first examines students and socioeconomic status, discussing factors including class personality, challenging classroom behaviours, and increased pressure and expectations on students. The second theme examines administrative and bureaucratic constraints placed on teachers, including: funding and resources, relationships, and curricula. The third theme considers how pressure and accountability affects teachers in seemingly insignificant ways that have implications for the function of the educational system as a whole. The fourth and final theme involves the continual changes in technological advances. Considering how these changes affect students in terms of access to information and increased issues in attention and focus both inside the classroom and out, as well

as the strain keeping up with constant changes in technology has on teachers. Chapter five examines the previous chapters' findings through the lens of a case study of a popular teaching methodology known as collaborative group work, including a brief theoretical analysis. It then provides a brief summary of the findings and how they converse with the existing literature and theory. Chapter six provides some recommendations, including the potential benefits to student learning outcomes, the overall classroom environment of teacher collaboration and of other progressive and experimental teaching strategies. It concludes with a brief discussion of the limitations and implications of this research, including where it could lead going forward.

## **CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL OVERVIEW & LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **THEORETICAL OVERVIEW**

#### CULTURAL REPRODUCTION THEORY

Cultural reproduction theory is based off Bourdieu's "Forms of Capital," and posits that social and cultural capital is used by the elite to maintain power, privilege and advantage in an already stratified system (Bourdieu P. , 1986). "Forms of Capital" argues that capital does not have to have monetary value to raise one's status in society, social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital can also be utilized. For example, social capital can be as simple as knowing the right person to be invited to an exclusive party (1986). An unequal distribution in resources between classes places those who have less in an inferior position. Bourdieu asserts that schools endow students with the goals and aspirations that fit with their location in the social hierarchy, which serves to further perpetuate and legitimize the inequalities (1974). Cultural reproduction theory refers to the way that cultural capital is passed down from parents to their children, who can then use that capital in the education system and beyond. These practices generally go unnoticed, making it seem as though an individual owes their fate "to their individual nature and their lack of gifts," effectively legitimizing the reproduction of inequality (1974, p. 42) There a lot of evidence in the literature supporting the existence of cultural capital classrooms (Calarco, 2014; Lareau, 2011; Heath, 1987), which will be discussed more in-depth in the literature review portion of this chapter. In "Class Reproduction by Four Year Olds," Jessie Streib (2011) documents children as young as four performing class, including strategies to maintain and reproduce their status.

Cultural reproduction theory has a couple of weaknesses. For example, it focuses on capital rather than values, which can leave a gap in the analysis in terms of how an agent's belief

system contributes to certain actions or outcomes. A cultural reproduction theory lens is necessary though to consider how the varying degrees of capital students possess affect their ease navigating the education system. Chapter Four will discuss some of the differences in learning outcomes that occur when a student has access to family support that is able to provide homework help, or even basic organizational skills.

#### INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY AS A GROUNDING FOR THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Institutional Ethnography, developed by Dorothy Smith (2005), grounds social research in the everyday experiences of individuals. The process begins with a focus on the activities and happenings of actual people in their everyday lives, and how those happenings are coordinated with the happenings and experiences of others. Analyzing individual accounts of the specific processes taking place in ordinary lives enables the researcher to highlight institutional processes that are not readily visible.

Our everyday lives are organized in a complex web of relations that extend much farther than the average person sees. Smith calls this web the “Ruling Relations” or: “that extraordinary yet ordinary complex web of relations that are textually mediated, that connect us across space and time and organize our everyday lives” (p. 10). Ruling relations are comprised of government bureaucracies, mass media, institutions and corporations, and the multitude of links and chains that interconnect them. The end result is our collective participation in processes that constrain and organize our everyday world, and it is these organizing features of everyday life that institutional ethnography works to expose.

Institutional ethnography avoids creating conceptual distance, and instead engages in “an essentially dialogic relation between concepts and the actual social relations and organization” (p. 57). Smith developed what she calls an “Ontology of the Social,” essentially a theory of real

life, that calls for the social to become the focal point for how peoples' activities and practices are coordinated. "The Social" is not its own distinct phenomenon, but rather an "aspect of what people do to be explored." The individual cannot be the sole focus of the research, but must be visible because his or her presence is essential to what is happening. Most importantly, their experiences in coordination with others must also be considered (p. 59). The end goal is not to provide an overarching theoretical system that explains human behaviour, but to learn directly "from their experience" by "tracing their everyday lives," and examining how those lives are entrenched in social relations both experientially and organizationally (p. 59).

Smith's "Ontology of the Social" is utilized as one of the theoretical bases for this thesis. This has been done by starting with the teachers, what they are doing in the classroom, how they are interacting with their students and colleagues, and then later identifying the constraining forces that produce specific outcomes. The diversity, perspectives, positioning and experiences of classroom teachers provides essential knowledge of the ruling relations at play in the classroom and wider educational institution. This includes how those relations interact with one another and the effect they have in the classroom setting, including a teacher's ability to teach, overall student experiences and the resulting learning outcomes.

#### SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Herbert Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism* (1969) is based on three simple premises: first "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them." Second, "the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows;" and thirdly, "these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (p. 2). The key takeaway is that meanings behind actions are social products derived from a complex

interactive process of interpreting interactions with objects and individuals, a process that continually changes and evolves with every new interaction. Factors are simply indicators that contribute to the meaning that actors make their choices based off of, and to ignore the situational context and the interactions and perspectives of the actors prevents an accurate account of behaviour. Symbolic interactionism takes a “down-to-earth approach, to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct” (p. 47), for one cannot fully study the empirical world without stepping foot into the natural world and directly observing the interactions taking place.

Symbolic interactionism sees institutions and organizations as “arrangements of people who are interlinked in their respective actions,” rather than a machine that functions based off a pre-determined set of rules and guidelines. It acknowledges that “participants are confronted by the organized activities of other people into which they have to fit their own acts.” Rules and guidelines exist, but it is real people defining and interpreting the rules and making decisions that lead to the organizations outcomes. In Blumer’s words: “large-scale organization has to be seen, studied, and explained in terms of the process of interpretation engaged in by the acting participants as they handle the situations at their respective positions in the organization” (p. 58). In studying the institution of education, this requires the acknowledgement that while schools operate as systemic organizations, it is interlinkages of the organization’s participants, their relationships, and how they process indicators and meaning on a daily basis, that really demonstrates what is taking place.

Teachers are actors that interpret the situations they encounter based off indicators from other actors (students, the administration, their colleagues), and objects. They make decisions based on their interpretation of the combination of these indicators, and these decisions lead to

the final outcome. This process is not stationary, but a cyclical process of interaction that reinterprets previous indicators based on the addition or reorganization of new indicators.

A common criticism of social interactionism is that it doesn't address class.

Understanding how classroom experiences differ based on socioeconomic status is imperative to this research. By combining symbolic interactionism with cultural reproduction theory this research can consider class as one indicator in a complex system of indicators and interactions, and trace the interlinkages and meanings without leaving socioeconomic status unaccounted for.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Previous research in the Sociology of Education shows schools are institutions that profess ideals of equality of opportunity for all, while maintaining the status quo of inequality at the expense of members of the lower classes and minorities (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Weis, Jenkins, & Stich, 2009). Achievement and ability, in reading, writing or arithmetic, are not the only determinants of success in the education system. Crosnoe, Johnson and Elder's (2004) research shows that educational climate is a major factor involved in shaping student learning outcomes. Specifically, social stratification, student agency, the culture of the curriculum and/or classroom hierarchical structures, can all influence reproduction of inequality in the classroom.

## **DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION**

Race, ethnicity, class, and gender, all organize students' lives and learning at school and therefore in the wider world. Ann Ferguson's (2001) ethnographic study of an elementary school, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in The Making of Black Masculinity* shows how male students of colour are tracked into the school-prison pipeline the same way that some "children were

tracked into futures as doctors, scientists, engineers, word processors and fast-food workers” (p. 2). Essentially, schools can establish future career paths for students not only of respected employment, but lives of incarceration, poverty or violence. Ferguson discovered that male students of colour commit the same common misbehaviours any spirited boy might: interrupting teachers, talking out in class, arguing, and bringing contraband to school. Unfortunately, the culture of discipline at the school was “highly charged with racial and gender significance” (p. 3) and punishments received by white male students lacked the same severity, despite having committed the same acts, resulting in seemingly subtle differences that are very visible to students. Ferguson asserts that students then internalize the role of inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad’ student, potentially setting them on the prison-bound trajectory.

In “What No Bedtime Story means: narrative skills at home and school,” Shirley Brice Heath (1987) presents three neighbourhood case studies: one predominantly white middle-class, one predominantly white working-class, and one predominantly black working-class. She demonstrates how families in each neighbourhood have different methods for reading to their children, each featuring valuable merits and transmitting a set of skills to that child. The skills acquired by students living in the predominantly white middle-class neighbourhood provided a leg up in the classroom once they hit school age. This is a form of cultural transmission that works against students of lower classes, and more so for students of colour. Heath argues these ways of child rearing should be taken into account by educators in order to best equip teachers of students from all neighbourhoods with the knowledge necessary to effectively and equitably teach every student. Her point is not to reproduce old ‘culture of poverty’ and/or ‘blame the victim’ tropes, but rather to argue that classroom pedagogy should not be built on classed and

racialized assumptions about childrearing practices. Doing so only serves to privilege certain methods, while setting others at a disadvantage.

The idea of the transmission of cultural capital comes from Bourdieu's "Forms of Capital" (1973), and involves the way certain students receive a form of cultural currency from parents before they arrive at school. Extensive research has illuminated methods used by parents to transmit class, culture and norms to children, and how these invisible lessons work to reproduce inequality (Lareau, 2011). These processes provide children from various backgrounds with different strategies for handling classroom situations, as Heath demonstrated above. It has been repeatedly shown that teachers subconsciously favor strategies adopted by middle-class children. This results in a wide array of benefits including extra help and accommodation from teachers, being more comfortable interacting with authority figures, and getting work done faster and more efficiently (Calarco, 2014). Most research has centered on parents as the primary agents for class reproduction, but studies have also documented children as young as four acting as their own agents (Streib, 2011).

Research has shown that minority and/or lower class students are not the only ones impacted by systemic oppression. Sadker and Sadker (1994) completed a detailed multi-year ethnography that illuminated ways that most teachers give the majority of their attention to students who are challenging in the classroom – usually the males – and focus their lessons and energy around getting the boys involved. In addition, boys tend to fight for their teacher's attention more while the girls sit back and wait patiently for the turn that often never comes (pp. 42-55), leading to silenced female voices and potential disengagement from learning. Sadker and Sadker argue that these differences have negative implications for male students as well, leading to a "miseducation" where boys are labeled as "problems in need of special control or

assistance.” They illustrate how few high achieving or “starring boys” emerge and the rest are in danger of becoming frustrated and acting out (pp. 197-198). It should be noted that while Sadker and Sadker do look at differences in terms of race, the study is not specifically looking for the differences that Ferguson emphasizes in her work. It might be interesting to consider how many “starring boys” in their study were kids of colour, if any.

Gender operates at a significant level in the classroom. Karyn Wellhousen (1996) found that teachers are more likely to call on boys than girls, and when they do call on girls the response is often a brief acknowledgement or single-word such as “un-huh.” When calling on boys, the same teacher often responded with a follow up question, or additional information. Wellhousen asserts that the teachers were not consciously trying to repress females in class; in fact, the majority of teachers were female and completely unaware that it was happening at all. The issue here is the invisible influence of systemic issues which Wellhousen calls the reproduction of relations of patriarchal capitalism in the classroom.

#### EDUCATION ON THE WESTERN FRONTIER

Stephanie Spoto (2014/2015) argues that current intellectual canon “prioritizes the literature, art, and cultural production of Western European traditions,” under the guise of providing a common language for everyone to express themselves with. However, this is problematic as it sends the message that intellectual knowledge is “only meaningful if it draws from Western traditions,” and anything else is deemed marginal to the “highest culture” (p. 81). In her article entitled: “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” hooks (2004) emphasizes the importance of language in education, and how it is used to uphold and reinforce existing power structures. She describes what it means to learn in a “culture of domination” by one’s oppressor, and the importance of not giving one’s full self over to the institution. She

believes it is possible to learn without “losing that radical perspective shaped and formed by marginality,” and that “understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people” (p. 157).

Digiovanni and Liston (2005) argue that despite a substantial increase in the visibility of prominent women authors, the majority of stories and poems in the curriculum still feature male heroes, demonstrate normative gender expectations – such as woman as princess, mother or homemaker – or are written by men. They posit that:

By overemphasizing the role of males, the curriculum cultivates a message that women are not as important or worthy as men. Further, this continual presences of males as the foremost authors of great literature; leaders of world politics and commerce; great scientists, inventors, and mathematicians serves to reinforce the idea that boys are ‘capable of great things,’ while simultaneously reinforcing the impression that women (and with as people of colour) have done nothing of much worth and that girls are not capable of doing much of great worth (p. 124).

This thesis aims to explore both the potential for emancipatory change and the reproduction of social order in the public school system. Therefore, it is important to understand that despite a rhetorical commitment to gender equality in the school system as well as in the surrounding society, gender inequality continues to be reproduced on a daily basis in the classroom.

#### EDUCATION AS A FORM OF SOCIAL CONTROL

In *Deschooling Society*, Ivan Illich (1971) argues universal education is unfeasible and counterproductive to society. Most people equate “learning” with the institution of school, which is believed to provide learning opportunities for all. Illich explains: “to attempt [equal education for all] is intellectually emasculating, socially polarizing, and destructive to the credibility of the

political system which promotes it” (p. 10). Formal credentialing discredits true learning; at best it can only guarantee that certain parameters were met, and prove little in terms of the quality of knowledge obtained. Since the most effective learning takes place through everyday experiences rather than classroom interactions, instituting a single school system creates an organizational monopoly and negates the legitimacy of other valid forms of learning. Illich asserts that: “this is neither reasonable, nor liberating” (p. 13). Even when the material is the same, poor children lack opportunities that are naturally available to children of middle or higher classes, effectively serving to maintain the status quo. In Chapter Three, Illich equates education to a product and students as consumers, demonstrating how education is treated as a status symbol. Investment in one’s education is associated with socioeconomic status and prestige. This association is still reflected in classroom life today. Chapter four examines ways that school funding is distributed, and how this is reflected in increased opportunities for those neighbourhoods that are able to invest more.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005), Paulo Friere explores how the oppressed can easily transition to oppressor: “The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to reject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility” (p. 45). This can be seen in the way many minority groups and lower classes embrace the ideals behind the school system – such as equality and opportunity – despite their own experience suggesting otherwise. Friere and Illich are both wary of the role of education in enforcing social control and reinforcing inequality. Next we consider literature regarding education’s potential for liberation.

## MOVING TOWARD TRANSFORMATION

The emancipatory potential of education is not new to feminist literature. In “Teaching Against the Hierarchies: An Anarchist Approach,” Stephanie Spoto (2014/2015) uses intersectional anarchist praxis<sup>2</sup> as a means to inform and influence the methods and outcomes of education. She argues that “the transformation of society and the transformation of education cannot be separated – educators who are serious about fighting against racism, sexism, and class hierarchies should not abandon the feminist and anarchist pedagogical theories either inside or outside of the classroom” (p. 79). Many scholars use a specific group of individuals as a means to generalize to the experiences of all – most often the heterosexual white male. This one size fits all approach is detrimental to true equality; highlighting only a heteronormative viewpoint silences valid experiences of oppression, and maintains the status quo of inequality. The complexity of human experience is often obscured in an institutionalized setting under the guise of managing an organization. Ellen Pence and Martha McMahon (2003) explain how this takes place through the use of categories, requiring all scenarios to fit neatly into a black and white box. In their words: “information is produced and translated into exclusively institutionally recognizable and actionable frameworks, thereby masking and replacing the contextual realities of individual cases” (p. 145). Once context is removed it becomes easy to overlook the relevant structural and relational problems inherent in the organization.

It is important to understand and recognize how racialization, class, gender and other social processes that reproduce inequality are entangled in people’s lives. In “Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom,” bell hooks (1994) examines the education system as a potential site of liberation for children of colour. She discusses the shift from

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<sup>2</sup> Applying an intersectional lens to account for relationships between classifications – such as race, class and gender – rather than focusing on a single neutral group, intended to push back at oppressive constraints caused by the hierarchical structure of institutions.

segregated schools to mixed classes where black students were never allowed to feel like they belonged, and how that dichotomy taught her that a difference exists between “education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination.” Even once she’d reached college “the primary lesson was reinforced: we were to learn obedience to authority” (p. 4). She believes the power lies within educators and that there is radical possibility in the classroom. She asserts teaching is performative, an act that “offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom.” She believes that too often teachers are fearful that a multicultural education would have political implications, and that the idea of having too many different perspectives leads to loss of “control” (p. 11). Education is often blind to diversity, culminating in further reproduction of inequality even as it is organized through diversity. In “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” (2004) hooks argues the center is privileged, and that establishing true liberation calls for the margins to become a space of radical openness.

To hooks (1994), an ideal classroom is “a place where difference [can] be acknowledged, where we [can] finally understand, accept, and affirm that our ways of knowing are forged in history and relations of power” (p. 30). hooks’ argument is that the processes of self-recovery and collective liberation are linked with “our lived experience of theorizing,” and that “no gap exists between theory and practice” (p. 61). In a nation that is built upon inequality and oppression of the ‘other,’ it is crucial to acknowledge the collective experiences of all people. True equality and liberation cannot be accomplished without accepting that there is no single universal knowledge while at the same time not falling into relativism. The recent political climate in the United States is a direct testament to the importance of critical thinking skills, which will be addressed further in chapter four of this paper.

In *Troublemakers*, Carla Shallaby (2017) follows four elementary school students identified by their teachers as ‘challenging students.’ Inspired by hooks, Shallaby believes troublemakers can teach us the most about freedom in the classroom through their refusal to blindly conform. She explains that school works against a child’s natural desire to learn by imposing rigid and strict rules about conduct and behaviour. Troublemakers are simply fighting these unnatural restrictions, demanding to be seen, and refusing to be silenced. In her words: “Understanding disruption and transgression as one language children speak, helps to reframe misbehaviour as... a strategy for being heard and seen.” She points out that while classroom management may seem like a neutral phrase, at its very core it: “requires the management of children, which means power over people, control over bodies” (p. 153). Shallaby believes practicing true freedom and liberation in classrooms would prevent many troublemakers from needing to fight for visibility and/or understanding.

#### CONSIDERING FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

In *Schooling Young Children*, Jeanne Brady (1995) argues for the importance of feminist pedagogy with an emphasis on multi-culturalism. She asserts this pedagogy allows for engagement with “a dialogue among different perspectives and developing alliances, based on the relevancies that different feminists and critical educators share” (p. 2). Brady believes separating theory from practice is one of the tricks used by those in power to reinforce the status quo and keep policy as “far removed from the interests and needs of those to whom the policies are addressed” (p. 2). Students should not be considered empty jars to be filled with information; rather the teacher should equip students with the tools and freedom to explore their own

curiosities. Brady argues feminist pedagogy<sup>3</sup> has demonstrated transformative ability. Feminist pedagogy gives students a voice (p. 87) by incorporating politics of difference, and mitigating classroom power structures to allow varying student identities in the room to partake in a mutually beneficial learning partnership. Natalee Popadiuk (2004) argues a shift toward feminist methodologies is “critical if we want to continue to question, challenge and change the constructions of gender and power imbalances and forms of privilege and power including race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion and ability levels” (p. 395). This holds true to the education system, and is important to consider when looking at classroom pedagogy as a means of liberation for students anywhere.

Much of the feminist theory in education has focused on the college or university level (Coffey & Delamont, 1995; Mayberry & Rose, 1999), which led to the development of a feminist pedagogy for college classes. In “Feminist Pedagogy in the Elementary Classroom: An Agenda for Practice,” Digiovanni and Liston (2005) apply an adapted version of that college pedagogy to an elementary classroom. They argue that bringing in feminist pedagogical practices and principles at the elementary school level is crucial to circumventing many of issues associated with the differences in educational outcomes pertaining to males and females. Issues such as drops in achievement and “visible changes in mannerisms and demeanor,” and changes that take place in elementary school, when many girls go from “very eager, excited learners” to “passive, almost invisible presences” (pp. 123-124).

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<sup>3</sup> Feminist pedagogy provides guidelines for evaluation of teaching strategies, focusing on creating a learning community that is empowered to think critically and utilize knowledge gained for the betterment of their community and wider society. A cyclical process that requires continued reflexivity with the self, active engagement with the material, and engaging with others to get past destructive hatreds – sexism, homophobia, racism, etcetera – and a collaborative goal of moving toward social change (Shrewsbury, 1987).

The literature leads us to understand that student learning is not just a simple matter of teaching a child how to read, write, and complete arithmetic; other factors must also be taken into account. It calls for an expansion from mainstream research methods into more experience-based qualitative research, which is better equipped to provide deeper and experiential understanding of situational happenings. This research attempts to accomplish this by utilizing the knowledge and experiences of teachers to better understand classroom happenings, and to fill the knowledge gaps between teacher and student agency, their attempts to move toward freedom and liberation.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In order to gain a more thorough understanding of teacher experiences in elementary school classrooms, fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with elementary school teachers, and the results analyzed through a lens of Cultural Reproduction Theory. Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth, snowballing, and mass emailing methods. Questions focused on their day-to-day classroom activities as well as on interactions with students, parents, colleagues and the school's administration.<sup>4</sup> Interviews lasted for one to two hours on average, with the shortest being 43 minutes and the longest lasting two hours and eight minutes. Length depended on how much the teacher had to say, how fast they spoke, and, occasionally, the time they had available to give. I was fortunate to find a variety of teachers, who taught across the entire spectrum of socioeconomic status, with student populations from low-performing public schools to affluent private schools. Specific details (demographic, geographic, and more) about my interview participants can be found in Table 1.1, located in the "Research Sample" section on page 30. Interviews discussed conflicts navigated, perceptions about positive and negative aspects of teaching in America, and administrative constraints. Participants were asked about classroom power dynamics, student interactions and behaviours, and their own respective education experiences. All interviews were voice-recorded with the permission of the participant,<sup>5</sup> transcribed and coded thematically to identify the emergent themes discussed in chapter four.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for a copy of the initial questions. Please note that follow-up questions were asked as appropriate.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix B for the consent form.

## **Qualitative FieldStudy**

The main methodological approach I employed for this research was designed by John and Lyn Lofland (1995) as instructions for the qualitative methodology they call ‘fieldstudy.’ Lofland and Lofland believe that a significant amount of social life can be analytically articulated by entering the lives of those they wish to understand. They argue the researcher’s goal is to understand how individuals “perceive, feel and act in order to grasp these seeings, feelings, and actings fully and intimately.” It is only through “direct experience” that one can know about social life with any degree of accuracy (p. 3). The epistemology behind qualitative fieldstudy asserts that one cannot acquire social knowledge without engaging with the thoughts of other humans, and that while there are numerous barriers to verifying the validity of such work, they are “nothing compared to the difficulties engendered by indirect perception” (p. 16). The goal is not to objectify subjects or keep distance, but to gather rich data, achieve intimate familiarity within the research domain, and “engage in face-to-face interaction” (p. 17).

In *Analyzing Social Setting: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, Lofland and Lofland provide instructions for the methodology by breaking it down into three steps: gathering data, focusing the data, and then analyzing the data (p.1). While they list the three steps in order, they acknowledge that it is a “general and rough order,” because while one must gather data before it can be focused, the focusing and analysis processes begin long before data gathering has ended (p. 1). I will discuss each of these steps in more detail throughout this chapter.

I chose to use fieldstudy rather than an alternative qualitative methodology because the framework allows for flexibility, and is intended for exploratory research. It also provides

instructions for unstructured, conversational participant interviews which was ideal for the goals of this research. A data driven approach, fieldstudy suggests the designing of research questions should take place in the second phase (focusing the data), once one has an idea of what information is revealed through the unstructured interviews. This is intended to protect the data from the undue impact of preconceived notions or expectations that the researcher had prior to the research, and supports this study's goal of understanding teachers' experiences in their classrooms. Through this process of talking to teachers and learning directly from their personal, frontline accounts, this research illuminates how Los Angeles teachers are navigating classroom tensions, and the steps they take to cope with everyday challenges.

#### **INFORMAL CONVERSATION INTERVIEW FRAMEWORK**

Lofland and Lofland describe qualitative interviewing as a “guided conversation whose goal is to elicit from the interviewee rich, detailed materials that can be used in qualitative analysis” with the goal of discovering the “informant’s experience of a popular topic” (p. 18). Michael Quinn Patton (2015) asserts that the interviewer “faces the challenge of making it possible for the person being interviewed to bring the interviewer into his or her world” (p. 341). Patton describes three types of interviews: informal conversation, the general interview guide and the standardized open-ended interview. For this research, I combined the freedom of the informal conversational approach with the general interview guide, by having a set of questions prepared<sup>6</sup> in case they were needed, while staying open to following the conversation wherever appropriate according to the participants’ specific experience.

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix A for research questions.

Lofland and Lofland describe the interview guide as not a formal questionnaire to be strictly adhered to, but more of a checklist of topics to be covered. When designing questions for the guide they assert that a researcher should “use what is called ‘common sense’... ask yourself ‘just what about this thing is puzzling to me?’” (p. 78). In designing interview questions, I followed Lofland and Lofland’s guidelines of spending multiple days brainstorming potential questions in a notebook, before organizing the questions into a coherent order.

Lofland and Lofland advocate for the flexibility of the unstructured interview format, explaining that with these interviews the:

emphasis is on obtaining narratives or accounts, in the person’s own terms. You want the character and contour of such accounts to be set by your informants. You might have a general idea of the kinds of things that will compromise the account but still be interested in what they provide on their own, and the terms in which they do it (pp. 81-82).

Questions were intended to serve as a conversation starter as needed, rather than a strict script to be followed. As interviews were carried out, questions were added or modified to reflect what appeared during previous interviews. As such, it should be noted that while there are 58 questions on the list of interview questions (located in appendix A on page 120), not all were asked in every interview. Some of the richest data came from moments when teachers went off on a tangent, opening up in more depth about how they felt regarding a mentioned aspect of teaching.

While the research does not adopt the exact methodology of *institutional ethnography*, the interview framework was partially informed by it. Institutional ethnography begins with a conversational interview, an open ended conversation with people, with the purpose of

identifying a problematic. That problematic is then traced back, usually through forms of text, to identify how decisions and actions in everyday life are connected to the ruling relations (Smith, 2005). The parameters for this thesis did not allow the necessary time to commit to a full institutional ethnography, however, this research is purposely immersed in the lived experiences of teachers and how ruling relations produce organized tensions in the form of systemic constraints that affect the emancipatory and social dimensions of education. Smith (2005) explains: “Knowing how things work, how they’re put together, is invaluable for those who often have to struggle in the dark” (p. 32). For Smith, it is less about gathering accurate accounts of any given event from the perspective of the participants than learning from the participant about how the process functions. While this research does focus directly on teacher experience, I didn’t want to neglect processes that are less visible to participants but inherent to the way the education system functions and whose traces can be found in the teachers’ lived experiences. This was the rationale behind including institutional ethnography into my methodological framework. Smith’s interview framework is designed to use open-ended conversation to identify a problematic situated within the informants lives which can then be traced back to the power relations with the ruling relations. My research does just that, by identifying administrative constraints that can be traced back to the ruling relations (school administrators), this is discussed more thoroughly in the theoretical discussion in Chapter Five.

#### **TRANSPARENCY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

When conducting qualitative research, it is imperative to be cognizant that when interviewing an individual one is gathering an individual’s rendition of what happened, rather than an impartial or unfiltered ‘truth’. Lofland and Lofland (1995) explain that qualitative data is

sometimes considered fictional because: “field notes filter rather than mirror” the event described, but as they assert: filtering is not fabricating. A filtered reality is simply a filtered reality, it is not...fiction” (p. 68). This raises two very important requirements of qualitative research: those of transparency and reflexivity. Lofland and Lofland talk about the importance of describing: “the path connecting the ethnographer and informants” (p. 151). When providing information generated from qualitative accounts and individual memory, it is especially important to describe in detail every step taken, to ensure the reader of the study is able to assess and consider how the researcher came to their conclusion. In this way, qualitative research can be thought of as the beginning of a dialogue that can be discussed at length, and considered from other standpoints and interpretations. In “Academic Voice in Scholarly Writing,” Garry Gray (2017) discusses the importance of reflexivity and transparency at every stage of the research process, arguing that: “Reflexivity enables both insight into phenomena and the knowledge of how that insight has been constructed. It allows researchers to become sensitive to their own political, social and cultural context while being aware that their knowledge is reflected in both time and social space” (p. 181). Reflexivity and transparency are important to what Lofland and Lofland (1995) call: “theoretical candor,” or a best practice for ensuring research is true and valid (pp. 150-151).

Lincoln and Guba posit that trustworthiness of a research study is important when evaluating its worth. To ensure trustworthiness I followed Guba’s four criteria for trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004), which involves establishing: credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability. In chapter one, I carefully describe the issues experienced by teachers in the American Education system both in terms of inequality as well as the emancipatory and social control dimensions of education, to establish confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings, or,

*credibility*. In this chapter, I carefully outline the interview process from everything to the recruitment stage, to the interviews themselves, to the analytical coding process which shows the findings are applicable in other contexts, or, *transferable*. Third, the transparency provided in the methodology section, including the step by step details of everything this research entails ensures this research could be replicated which provides a degree of *dependability*. Finally, I have been very cognizant of ensuring that my findings emerge from the data rather than from preconceived notions, from making use of an exploratory methodology to coding inductively, which works toward establishing *confirmability*.

#### **SOCIAL POSITIONING OF RESEARCHER**

It is important to acknowledge the background of the primary researcher for reflexivity purposes. I identify as both white and Métis, and my family has lived in Canada for several generations. My brother and I are the first to graduate from university, and we were raised in a middle class household in British Columbia, Canada.

My interest in education stems from having had negative experiences in primary and secondary school. In high school I was often described by teachers as ‘not applying myself.’ I have since wondered whether my disengagement from learning was related to being bullied socially and a then-undiagnosed attention deficit disorder. A quiet student, sitting in the back, doodling in a notebook and not causing trouble, most teachers seemed to give their attention to more obviously demanding students, and seldom tried to engage me. Upon graduation at seventeen, I remember thinking post-secondary was not for me, and went to work full time at a hotel. It was not until returning to school at age 25 that I realized my true affinity for learning, and how much at home I feel in academia. I attribute my experience at community college in Los Angeles, California with

the realization of my potential, and the encouragement to aim high. This is perhaps the strongest reason why I feel the need to give back to the Los Angeles community.

A Sociology of Education course at Columbia University opened my eyes to the multitude of factors that affect student learning outcomes beyond academic ability. This led to a reexamination of my educational history, to better understand how I had come to believe I did not belong in the classroom. My passion for this research stems from a desire to help other children avoid similar experiences.

Part of reflexivity requires evaluating one's biases and acknowledging how one's positionality may influence the analysis and recommendations made in research. It is important to consider the potential blind spots that stem from a strong passion for helping students avoid negative experiences. Having personal experience with both good and bad teachers may incline toward a belief that I only recruited good teachers. I want to believe that schools have the potential to be something great and liberating for all children. There is always the possibility of projecting my own viewpoints onto the data. I believe that being aware of this possibility at the analysis stage can guard against reproducing those blind spots in the data, and at least empower the reader to critically engage with the research. This study does not substantially examine the impact of race on learning outcomes, for the most part because the data did not clearly suggest this, although this may be because the questions were not constructed to highlight race issues. The results of this research rely significantly on the self-reporting of teachers, and observation of actual classroom activities may have prompted additional insights and served as a guard against accidental or intentional omission or misrepresentation by the interview subjects. Schools are a place where power is easily abused, both in the form of power relationships between student and teacher and

in the pedagogical practice used in the classroom. It is important to consider ways to mitigate this potential, so that the outcome is not oppression but a positive experience for everyone involved.

## **GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION OF RESEARCH**

My research took place in various school districts across the Greater Los Angeles area of Southern California in the United States of America. My rationale for conducting this study in Los Angeles is that the environment is ideal because of the extensive diversity within a relatively small geographic area. Communities in Los Angeles boast a wide array of socioeconomic statuses, ethnicities and cultures. The educational system in Los Angeles is also very similar to most mainstream North American systems: districts are broken up by geographic area, funding is distributed based on taxes paid by those areas, and they run off the same K-12 format. The scope of LA's diversity provided access to some of the more complex nuances appearing in North American schools, while at the same time the similarity in framework provides potential for cross-jurisdictional generalization.

## **RECRUITMENT**

My target population was individuals who teach grades four through six who are currently teaching in a Los Angeles elementary school. I had no age, gender or ethnicity requirements, nor did I specify a minimum amount of experience. The goal was to find a diverse sample of teachers, with experiences in a variety of socioeconomic status neighbourhoods, and spanning the gamut of public to private, to charter.

To recruit I reached out to my network of connections in the Los Angeles area in the hopes I could secure a few willing interview participants. The plan was to ask the participant to

connect me to another colleague or teacher they knew, and snowball out until I had enough interviews to complete the study. To protect the privacy of potential referrals, I provided participants with a blank ‘Invitation to Participate’ to pass along to the referral, and then ask permission to give me their contact information so I could contact them directly to coordinate an interview. I reached out to my contacts through both email and social media (Facebook and Twitter), despite having a substantial number of contacts in the Los Angeles area, and in the end I was only able to secure two interviews using this method, and a third through the snowball technique.

Since three interviews were not enough, I adopted another strategy: mass emailing teachers previously unknown to me. Appendix one of the “UVic Human Research Ethics Board Guidelines” states that it is appropriate to contact participants via publicly available contact information (2018, p. 23). Most Los Angeles area school districts have websites that include lists of the schools in their district. Further, many of those schools’ websites list their teachers by grade, with either an email address or web-form allowing teachers to be contacted directly.<sup>7</sup> From there, I was able to compile an extensive list of public school teachers in the greater Los Angeles area that teach grades four through six. Many private school websites feature similar lists, and so I was able to add private school teachers to that list as well.

I sent out approximately 450 emails to teachers across eleven school districts, and another 25 emails directly to private school teachers. I received a response from eighteen teachers, and scheduled interviews with sixteen. Two teachers canceled, resulting in fourteen completed interviews. It is important to acknowledge that the experiences of teachers that responded may be different from the teachers that did not respond, and that my sample is not representative of

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix D for a copy of the Invitation to Participate, emailed to potential participants.

every teacher. Most of the teachers interviewed talked about the importance of civic education, in particular, social justice education in the classroom. In the following section, I talk in depth about the participants that I did hear from, including how I believe the recruitment strategy operated as an unintended means of selecting teachers who are personally invested in social justice and inequality in the classroom.

## **RESEARCH SAMPLE**

While the response rate was low, the resulting sample was diverse<sup>8</sup>, including three participants from private schools in affluent neighbourhoods, five that teach in public schools in affluent to upper middle class neighbourhoods and six from schools located in lower socioeconomic status (SES) neighbourhoods. Of the six in low SES neighbourhoods two teachers teach at the lowest performing schools in their respective districts, and one teaches in a neighbourhood in Pasadena that is actually – as described by the participant - on the border between a middle class and low SES neighbourhood, resulting in a great deal of SES diversity in her class. Two teachers interviewed have received notable teaching awards for their work. Of the fourteen participants, three were male, eleven were female, and teachers had experience ranging from four to 33 years in the classroom. Schools were located all over the greater Los Angeles area from Calabasas to Pasadena, to as far south as Torrance, and situated in communities that were predominantly African-American, Latino, or white, and one had what was described by the participant as a diverse mix.

Potentially due to the nature of my recruitment strategy, the teachers I heard from presented as particularly knowledgeable in the classroom, and outwardly expressed enjoying

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<sup>8</sup> Table 1.1 provides detailed information on the participants involved.

watching their students learn and grow. One common theme repeated in the interviews is that teaching is exhausting work, which might partially explain the low response rate. The teachers who did respond either expressed a high degree of interest in social justice (one had a Master’s in Social Justice), reported having a family member involved in graduate school, and/or mentioned that they themselves conducted similar research in grad school.

TABLE 1.1: PARTICIPANT DETAILS

Pseudonym	Public/Private	Socioeconomic Status	Location	Class Size	Years of Experience	Dominant Ethnicities
Dr. Smith	Private	Upper	Santa Monica	17	30+	White/Asian
Mrs. Bennet	Private	Upper	Santa Monica	20	42	White/Asian
Melissa Merriwick	Private	Upper	Culver City	20	28	White/Black
Jessica Hoffman	Public	Upper/Middle	Hermosa Beach	29	20+	White/Latinx
Stacey Sanders	Public	Upper/Middle	Calabasas	x*	14	White/Iranian
Mrs. Paige	Public	Upper/Middle	Torrance	x*	15	White/Asian
Danielle Tilly	Public	Upper/Middle	South Pasadena	29	32	Asian/White
Mitch Stevenson	Public	Middle	Santa Monica	29	28	Diverse Range
Ms. Sarra	Public	Middle/Lower	Pasadena	29	4	Latinx/Black
Karen Ramsey	Public	Lower	Hawthorne	28	21	Latinx/Black
Ms. Adams	Public	Lower	Pasadena	33	20	Latinx/Black
Mr. Gonzales	Public	Lower	Pasadena	32	18	Latinx/Black
Mr. Harris	Public	Lower	Hawthorne	32	26	Latinx/Black
Kristin Warren	Public	Lower	Hawthorne	x*	13	Latinx/Black

\* Information not provided.

It seems clear that despite the diversity in terms of where and who they teach, it was only a certain type of teacher that responded. While some may feel therefore that the sample does not reflect all teachers, I would argue that the characteristics of this sample enhanced the depth of insight identified by this particular research. Essentially, it provided inadvertent purposeful sampling (Emmel, 2013) of information rich participants, as the teachers who responded to the interview requests also seemed to be the ones with an ideal knowledge base and background for contributing to this research. Most of the participants expressed thoughtful accounts of their perceptions of inequality in the education system. I believe this enables these particular teachers

to notice hidden dynamics that a teacher less well versed in social justice might miss. Though inadvertent, my recruitment method seems to have served as an unintended filter which produced a small sample of teachers already interested in the emancipatory potential of education.

### **GATHERING THE DATA: THE INTERVIEW PROCESS**

I spent six weeks in Los Angeles in two separate three week periods in 2017 – one in September, and one in November –to complete the interviews. Interviews took place either after school or on the weekend, in most cases at the rate of one per day. Twice, during two separate weekends, I completed two interviews in a day.

My goal was to make the interview process as convenient and accessible for participants as possible. I let the participant choose the time and place to ensure optimal comfort, and I provided a nonalcoholic beverage of their choice. Most interviews took place at a cafe close to their home or school; I met two participants in their respective classrooms, and conducted one in the participant's backyard.

Interviews typically lasted from one to two hours. Once the participant arrived, I secured their beverage and thanked them for sitting down with me. I provided a copy of the verbal consent script, and then read the script to them out loud. The consent script included an overview of my research, the goals of my study and asked for their consent to participate<sup>9</sup>. All participants agreed with a verbal “yes,” and they all gave additional consent to audio recording. The verbal consent script also explained that I would change their names and do everything in my power to keep the data de-identifiable for their privacy.

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix B for a copy of the Participant Handout/Consent Script.

All interviews made use of the previously discussed guidelines set forth by Lofland and Lofland (1995) for unstructured interviews. I had with me the list of research questions (see Appendix A), to refer back to when needed. Although I did not strictly adhere to the guide, it proved helpful in keeping the conversation moving and ensured we covered all the topics I was initially thought relevant. Questions focused on the participant's experiences in the classroom, their knowledge of the education system, and some background and demographic questions. When a participant felt the need to tell a story or add additional information, I let them do so. I believe the interviews resulted in a detailed knowledgebase of the environmental conditions that these teachers operate in, and their classroom experiences.

At the end of the interview I thanked the participant for coming, shook their hand and we parted ways. Afterward I would find somewhere quiet, sometimes sitting in my car, other times at home, and take twenty to thirty minutes to reflect upon the interview and free write field notes on the experience. I did this for two reasons: first, to make sure I retained as many details as possible and second, to ensure that should anything go wrong with the transcription I had some data to draw from. These notes proved useful later on, during the transcription process when they informed a brief write up on each participant at the top of the transcripts.

It is important to note that no interview data is bias-free, and without observing or speaking directly to the students it is impossible to know their perspective or interpretation of the conditions described by teachers.

### **FOCUSING THE DATA: CONSIDERING KEY THEMES AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

Lofland and Lofland consider the act of "Focusing the data," to be the second "major line of activity," where the researcher begins to envision the concepts that that the research will address,

and also the research questions that one might ask (1995, p. 99). In terms of designing the research question they argue that the questions must be: true, new and relevant, sociologically. They also note that in actuality, while they consider the focusing to be second to the gathering, typically the focusing begins while the gathering is still taking place, and call the ordering “general and rough” (p. 1).

In terms of this research, the focusing stage did start earlier, in the sense that I had analyzed the literature on the topic in terms of the emancipatory potential and social control dimensions of education. This literature review and analytical consideration of the topic began during the ethics approval process which required a detailed outline of the research that was to take place, as well as during the required thesis proposal process required by UVic’s Department of Sociology. At the same time, this study was always intended to take on more of an exploratory format, and as such, once I had conducted the first couple of interviews, I set about focusing it. ok I did this in two separate ways: first in modifying interview questions based on emergent themes and content from the interviews themselves, and second by beginning to draw together the themes of administrative constraints and autonomy that had emerged from the data being collected. I will expand upon both of these processes more thoroughly in the following two paragraphs.

Every interview was designed to be its own organic conversation with the teacher, but the interview guide was also there to ensure that we covered the relevant topics I wanted the teacher to address, and to initiate conversation as needed. The interview questions were modified based on what tended to come up within interviews. For example, none of my initial questions directly asked about the teachers’ relationship with their administration, yet the topic appeared again and again without any prompting, so it became a question. Alternatively, I stopped asking questions about advice they (teachers) give to parents, because the first few teachers I spoke to said they

didn't ever get asked for advice from parents. While this is an interesting finding in itself, my study specifically looking at classroom experiences, rather than family relationships, and so I decided that those questions were not pertinent to the study at hand.

Identifying the key themes of administrative constraints and autonomy was the other major aspect of focusing my data. Initially while searching for a potential problematic I was looking at the emancipatory and social control dimensions of education. The increased focus on administrative constraints and autonomy represented more of an adjustment than a complete change of focus; the participant centered interviews provided so much information regarding the administrative constraints and autonomy experienced by teachers that it was impossible to not include it as a central focus of the study. As such, my research question became: *How do factors such as socioeconomic status and administrative constraints affect teachers' abilities to effectively teach students in the classroom?*

## **ANALYZING THE DATA**

The third and final category of Lofland and Lofland's fieldstudy methodology is "Analyzing the Data." They outline this process through several strategies which they consider a "storehouse of possibilities from which to devise ways of working with analysis" (p. 182). Lofland and Lofland assert that each researcher should be flexible and adaptable while developing their analysis, and clearly outline any steps taken.

The steps I used for my analysis were as follows: first, I completed all of the interviews myself. This allowed me to receive the information first-hand, as well as allowed me the opportunity to take into account facial expressions, vocal tones, and various gestures and expressiveness that may not have carried over to the audio tapes. Second, I took half an hour

after every interview to free write everything I remembered from the interview, along with my initial thoughts and interpretations, and any connections I may have made with information from previous interviews. Third, I transcribed all of the audio transcripts myself, word for word, which allowed me to thoroughly revisit all of the interviews and further cement the information in my brain. These first three steps were all part of the gathering data stage, and also played a role in my overall analysis.

Fourth, the coding stage, for which I followed Lofland and Lofland's guidelines for analytic coding, which they rooted in a grounded theory approach, where theory is constructed directly from the inductive analysis of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal of analytic coding is to "formulate generic propositions that sum up and provide order in major portions of your data" (p 182). Lofland and Lofland explain analytic coding as "emergent, venturesome, and experimental" and often entailing a large number of codes, multiple codes for a single item and category subdivision (1995, p. 190). They go on to outline two stages of coding including an initial coding stage where codes are generated inductively from the data. Next comes the "Focused Coding" stage where the coding itself becomes the object reviewed; this is where codes that are more prominent get highlighted, repetitive codes get collapsed into each other and the codes are then grouped based on themes that emerge from the data (pp. 192-193). The stages of coding are cyclical in nature and involve more than a single pass. The fifth step was "Concept Charting" (p.198), where the codes generated from the coding process are charted out for the purposes of making connections more clearly visible. The final stage involves the writing of the final report.

The previous paragraphs have outlined the analytical steps I adopted from Lofland and Lofland's fieldstudy methodology. Now I will specifically outline what I did, while following

the steps listed above. As per my Ethics Board application, all audio files and identifying data were kept on a password-protected encrypted flash drive. After the interviews were constructed I transcribed the audio into word documents on my laptop, keeping all transcripts de-identified. I assigned pseudonyms to all teachers, as well as to any students or colleagues they referenced in the interviews, and also removed the names of the schools they teach at.

After completing the transcription process with the aid of headphones and a foot pedal, I went back a second time and edited all the transcripts for typos and errors. Then I went through all of the interviews a third time, removing repetitive words, and saved this second set of transcripts under a name entitled 'InterviewX\_Clean'. For the purposes of this paper, the quotes included will consist of the 'clean' (abridged) version. The transcript creation process was long, but fundamental as I developed a deeper sense of familiarity via immersion with the interviews.

Once I cleaned the interviews, I uploaded them into Atlas.ti software on my laptop, and began the "initial" coding stage. As per Lofland and Loflands suggestions, I coded inductively, generating new codes from what appeared in an interview, rather than applying codes from pre-conceived ideas. Most of the fourteen transcripts averaged twenty to thirty-five pages of ten-point font, creating a dense amount of content to sift through. At the end of the first coding pass I had over 800 codes, forcing careful consideration of which information was the most pertinent and narrowing the scope in the "focused coding" stage. Eventually, through this focused coding pass, followed by a second focused coding stage, I narrowed it down to 281 codes which I then sorted into 28 groups<sup>10</sup>. Coding was ultimately a cyclical process in which I went through the interviews while keeping handwritten notes of connections and themes I was noticing throughout the data on a piece of paper beside me. I printed out some of the more prominent codes to read

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<sup>10</sup> Table 1.2 depicts the 28 code groups, alongside the number of codes within each group.

through and make notes on paper, and then updated them back into Atlas.ti again. I ended up focusing on three basic themes, which I explain in detail in the next chapter, including: Students and Socioeconomic Status, Administrative and Bureaucratic Constraints, and the Effects of Technology. For more information, see chapter four.

**TABLE 1.2: CODE GROUPS - INCLUDES NUMBER OF CODES PER GROUP.**

Students/SocioEconomic Status		Bureaucratic/Administrative Constraints		Technology/Other	
Behaviour	(21)	Academics	(12)	Class Environment	(18)
Community	(21)	Bureaucracy	(25)	Education	(19)
Home/Family Lives	(17)	Conflicts	(18)	Group Work	(6)
In the Classroom	(36)	Curriculum	(25)	Learning	(24)
Multicultural	(7)	Private/Independent Schools	(5)	Progressive	(17)
On the Playground	(6)	Relationships	(19)	Society	(17)
On the Students	(69)	Resources	(17)	Teachers	(26)
Social Factors	(34)	Structure	(35)	Technology	(11)
Special Needs	(8)	Support	(12)		
Students of Colour	(4)	Teacher Training	(9)		

Alongside the coding, I also had a handwritten page of notes that I used to keep track of patterns and themes that were emerging from the data as I went along. Eventually this turned into multiple webs of connections, similar to what Lofland and Lofland call a concept chart, albeit disguised as a web form. I also had an outline of points to be made, where I was keeping track of potential quotes to be brought in as examples. I will talk about this more in depth in the “Writing The Report” section that follows.

### **CHOOSING QUOTATIONS FOR THE WRITTEN REPORT**

Once I had organized my codes into themes, and mapped out the points my paper was going to make, I drafted a base outline for this Thesis. By this point I had detailed notes on all of the themes I intended to outline, and a clear idea of the story my research was telling. Then came

the time to choose which quotes to use representatively in the body of this thesis. In choosing quotations that will represent one's data, it is imperative to achieve "the proper balance between the obligations of scientific reporting and the taking of artistic license" (Sandelowski, 1994). When utilized correctly, quotes provide valuable evidence toward one's argument, and clarity toward the overall point being established.

Lofland and Lofland explain that it is important to distinguish between reports, inferences and judgements. "Neither inferences nor judgements can be definitively verified. Reports, on the other hand, are capable of definitive verification, and thus debates over them are important and meaningful" (p. 69). This is why quotes are so crucial to qualitative work: they are the evidence of one's points that can be verified by a reader, so the researcher must give them serious thought.

This research uses participant quotes, taken from participant interviews, to support the arguments being made within. To determine which quotes should be used I began with an outline of the story which the data seemed to be telling, broken down into different 'points'. Then, I jotted down quotes that I could remember that stood out in terms of each point. I had a separate word document open on my computer, entitled "potential quotes". This document included the arguments I was making, and I then searched for the exact quotes in my transcripts and copied and pasted them into that file. From there, anytime I was perusing the transcripts, either in another coding pass, or even reading through searching for a different quote, I would pull quotes that illustrated key points and add them to the document. In the end I had a rather extensive document with – for the most part – several quotes to choose from for each point.

I based the decision about which specific quotes to include on two key considerations: first, on which quote most clearly exemplifies the point intended; and second, on whether the quoted teacher has so far been the only teacher voiced in this section, and whether there is another teacher

whose quote also exemplifies the point I wish to make (with preference given to the quote from the teacher not yet quoted). My rationale for this was that this research is meant to represent the voices of fourteen teachers in Los Angeles, not one teacher. If two quotes seemed equally indispensable I made use of both whenever possible. For example, in chapter four, when providing examples of teachers going against the specifications set forth by the curricula, I use quotes from both Mr. Harris and Ms. Sarra.

I also note in the paper that I make use of what I call the “abridged” version of the quotes. After transcribing interviews word for word, I intentionally went through and “cleaned” the data, removing repetitive phrasings such as “um” “ah” and “you know.” When deciding which words to omit and which to keep, I considered the overall quote and whether the repetitive phrase was making a point of emphasis or simply a placeholder while the participant was considering what to say next. I believe that the fact that I was present in the interviews themselves, as well as the transcriber, helped me make decisions from the most informed perspective possible. That said, I was also careful to save the cleaned data separately, to ensure that I could always reference back to it if needed.

Conversational analysts might argue that removing repetitive phrases removes valuable information that is pertinent to the study at hand. However, Lofland and Lofland, argue that unless specifically using “conversation analysis” methodology (Boden & Zimmerman, 1991; Heritage, 1985), “it is generally not necessary for you transcribe every word, exclamation or pause that occurs in the interview” (p. 88). Since I am looking specifically at teacher experiences and the constraints that affect their everyday lives, rather than analyzing their conversations specifically, my analysis was not hindered by the lack of repetitive phrasing. Abridging quotes enabled me to

analyze the data without getting bogged down by pages of pointless extra words, while still retaining unabridged quotes if needed for later analysis.

When writing up the analysis with the quotes, I again chose to use the abridged version of the data to enhance the readability, and ensure that the paper accurately represents what the teacher was trying to say. This does involve some interpretation on the part of the researcher, which is why transparency is so important. Yes, the abridged version was used, but the verbatim quote is also available should verification be deemed necessary. This empowers the reader to take into account the reasons for the use of the abridged version, and the ability to inquire further should they so desire. In terms of “theoretical candor,” Lofland and Lofland assert: “the reader’s faith in the accuracy of the empirical details is enhanced if the researcher provides a truthful explanation of how he or she came to employ the particular form of analysis that organizes the facts” (p. 151).

## **CONSIDERING THE ETHICS**

This research was approved by the University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethical Review Board (HREB).<sup>11</sup> Any time research is conducted on human subjects the researcher is obligated to consider how the research may affect each individual, and care must be taken to protect the wellbeing of the participant. The purpose of the HREB is to ensure that all research on human participants is conducted ethically, for good reason, and in the best interest of participants. It ensures proper procedural protocol is followed, that participants give proper consent, and that anonymity is protected. The Canadian Tri-Council includes the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the National Sciences and Engineering Research Council and the

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<sup>11</sup> See appendix C for a copy of the HREB approval certificate.

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The HREB follows the standards set forth by the Canadian Tri-Council regarding ethical conduct for research involving humans. The approval process requires a detailed application that ensures methodology is fully thought out and that the benefits of the research outweigh the risks.

Ethical issues commonly considered in sociological research include: if deception is used or if incredibly difficult subject matter is discussed the participants may experience psychological duress. Participants must be able to give informed consent, which can be an issue when researching vulnerable populations such as children or individuals with developmental disabilities. Also, if a participant feels they are being coerced, or if there is a power imbalance between the researcher and participant there is a chance the participant may give false information and invalidate the research. These are all important aspects to consider when designing research projects requiring human participation.

This research did not utilize any methods of deception and the subject matter was unlikely to cause any undue stress of the participants. All of the teachers interviewed were adults, who were capable of providing informed consent, and I was careful to outline the details of my study, how I intended to protect their anonymity through data protection strategies and the use of pseudonyms in the participant hand out/verbal consent script. In terms of recruiting participants, when approaching known contacts one must be careful to ensure that it is clear that participation is voluntary and that the relationship will not change should they decide not to participate. In terms of the specifics of this research, none of my known contacts were asked to be participants of the study; rather, they were asked to connect me with teachers of their acquaintance who might be suitable for the study. In all correspondence with my known contacts I was careful to directly state that their help was completely voluntary and that our relationship

would not change based on their decision about whether to help. I provided blank ‘invitation to participate’ forms for my contacts to pass on to their contact, and they were asked to either advise the participant to contact me, or to ask permission to provide me with their contact information so I could reach out to them directly.

Addressing the potentiality for a power imbalance is also important in qualitative interviews. To ensure this was not an issue for my participants I made every effort to ensure they were comfortable, including meeting them at a time and location of their choice and providing them with a non-alcoholic beverage as a token of appreciation. Participant-directed conversational interviews are designed to mitigate feelings of power imbalances by viewing the participant as the expert providing information to the researcher. I believe the open ended, unstructured, and transparent process of the teacher sharing his or her frontline perspective successfully facilitated an atmosphere where the participant could relax and talk freely about what was happening in the classroom and beyond. Moreover, many of the teachers interviewed stated that they found the interview enjoyable, without any prompting from the interviewer.

## **PROTECTING THE DATA**

I have made every effort to maintain anonymity during the dissemination of these results. To protect the privacy of the teachers interviewed, names of all the participants have been changed. I have also assigned pseudonyms to other individuals referenced, including but not limited to: students, colleagues, parents, and friends. I also removed the names of all schools, instead referencing them as: “Public/Private,” “Low/High SES Status,” and/or the district or city of its location. However, there is always a chance, that someone close to a participant or situation may recognize the described situation and think they can identify the parties involved. All of this

was clearly emphasized in my Vocal Consent Script/Participant Handout (See Appendix B), and explained to the participants in detail.

All audio transcripts are kept on a password-protected encrypted flash drive which only the primary investigator has access to. Audio files have been transcribed in de-identifiable form, complete with changed names. Transcripts are kept on my password-protected encrypted MacBook Pro. All hand written and/or typed out notes from interviews has been completely de-identifiable from the start. While there is one excel spreadsheet that keeps track of all individuals interviewed and their pseudonym, this is on the password protected encrypted USB flash drive with the audio files. All handwritten notes and audio files will be destroyed upon the completion of this thesis, and the de-identified transcripts will be moved to the password-protected encrypted flash drive for safe keeping. They may be utilized again for future reference or included in future research projects at a later date. Any such future research will be conducted with the approval of any ethics board at the relevant institution with which said research is being conducted.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

Interviews were informative and provided rich qualitative data for analysis. One unexpected finding was how so many teachers articulated similar problems. Dominant themes included: increasingly distracted and stressed students attempting to meet rising expectations, administrative/bureaucratic pressures, and changing technology in the classroom. These themes will be the focus of this thesis, as they shed light on underpinning stressors that hinder teachers' abilities to do their jobs effectively. The following paragraphs will discuss the findings in detail for each of the three themes, and provide examples from interview transcripts depicting each expert's experiences. The following "Discussion," section will discuss the implications of my findings, and what it means for teachers and students in terms of teacher success and student learning outcomes. I will argue that the answer to the question of underperforming students lies neither in ranking teachers, nor basing their success on student test scores. In order to foster the best learning environment possible, teachers require the flexibility to adapt their teaching practices and base their curriculum on the specific needs of each class. I use empirical evidence from my interview data to argue that teachers should be empowered to creatively adapt in terms of the curriculum taught, and the methodologies utilized.

### **A BRIEF FORAY INTO THE RECENT HISTORY OF US EDUCATION POLICY**

In order to better grasp the complexities of the American education system, it helps to have a basic understanding of the recent history of US Education Policy. In response to low graduation rates across the United States, President George W. Bush brought in the NCLB (No Child Left Behind Act) in 2002, aimed to establish high standards across all classrooms, with a large reliance on federally mandated high-stakes standardized testing, with the intention to

‘guarantee’ every student across the United States received a quality education. The program emphasized teacher accountability, and federal funding allocation as well as punitive sanctions for teachers and low performing schools, were built into the system, and doled out based on student test scores. This resulted in a lot of stress and pressure on teachers and students to pass a test that could not, in the view of many educators, provide an accurate measurement of student success. Teachers were given text books, handbooks, and pacing guides, that stated exactly what a teacher should be teaching during each week, removing almost all opportunity for teacher autonomy. The result was that many teachers felt forced to teach their students “how to pass the test,” rather than educating them; fearful their schools would be shut down if their students did not score high enough (Cambre, 2013).

In 2015, Barack Obama did away with the NCLB and established the ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act), designed to maintain high standards, while lowering the importance of standardized tests and allowing more flexibility in the classroom. However, while there is now reduced testing and the requirement for punitive sanctions have been removed, funding is still allocated based on data from test scores (Moussaoui, 2017).

Meanwhile, in the midst of the federal mandates and testing, the National Governor’s Association Center, coordinated a panel of teachers, experts and policy makers to develop the “Common Core.” A set of guidelines and standards of what each child throughout the United States should know upon completion of each grade. The basic idea is regardless of where a student receives their education they should possess roughly the same knowledge. A lot of research went into creating these standards and ensuring they line up with the NCLB and now ESSA. While the Common Core was created alongside the federal policies, and designed to uphold set guidelines, it is important to understand that it is not part of the policy, or federally

mandated. Individual states have the option to partake, along with full jurisdiction over how they interpret the standards. Currently 41 states, four territories and Washington DC, have adopted the Common Core; including California. There is much contention and confusion surrounding the Common Core. Many confuse it with the federal policies, but, the idea behind the Common Core is to establish: “A guide, but not a bible,” with enough flexibility for teachers to make decisions where they need to in order to effectively teach (Dana, Burns, & Wolkenhauer, 2013).

There are many nuances both positive and negative that stem from the NCLB and ESSA, as well as the Common Core, all of which are beyond the scope of this research. For the purposes of this thesis it is important to understand that many states have adopted the Common Core with the idea that all children in US Public Schools should receive a certain standard of education, equal in its entirety. Those standards were created just a few years ago.

## **STUDENTS AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS**

This section will focus on the students in the classroom, and how factors such as socioeconomic status (SES), behaviour challenges, and the increasing pressures of high expectations, affect their ability to function in the education system. Since teachers are in the classroom with their students on a daily basis, they are uniquely situated to assess their student’s needs. While they cannot provide exact accounts of student experience, they can explain what they witness taking place in terms of student frustrations and resulting academic success or challenges.

It is important to note that each group of students is different, and comes with its own unique traits, challenges and personality. This is the reason qualitative research offers important insight for assessing the situation and suggesting effective solutions. Three teachers that I

interviewed described this idea of “class personality” in depth. Dr. Smith, who teaches at a private school in Santa Monica explains:

Every class kind of has its [own] personality. Particularly, you notice it in this school because there are only two classes per grade level. It’s a small school... Most of the students have been together... This will be their seventh year. And so social dynamics have set in, and every class kind of has its personality. This years’ class for example... I think it’s kind of a young class, they’re younger than some classes I’ve had.

Here, Dr. Smith uses her class’ ‘age’ to describe its personality. Mitch Stevenson, who teaches at a public school in an Upper Middle Class neighbourhood in Santa Monica, also explained the idea of a ‘class personality’ in depth:

Each year is different. Each child is different. Each class is different. They have their own unique chemistry, and most teachers will tell you that one child, one factor, can change everything, and that’s either by addition or subtraction. Adding one more kid to the class can change the entire dynamics of the class, removing one student from the class can change the entire dynamics of the class.

Mitch’s explanation emphasizes how important each individual child is to the dynamics of the group as a whole. When a new student arrives the dynamics change. If a student moves away, everything shifts.

While the dynamics of a class’s personality may be one of the most important factors to consider when assessing education, policy makers are often looking to pinpoint the ‘silver bullet’ that will fix everything. The reality is that every class is unique, and what works for Group A may have the opposite effect on Group B. This paper will focus on the various differences that take place, shedding light on some of the more common variations of classroom dynamics.

## SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

SES has long been established as a crucial factor in the potential for student success for various reasons, including the transmission of cultural capital, family involvement at home, access to more resources and more (Calarco, 2014; Heath, 1987; Lareau, 2011; Streib, 2011). Popular rhetoric suggests that public school classrooms should provide the same education to all kids across America, to equalize the playing field and allow for the social mobility (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). At the beginning of this chapter, I briefly summarized the policy changes to the US education system, including the NCLB, ESSA and the common core standards. The intention behind this commitment to policy and curricula adherence was to foster equality of outcome for all students through a standardized curriculum, to better understand what is taking place, and identify where we need a closer look. I was fortunate to speak with teachers from schools located in a wide array of socioeconomic areas. From low-performing schools where 100% of the students are provided with breakfast and lunch, to expensive private schools where field trips include week long educational trips to historical sites dating back to colonial America. This range of diversity provides an opportunity to compare and contrast what is working and not working, and how various teaching methodologies function in different settings. I will now apply the lens of SES to teacher accounts of student issues including: behaviour, paying attention in the classroom, and managing the ever-growing student workload.

## CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR IN THE CLASSROOM

Daily behaviour issues were a common challenge reported by all teachers interviewed, regardless of the SES of the students in the classroom. That said, the evidence suggests there may be an association in the severity and number of students with behaviour challenges, and the

classrooms' collective SES. This contributes to significant differences in the ways teachers are able to address challenges. Valerie Adams teaches fourth grade at one of the lowest performing schools in Pasadena, in a particularly low SES community. There is a foster group home for youth in the neighbourhood that feeds students directly to the school, resulting in a high volume of traumatized and special needs kids in her classroom every year. This is in addition to the usual kids traditionally found in a low SES neighbourhood, a significant portion of them with their own traumatic home lives. Some have a parent in jail, are being raised by a grandparent because their parents are unavailable, or they are homeless and living in a shelter or a car. All of these are common scenarios for many of the kids in that school. The end result is a larger proportion of students who are distracted, have anger management issues, and even the kids with a stable home environment don't necessarily get the same academic support that higher SES students might.

Alternatively, a teacher in Santa Monica, at a more progressive public school, has one student with severe behaviour issues, a couple more with special needs, and a class sporting an average distribution of academic levels. This includes four or five who he: "could lock them in a closet with the books, and they would come out in June and do just fine on the test." It comes as no surprise that managing and teaching a classroom of thirty ten year olds is significantly different when one has twenty-five attentive students and five disruptive ones, versus twenty disruptive students and five attentive.

Teachers in higher SES neighbourhoods have more flexibility in terms of how they navigate "trouble makers." Almost every teacher interviewed, regardless of SES, made a point to explain that behaviour issues aren't as simple as a child purposefully trying to be belligerent (at least not at first). Having only one or two challenging students provides the liberty to more thoroughly assess each student's individual needs, and the best method to address the behavior.

Sometimes, if it's a particularly quiet or shy student they may even encourage the display in an attempt to encourage their use of voice. One teacher at a public school in a more affluent area of Los Angeles said: "These girls, they're really kind of loud, but you don't want to squash it because they're big and bold and argumentative, and you think well, okay." Another teacher, of an affluent private school said: "for the quiet ones, if they finally started to speak out, we let it go because... Finally!" But managing classrooms with multiple kids with behaviour challenges does not afford such flexibility and is more akin to attempting to contain a forest fire. Just as the teacher convinces one kid to quiet down, four other students across the room erupt into varying degrees of restlessness. Teachers in lower income schools spend more time trying to get the kids to settle down enough to begin the lesson. It's exhausting and very little energy is left to ensure the students who are ready and want to learn are able to. As a result even the capable kids begin falling behind, and are in danger of becoming disenfranchised with the school system. It takes a great deal more motivation on the student's part to maintain focus in a classroom environment that's wild and unruly, than in a naturally quiet one with only two or three challenging students.

#### INCREASES IN ATTENTION DEFICITS

One thing every teacher interviewed mentioned was increased rates of students with ADHD or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, regardless of socioeconomic status. Mrs. Bennet, a private school teacher in an affluent neighbourhood got her start in special needs education, and she said:

There's a lot more ADD with these kids. And I don't, I do not believe it's because more and more kids are getting identified, because I didn't need them to be identified for me to say: 'oh this kid really has a hard time doing this or that.' You know? And I have my Masters in Special Ed, so I know it when I see it.

Almost every teacher interviewed mentioned this increase in ADHD, but Mrs. Bennet's intimate knowledge of special needs from her advanced credentials and decade of work in a special needs school provides additional validity to this statement. Maintaining focus and keeping kids motivated toward the lesson at hand is a common challenge. SES and homes with resources seem to have no bearing on a student's having ADHD, although the family support at home and getting the kids the extra resources they need in terms of IEP's likely lightens the burden somewhat.

#### INCREASED PRESSURE ON STUDENTS

Another concern all teachers spoke about, regardless of SES, was a significant increase in pressure and expectations placed on today's students. In the more affluent areas this involves extra-curricular activities, while trying to balance a difficult workload at the same time. Dr. Smith, a sixth grade teacher at an affluent private school, spoke in depth about how: "kids are more involved in activities where school isn't necessarily their number one priority." She continued to explain that parents are putting more pressure on the teachers to: "lighten up on homework this week." Mrs. Bennet finds her students have significantly more anxiety than they used to, and are powering through homework quickly, just to get it done. In her words:

We are trying to do too much, and we're stressing kids out, because we're trying to cover twenty-four chapters in an eight-month school year... It's like that Coca Cola ad years ago that would just flash pictures... And I mean that's how I feel we're trying to teach.

Mrs. Bennet is concerned that even their affluent kids who have opportunity for success are becoming overly stressed and burned out before they even hit college. In the lower SES schools, the pressure is felt by students less in terms of getting voluminous workloads accomplished, and more in terms of meeting grade level expectations. Teachers in low socioeconomic

neighbourhood schools mentioned the commonality of students giving up early, deciding school is not for them – often before they even hit fifth grade. Karen Ramsey teaches at a low SES public school in Hawthorne, and she has found: “some kids... By fifth grade they get to a point where they’re like: “I’m done. I can’t do this. I don’t know this.” Rather than trying to speed through difficult workloads, low SES students are becoming completely disenfranchised by the system. Previous research has demonstrated that children who cannot attain the grades they want have a tendency to seek attention in other ways, such as becoming troublemakers (Shalaby, 2017; Valenzuela, 2005).

It is impossible to fully understand everything going on at the student level without speaking with and/or observing the students directly. This section emphasizes what appears to be going on at the student level, through the eyes of their teachers. While this particular type of data has limitations, it is important for projecting a clear visual of the issues going on in the classroom, especially in terms of how SES directly influences student experience. In the following section I will emphasize the systemic constraints that teachers experience, impeding their ability to teach effectively.

#### **ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUREAUCRATIC CONSTRAINTS**

The fact that school is a place for children makes it easy to overlook the dark reality: schools are institutions just like any other. Several teachers referenced their surprise upon discovering just how political their job can get. Many went into teaching because they prefer working with children, and didn’t realize how much of their job revolved around relationships with their adult colleagues, or figuring out how to get their classroom needs met by the administration. The job requires a lot more than teaching a child reading, writing and arithmetic,

and teachers are held accountable not only by the students they teach and their parents, but also the administration, the community, and politicians. This section illustrates the struggles experienced, and strategies utilized while navigating the complex bureaucratic web, in addition to how the system acts as a restraint toward a teacher's ability to effectively teach by creating multiple obstacles that must be overcome.

#### FUNDING AND RESOURCES

Possibly, the most obvious of administrative constraints falls under the funding and/or resources category. It is relatively common knowledge in Los Angeles (and the wider United States), that funding is paid for by taxes and most often distributed by community. More affluent areas in Los Angeles such as Beverly Hills, where the winding streets are lined with palm trees and mansions, pay more in taxes because they have higher incomes. By proxy, higher amounts of money are funneled into those school districts. One must only look at district rankings to see the association between affluent neighbourhoods and district school achievement ranking (Niche.com, 2018). Districts with more funding can afford to pay more teachers a better salary, thus attracting the best teachers and lower class sizes than schools with less funding. They can provide more resources in the form of support aids, counselors, and special needs teachers, and they can afford to supply classes with the best technology and newer books. Schools in lower income areas provide much needed meals for their students, but their already stretched thin budgets can't afford to provide the healthiest options, and they have less funding for other needs. Moreover, the schools that provide breakfast do so during class time, which one teacher in Hawthorne claimed distracts from the learning taking place during that time. This is not suggesting those kids don't benefit from the much needed breakfast, or that they can and should learn on empty stomachs, but there is a difference between learning time available in a school

whose children come from families that are able to feed their children healthy and balanced breakfasts before they arrive, versus a classroom full of kids who are not able to have breakfast at home. Even one twenty-minute meal break is a twenty-minute head start at a different school where providing breakfast isn't necessary, and each twenty-minute period adds up to hours of extra instruction for higher SES populations. It should be noted that if the lower SES population did not get breakfast, concentration deficiencies that stunt learning capabilities even worse would result. Either way, the end result remains increased inequality.

Every teacher interviewed at middle to affluent SES neighbourhood schools referenced an overnight class trip, with the exception of one of the private schools, where the middle school does a big week long class trip the following year. Some of the private schools go on more than one trip in a year. Mrs. Bennet takes her fifth grade private school class to an overnight camp out on a boat in the fall and a week-long trip to a historical town on the East Coast in the spring, to study the colonial period. She talks in depth about the intrinsic benefits that come from being able to visit the exact site where history took place: "They would get there, get off the bus and go: 'Gasp! I think Alexander Hamilton probably walked right here!' ... 'GASP! I think I have his DNA!' ...they were so excited about what they had learned. And so invested." Many of the middle-class public schools take part in a wilderness training/outdoor education program where they spend a week in cabins in the mountains, learning about nature and/or science. One public school teacher from a more affluent area explained: "The fifth grade goes to 'Outdoor Ed,' in the fall... Schools [in this area] do that. SO my kids went in sixth grade in their schools... And in LA Unified they do it in fifth grade... So it's kind of a fifth grade; it's like a passaging." Teachers that spoke of these weeks talked about the amazing bonding experience it is for them and their

students, and the incredible rewards the students receive in terms of confidence building. One teacher who works in a very affluent neighbourhood in South Pasadena said:

My fifth graders, we do the program every September called ‘Outdoor Science School,’ we go to Malibu for a week... So we come back a real cohesive group... And all my boys are in one cabin together, and all my girls were in one cabin together, and they’re all grouped together all day, so they come back just really, really bonded.”

Mitch Stevenson’s class attends a similar program:

Well the big field trip that all kids, all the fifth graders go on is to Paley Science Camp. It’s three days and two nights, up in the mountains again... That’s a very transformative experience. Cause for a lot of them it’s the first time away, we have kids come back from the field trip just entirely different kids... And they come back on a Friday right at dismissal time. The parents pick them up and then they come back to school on Monday. Most of them sleep through the weekend. But I can’t tell you how many parents I’ve had, call me, text me, come up and goes: ‘you brought back a different person... I can’t believe this is my daughter.’

Dr. Smith’s private school class attends a similar outdoor education program; she loves how it provides an opportunity for her to observe student abilities that she wouldn’t otherwise see:

It also gives me and the other teachers a chance to observe. And I learn a lot about the kids in that week, you know? Who are the movers and the shakers? Who are the kids who are in charge? Who has the power? Who doesn’t? How do they go about solving issues? Is there any kind of leaders that are already established? Or who are the kids who are the potential leaders, you just learn a lot about the social dynamics of the group and how...One year, there was a young man who was a well-liked student, but he’d been

involved in boy scouts for several years. I noticed that being out in the environment just really spoke to him in ways that... Maybe the classroom didn't. And so I wanted to be able to adapt what I saw, to giving him experiences academically, or in the classroom.

Dr. Smith explains that seeing her students in a completely different environment sheds new light on their personalities and their true potential. When the class returns to the school, she can utilize this knowledge to help the student to flourish in ways she would not have otherwise realized were possible.

None of the teachers interviewed in the lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods have had the opportunity to take their students on trips, most of the schools do not have the funding and the families don't have the ability to supplement. It should be noted that one teacher had mentioned the LAUSD (LA Unified School District) participates in the Outdoor Education program, and they do have lower SES neighbourhoods in the district. It would be interesting to find out if the trip takes place for schools in those neighborhoods, and the effect it has on the students.

Of the lower SES schools there was a lot of variety in terms of field trip opportunities. Karen, who teaches in a low SES neighbourhood in Hawthorne explained that funding just isn't there: "We won't be taking any this year, unless somebody pays for a bus. It needs to be something that's free. Or someone who donates the bus... It seems like each year we might do one thing... If we do anything." Most of the other teachers I interviewed from schools in Hawthorne do get one or two field trips per year. One said: "There hasn't been any this year, I think we are allowed two bus trips. And then I think we can do walking trips. We have one that comes to us every year..." This suggests that some teachers get around the funding issue by being creative, and looking for alternative options such as opportunities that will come to the school, or

they take the kids places that they can walk to. Interestingly, lower SES schools' teachers in Pasadena have seen a recent influx of fieldtrips, which appears to be thanks to more community involvement. For example, Ms. Adams explained this year they have twelve lined up:

We go to the Eaton Canyon – it's a canyon up here, and its free ... This art organization in Pasadena, they're very well known, they send these artists to the schools. So the artist comes to our classroom four times, and they teach art to our class for two hours. And then the other four times, they pay for buses to take our kids up in the canyon and the kids have lessons up in the canyon which is really cool... We're going to the Disney Concert Hall and that's free. The entrance fee is free and they're paying for our bus, that's free. We're going back to Eaton Canyon for some other kind of hike, and then up here in Mount Wilson there's another free trip, I have to pay for the bus, and they're gonna show us... I guess they have an observatory up there and we're gonna go there...I'm telling you so many free... How do you say no when it's free? That's why I'm going on twelve of them.”

Here we see an example where the community sees the value in community outreach, and is willing to help provide valuable experiences for kids. Mr. Gonzales, who teaches at a different school in the Pasadena district, still low SES, talks about how in the past it was only one to three trips a year: “for some reason this year... I guess, just cause of the budget. But they found a way to do it, they call it dead hours, when the busses are not running from school to school...” Here we see schools doing their best to make it work, despite limited funding. This shows that schools are making an effort to effectively utilize what they do have.

One major constraint that many teachers interviewed talked about in depth is the amount of work teachers have to do, and how difficult their jobs are on a day to day basis. Three

different teachers spoke about the public perception of teachers having nice cushy jobs with lots of vacation time, and how they wish more people knew the truth. Mr. Gonzales explained: “A lot of people think that I come, and I have an easy day, an easy life. And I just... Haven’t...It’s not until... When parents come and they help... then they see.” Ms. Sarra talked in depth about her frustrations with trying to communicate how new government policy and programs such as charter schools and voucher programs affect public schools, and how the general public’s perception of teachers only makes it worse:

People in general do not understand what it means to be an educator, they don’t understand the challenges of the educational system, specifically the public school system. They don’t understand what it means to be a teacher, they don’t respect the idea of being a teacher, and because of that... our requests are unheard or not taken seriously, when we try to explain... It’s as though they don’t understand that what we’re really doing is building the future of our society. Like we are dealing with children, and those children will one day be adults, and those adults will replace us and if we want our society to continue to thrive... to improve, then we need to start here.

Ms. Paige pointed out the years of education, professional development and credentialing required to teach, yet the compensation does not match the effort required. In her words:

“Teachers need to be viewed as more professional, and compensated as such. For the amount of work, and the amount of training that we go through.” It’s easy to notice the months off for summer vacation, and weeks off in the middle of the year, and assume that teachers get a lot of time off. But as Mrs. Bennet points out, when a teacher is in the classroom there are no breaks:

You just work so hard... I don’t think people really know how hard it is and you can be... I get up at 4:00AM in the morning to grade papers, and... Just being on... You’re

just on the whole time, and there aren't very many jobs unless you're fixing somebody's heart – you know a cardiologist – where you have to be on...Right? You can't break away. It's just constant.

When teachers are in the classroom they are on the entire time: teaching, determining who needs extra help, providing the obligatory extra help to students with Individual Education Plans. In well-resourced schools, there may be a PE teacher or a science or music teacher who may take the students for an hour here and there, but most of the lower SES schools have had to cut those extras, and teachers are left to pick up the slack. Mr. Gonzales talked about how his workload has increased: “Now they have cut a lot of, they've cut aids they've cut... We do a lot more than we used to... They're asking us to do a lot more than we used to.” Recess and lunchtimes often include yard duty rotations, and those who do get a spare hour off a few times a week do not have enough time to cover the lesson plans needing creation or the grading and assessments they have to provide for each of their students. Karen Ramsey teaches at a school in a lower SES neighbourhood in Hawthorne. In her words:

I have a reputation for being at work late. So I'm usually... like yesterday I left there at... 7:00PM I think it was. Cause I feel like, when they're gone I can finally do stuff, and get stuff done. I can't do stuff while they're there. I mean I'm on 24/7 while they're there.

Many teachers find themselves staying late to get their work completed, while others take their work home, like Ms. Adams, who teaches in a low SES neighbourhood in Pasadena:

Trying to get through all the things that we're trying to achieve is always a challenge, and so by the end of the day I'm exhausted. The upper grade teachers are exhausted, and we just want to go home to rejuvenate, we would love to stay late but it's like... I work on my computer at home, I print stuff at home, I do report cards at home. All that grading

stuff gets done at home, I just need to get away from that place to just rejuvenate for the next day.

Moreover, teachers are expected to keep data on their students, in terms of progress, and the new common-core curriculum. Miss Sarra talked about the emphasis on data collection and why it's not useful but still necessary:

Even outside of our school, school board and district, the way that they keep track of the school is through data; and so we have a lot of data entry, and data collection, and analysis of that data. That really has nothing to do with the day to day... 'How can I teach my kid how to multiply,' it really reduces everything that you do in the classroom, because numbers, and those numbers don't really accurately represent what your kids can do, but it's how we get money.

Here, Ms. Sarra sheds light on yet another requirement teachers must adhere to, taking extra time, which doesn't necessarily accurately measure what her kids can or can't do. This emphasis on paperwork and data collection is an example of what Dorothy Smith would consider the use of text to mediate discourse by the ruling relations. Meaning that the large volume of paperwork serves – whether intentionally or unintentionally – as a mechanism of control that impedes the time and energy a teacher has left to teach their students. In addition, teachers often have to submit detailed lesson plans, serve on committees, and take on added extra-curricular responsibilities such as coaching a sports team. One teacher explained: "I thought going into teaching: 'I just have to worry about teaching my kids... ' But no, I need to worry about... yard duty, and analysis and professional development, and I have to join certain teams." What appears to be a cushy six-hour work day is actually closer to ten to twelve, which increases during report card season.

Teaching is a unique profession in that for the amount of education and credentials required to become a qualified teacher, they are paid very little in compensation or respect. Almost every teacher spoke openly about their love for kids, many became teachers because they wanted to make a difference, and most believe they do. When asked her favorite thing about teaching, Ms. Adams, who teaches at one of the lowest performing schools in Pasadena, said: “Probably like when I teach them something that they get totally excited about, and they’re just so engaged, and they’re just like: ‘Can we do it for homework? Can we do it for homework?’” Unfortunately, especially in the lower socioeconomic status schools, they are also frustrated and exhausted.

#### RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships also play a significant role in a teacher’s working life, and not just relationships with the students and their parents. Melissa, who teaches at a private school in Culver City, explained: “It’s about relationships, and it’s about your relationship with students, about your relationships with the parents of the students, about your relationships with administrators and their relationship to you, and your relationship with your colleagues... A lot of relationships.” Navigating these relationships alongside the politics of a school is a big part of the job. One teacher who works in a middle class neighbourhood near Hermosa Beach stated: “I don’t feel like they get you ready for parent communication in college... Yeah... The politics of teaching. Principals have favorites, there’s a lot of dishonesty in the system. The board, the superintendents, a lot of politics.”

Perhaps the most crucial relationship is that between the teacher and their school’s administration, especially the principal. A supportive principal can make all the difference. Mr. Gonzales spoke in depth about his experience at his previous school:

When I started teaching it was really good... It felt like a community school and so on and so forth. But then we went through like four or five Principals, but the school was very low achieving. It was one of the lowest... So the school district decided to send a Principal to bring up the scores somehow. And he came to the school... Totally different than the other Principals, and he started like, basically dividing the school, micro-managing us... We called the union, the union couldn't do much about it, that was very disappointing... Parents started turning against us, following what the principal was saying, that was very disappointing... We worked hard at that school.

Mr. Gonzales' experience illustrates a common problem that occurs when a district tries to fix low test scores by sending in a corporate enforcer. Schools run like institutions, but the very complex nature of working with kids from varying cultures, communities, and levels of SES, require solutions tailored to unique situations, not, according to the teachers like Mr. Gonzales, a corporate agenda. In Mr. Gonzales' account the end result was not higher test scores, but a divided community and environment where teachers felt attacked, that worked against the intention of better student outcomes.

On the other hand, having the right, supportive, administration makes a huge difference in terms of building an environment conducive to teaching and student learning. Ms. Sarra attributes her principal's success to having been a teacher first: "Our principal is really great, she's been there since the 90's, a teacher there first, and then she's been a principal for the past ten years." Ms. Sarra also explained that her principal makes a real effort to know every student that comes through the school and keeps detailed records of each students' family life, because it's not always easy to get ahold of the parents in the lower SES neighbourhoods of Pasadena.

One teacher spoke in depth about wishing her teachers education had included knowledge on how to effectively navigate, and get what she needs from her administration: "...And know how to ask for what you want and need without being a fool. And without making yourself feel vulnerable. And then getting, feeling disappointed." Another mentioned that if she were teaching at a teacher's college she would include communication skills: "...Okay this is how you write a nice email. When you get mad you don't react, you always kind of have to put on a [smile], like everything's great."

Relationships are a big factor in education, and not solely the traditional teacher/student relationship. The relationships between teachers and their administration, fellow colleagues, and parents also play a major role in a teacher's ability to teach effectively; relationships that teachers have no control over. It is crucial to consider relationships as both social and environmental factors that have the ability to hinder teaching, and by extension, student learning.

#### CURRICULUM

One major teaching constraint that is important to emphasize is the adoption of new curricula. This is a major challenge that every public school teacher spoken with has experienced. One of the side effects of the recent implementation of the common core standards is that up until a few short years ago, teaching materials and common core aligned curricula did not exist. As such, most districts across the United States have been in the process of implementing new core aligned curricula over the past few years, and the School Districts of greater Los Angeles are no exception.

Each state's must interpret the standards to reflect what they expect their students to learn. Each district finds and selects curricula that allow them to meet the guidelines set forth by the state. Since the Common Core's implementation, most districts have been trying out various

curricula to figure out the best way to get their students to the expected level. Moreover, since the standards are new, it is only recently that fully Common Core aligned curricula have existed. The result is that most teachers have had to adopt new curricula, especially for math and language arts, and in some cases more than once. One teacher that works in a higher socioeconomic neighbourhood in South Pasadena explained:

[they give] the career part of the program a year, and then you never really get a chance to master any of them... Then next year it will be all new... Then we're like 'well what about that thing from last year, are we doing that anymore?'

While the curricula is new across most districts, it is not identical curricula, although the end goals are the same. Continually overhauling the curriculum not only causes extra stress and work for teachers, but teaching new material comes with a learning curve, and without keeping material long enough for teachers to become comfortable with the methodology, it is impossible to truly assess if it is effective.

During the interviews there were two dominant themes that most public school teachers talked about in terms of implementing the new curricula, the challenge of adopting and teaching the new material itself, as well as the pressures associated with continually rising expectations. It should be noted that students' SES plays a major role in terms of ability to effectively process the curricula being presented. It contributes to each class' personality, the academic level students are at when they enter the classroom at the beginning of the year, as well as other factors that can impede ones capability to retain information, such as homelessness, lack of resources or family support at home.

Most teachers have a specific learning and teaching style that they have honed over the years. Factors such as previous education experience, personal learning styles, and what they

have found works best in their class over time, all combine to form this style. Some of the new curricula, however, are very strict about how the information is to be presented and does not always mesh with teaching styles. This results in an inflated learning curve for teachers who not only have to learn the new curricula themselves, but they must understand it well enough to effectively pass it on to their students:

Because common core is like been placed in our classroom, a lot of the curriculum has changed. So for a teacher that's been teaching as long as me it's a big shift. Cause the standards came, they didn't even use to have standards, so when I got my credential in [19]96, that's when they really started having standards like available. So I've been teaching with these standards for twenty years so it's a big shift. And my colleagues have been teaching even longer than I have (Jessica, Hermosa Beach).

Not only is the material different, even the pedagogical methodology is expected to take on a specific structure. Karen Ramsey describes this in detail:

We just started a new language arts program and it's been rough. You know, trying to figure out the whole system of things. Part of this new program, is you're supposed to get your kids... When you say: 'the first fifteen days is all review and receive,' and then after the fifteen days you guide them through it. So it was a little bit stressful in the beginning and we were all worried about how we are gonna do this.

Regardless of socioeconomic status, implementing a new curriculum is tough. It adds more administrative work to the teacher's load; in the form of collecting data, figuring out lesson plans, even getting on board with the methodologies. Danielle teaches in South Pasadena, and spoke about the added stress and challenges that she has faced with their current language arts curriculum, in her class which happens to have a high percentage of kids with special needs:

We have a new language arts program this year. It's not usually this stressful, and the kids aren't liking it, so then it's already challenging to teach cause I'm not loving it either... [but] we've got to find a way to make it work... And so trying to do just that, well then: oh we have to give these assessments, and we need data by this date. And come on like my kids don't know their passwords, and they have learning issues, and it takes forever to like... It's just overwhelming.

Once they adjust to the new curriculum after a couple of years, things get easier. In Kristin's words: "we started a new curriculum this year, so it's challenging for everyone... Our first unit assessment was awful, but it was throughout the district, so the second one [was an improvement]." But when the curriculum keeps changing, and expectations keep rising, time management and productivity are bound to suffer.

The previous section examined pressures that students are feeling from the continually rising expectations of the curriculum. This pressure is very obvious to teachers in the lower SES neighbourhoods. When it comes to adopting the new curricula, the teachers notice it too. In the words of Mr. Gonzales:

What the district, the state, is asking the kids to do is not appropriate. I don't think the kids are ready for the kids of... the standards that we're trying to teach them. I think they try to speed it too much. I think that the expectations are too high. And I understand about high expectations, but I don't think that... Some of these kids are not ready, a lot of the kids are not ready... There's very few kids that are ready for the kinds of things that they want us to be... You're asking [them] to do things from high school, things I learned from high school, and middle school. It's they're teaching them in fourth grade.

This becomes an even larger problem in areas of lower SES where schools tend to perform lower on the academic scale. In most cases these students are already behind, and teachers are now being handed curricula where their kids need to be at far more advanced levels. Mr. Harris spoke in depth about the difficulty he is having with his current group of students:

I have... seven kids that were in Special Ed, and now they're mainstreamed. And they're extremely low; they're not even close to grade level. And then I have probably six, seven more that are also extremely below grade level, with different needs than the ones that are diagnosed with IEP's and what nots. So it's... and then I've gotta teach this advanced curriculum that we just recently adopted, which is heavy duty, and the kids are just lost. And I know a lot of tricks, and I've been at it a long time, and they... And it's just not, and I mean they're bombing these tests... This curriculum is expecting them to already have so many skills in place, in both math and language arts... Actually they're just... truly on grade level... I've got about three, out of thirty.

Teachers are on a schedule and there are unit tests, some of which are expected to be provided to the state as data. In classrooms that have a large population of students below grade level this adds a huge amount of pressure. Teachers are expected to teach students information they are not ready for, and in many cases the students don't have the social, organizational or study skills necessary to acquire the information effectively in the first place. Miss Sarra explained that it's not even worth getting straight to the academics if they are not in the right place socially and emotionally:

For me this year, it's been a lot more of like: 'okay let's figure out our social positioning here.' Instead of focusing immediately on the academic, because most of them, across the board, are low academically. So I know that I'm gonna have to take my time through

everything, and maybe they won't end the year at a fifth grade level, but I really... Cause I used to teach middle school and so, for me, knowing that they're going to leave this elementary school and go into middle school the way that they are now, they're gonna have a really difficult time adjusting to the expectations of middle school students. So my goal right now is to try and get them more independent. So that they can at least ask for help when they need it next year.

Having taught middle school previously provided Ms. Sarra with additional information on what they truly need to survive there, which isn't necessarily academic curriculum. In lower SES neighbourhoods, students are already behind and fighting a losing battle before they even receive the curriculum, because they simply don't have the foundations for success. Teachers are forced to make difficult choices: attempt to force overly advanced material into their student's brains and completely neglect any sort of foundations, or like Ms. Sarra, accept that there are other skills that their students need first. Skills that will better equip them in the long run. Ms. Sarra believes that by focusing on her students' social emotional needs, and building their independence, her students will fare better in middle school because even though they are behind academically, they will be better equipped to seek the help they need and advocate for themselves.

Mr. Harris, who teaches in a low SES neighbourhood in Hawthorne, has a similar philosophy. He believes that life skills are more important for his students, and that without the proper study and organizational skills in place, his students won't be able to retain the more advanced knowledge. In his words:

My goal is to prepare them for middle school. And not just Academia, because most of them are a little below, but... to make decisions, how to organize their work, good work

habits, study skills... None of that's in the curriculum, [or] in our pacing guide, but I do it anyways... I've gotten kind of dinged from the administration, but I don't care... They need those skills, and they don't get them at home. So they need to be able to make smart decisions, and organize their work because... They have the curriculum which they can't understand anyways... Every paragraph has twenty new vocabulary words they've never heard of... I try to fit in what I can... I've learned over time that you can't be too anal about what you're teaching. There are a lot of teachers that are, and they're going crazy.

Mr. Harris' emphasizes the struggle he and his colleagues face: they are expected to teach advanced curriculum to students that lack the necessary foundations to process it. Not only the foundations for the material itself, but even the ability to organize a notebook or write down notes to be reviewed later: the skills needed to retain information. Moreover, if the administration is paying attention to whether they are following the curriculum, they are stuck between choosing to help their kids in the long run and risk getting in trouble, or spending their time drilling their kids on advanced curriculum without the necessary foundations for success. In Mr. Harris' case, he has been "dinged" before for stepping outside the box, but he is confident in the union's ability to protect him. In his eyes, his students are the priority.

While the ideals behind the common core are well intentioned, for students in schools like Mr. Harris' and Ms. Sarra's, the standards tend to have an opposite effect. Rather than bringing the students who are behind up to an 'acceptable' level, they become disenfranchised and often give up. This is very different from what teachers of middle-class and affluent students' experience, where most students arrive with the organizational skills and basic academic foundations to acquire anything and everything. In most cases they have to work extra hard to challenge the kids. While the intention of providing all kids with the same "equal"

education is a great ideal, the actual result is an increase in inequality because students in lower SES neighbourhoods already lacked the equity to be successful before the bar was raised. They don't have the organizational skills and capital that higher SES kids learn at home, usually before they even reach kindergarten. It is also worth inquiring into the nature and purpose of the bar to begin with.

Another difference in terms of curriculum implementation and SES is the amounts of flexibility teachers are given. It should be noted that while the amount of perceived flexibility does correlate with SES in most cases, it also relies on having a supportive administration. Teachers in lower-performing schools tend to have administrators that are under increased pressure to raise their schools' performance, which leads to a tighter rein on teachers. An example of this was illustrated in the previous section, when Mr. Gonzales' school district brought in a Principal with the intention of raising test scores.

Mrs. Paige teaches at a public school in Torrance. She spoke in depth about how she had stressed about lesson plan design and curricula implementation in Teachers college, and that she hasn't needed to do much lesson planning at all:

I didn't have to spend a lot of time writing a lot of lesson plans... We have a lot of freedom, and I know it's not that way at all schools so I feel very fortunate that... We do a lot of collaboration among our colleagues, and then we sort of come up with plans and... Try things out... So we do a lot of experimental lessons, so to speak, so we don't have a lot of formal plans or what not.

Mrs. Paige's school is in an upper middle class neighbourhood and performs well in state tests. She and her colleagues are encouraged to collaborate and experiment with curriculum to foster a better learning environment. Mitch Stevenson's experiences are similar with his upper middle

class school in in the Santa Monica/Malibu district, a district known for being progressive. He has been teaching for 28 years and his methods provide consistently successful results.

This is the opposite end of the spectrum from Mr. Harris getting “dinged” when he deviates from the specified curriculum to teach his kids organization and notetaking. It should be noted that while Mr. Harris’ students have low test scores, they also have the best attendance rates at his school. This suggests that he has built a good rapport with his students, especially in a neighbourhood where school attendance isn’t always a family’s top priority. Mr. Harris is also frustrated by the need to regularly turn in detailed lesson plans, when his limited time would be better spent teaching:

A lot of it is just a waste of time. Turn in all these lesson plans. Why? We’re following the curriculum, right here we add our own little flair... Especially when you’ve been teaching twenty-six years. I need to write out everything?... Okay I’m gonna waste ten hours a week and write that down, when I could be preparing... Or [grading] papers, or [working] with kids.

Here we see another major difference between teaching in higher versus lower socioeconomic status areas. Higher SES schools are given more freedom and flexibility to interpret the curriculum and hone their lessons to their kids’ specific needs. Whereas in the lower SES neighbourhoods teachers are watched closer by administration, they have to submit more paperwork for lesson planning in addition to data collection and assessments. Of the six low SES school teachers interviewed, four directly referenced data collection or paperwork aspects of their job. While the other two did not specifically reference paperwork and data collection, both spoke in depth about the significant amount of overtime they put in, well past the traditional eight-hour work day. Schools with higher performing kids don’t have to worry about test scores

and funding so they can afford to allow their teachers the space to experiment and see what they can do. Further, because the teachers are awarded the freedom to truly hone each class to their students' needs, the students get more out of the system and they learn and grow more than they would in a school where the teacher is forced to stick to the strict curriculum.

It should be noted that this lack of freedom is not consistent for all low SES schools. Kristin teaches at a low performing school in Hawthorne, and has had a very different experience. She references having flexibility in terms of grading, which test scores are reported, and resources that other teachers in the same district don't appear to have access to:

The weekly tests are supposed to be considered informative... Help you know which students need more help... But we do [state-administered tests]. I mean we have flexibility with how many of them we use on their final grades. The unit assessments we are supposed to use, and that's the data the district collects.

Kristin's comment is important because it emphasizes the importance of school administration especially in terms of added constraints for teachers. While she is expected to adhere to the chosen curricula, she brings in other strategies such as "sticky-note quizzes" to discern what information her students are retaining and who needs additional help. She adapts the recommended collaborative group learning formats to what works for her group of students. When grading, she has flexibility in terms of assessing her students and what their final grades look like. So what is different about her experience? It likely involves her relationship with the administration. More specifically that she doesn't feel like they are watching her closely. In addition, Ms. Sarra, who spends a good deal of time focusing on her students' social emotional needs and has not been "dinged" like Mr. Harris, but as mentioned above, she feels that she has a

very supportive principal. Her school is on the cusp of both low SES and middle-class neighbourhoods.

#### ON THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER ADAPTABILITY

Finally, class personality should be reiterated as an important factor of a classes overall success. Socioeconomic and cultural factors impact class personality, and intersect with the individual personality of each student in the class to create a unique personality for the group as a whole. Ms. Sarra explains her classes' distinct personalities:

It's really fascinating how the students can change, whether it is in maturity level or interests... I sort of think of it more like, the personalities of my kids... My kids last year were very curious and very outgoing, and so they were really excited to do projects and presentations... And they weren't afraid of anything... My kids this year are... much more childlike... They're not as outgoing, they're a little bit more timid and unsure of themselves.

This is important because even being in the same neighbourhood with the same population of students, does not provide the same experience every year. What works for a group of students one year, may not work the next year. Teachers must continually adapt to each class in addition to their other duties. One teacher in Hawthorne explains that she seems to get alternating groups, "Last year I had several challenging kids... I mean they weren't kind... Treated others poorly... And so this year... I feel like I have a lot of students who are just very individualistic... but they're all kind hearted." Understanding one's class is the key to classroom management. Mitch Stevenson elaborates:

Classroom management is kind of the foundation that everything, all the other pedagogy comes off of, 'cause if you don't have command of the class, if you don't have the

attention of the students. If you don't have everybody buying into the system and participating, then it doesn't matter how fast your wheels are going, because you're not going anywhere.

This is why it is so important for teachers to have the freedom to adapt their methods and curricula to suit their current class. Class personality affects which learning and teaching styles are best suited to each classroom. A teacher with the flexibility to assess and adjust is far more likely to efficiently teach their students than a teacher forced to follow one rigid path.

### **TEACHER PRESSURES, ACCOUNTABILITY AND ASSESSMENT**

One of the key findings of this research that teachers are constantly under pressure from their administration in terms of performance, which provides an additional obstacle that they must overcome. The adoption of the NCLB came with a huge push toward teacher accountability, likely due to a public misconception that low performing schools result from teachers not doing their jobs. The policy included provisions to ensure teachers were qualified, and sanctions and salaries were based off their students' test scores. The intention was to incentivize teachers to ensure their students learn the material. The problem is, as illustrated in this thesis, a teacher's ability to teach is only one small part of the puzzle.

Student performance is effected by a combination of factors; a large percentage of which teachers have no control over. The policy also required districts to take action against low achieving schools, including mass rehiring of staff and faculty, or shutting down the schools completely (Cambre, 2013). This resulted in increased pressure on the administration and the wider district, encouraging them to keep a close eye on teacher performance.

Stacey Sanders talked in depth about her frustrations with the new principal and how he has been promoting “Radical Candor,” a term for a management style in the business world developed by Karen Scott (2017) of Google. She did not go into detail about the nuances behind buzzword, or what it means to adopt business strategies in an educational environment, but she spoke in terms of the observation assessment he provided for her. She said that he: “shared with me in my observation, there were other things and some of it was okay...but the stuff that was supposed to be proscriptive was like “what?” ...We don’t seem to connect.” Radical candor promotes an ideology of showing that you care about the employee, while at the same time providing constructive and direct feedback. It believes that in the long run, appropriately delivered direct feedback, even when harsh, is more productive than avoiding hurt feelings. Based on Stacey’s confusion by the feedback she received, the “direct” feedback was not clear. Stacey’s job is affected negatively by an administration that she feels does not have her back. The idea of radical candor being utilized in classrooms, what it means, and if it is ever effective is worth pursuing in future scholarship, but for the scope of this thesis it is important to note that Stacey’s experiences with her administrator were further hindered by the implementation of a management style made popular by the corporate world. Adapting to and getting used to changes in administration, is another obstacle that teachers must navigate.

In the previous section, Mr. Gonzales provided an example of how using test scores as a measurement can be problematic, when his district brought in a principal with the intention of raising the school’s test scores. In his case, the principal’s focus on test scores resulted in so much conflict between the administration, parents, and teachers that Mr. Gonzales ended up switching to a different school, despite the school’s location in the neighbourhood he grew up in. Teacher accountability and assessment is important, but one might argue that it should not come

at the expense of a teachers' ability to effectively teach.. Punishment for situations they have little control over, and ignoring other contributors to student performance, may well result in disengagement from the system, burn out, or leaving altogether.

The main themes that appeared in the interviews were teachers' experiences of administrative pressures associated with assessment, and often revolved around the idea of ranking teachers based on student performance, and/or using test scores as a measurement for teacher performance. Karen Ramsey – a fifth grade teacher at a low performing school in Hawthorne – emphasized her frustrations:

The tendency to judge a teacher based on the performance of their students. That's one thing that I think my administrator and I disagree on the most. Because she loves to go [wagging her finger] And I'm like... Are you suggesting I don't teach? Do you think that I don't work hard? ... I say why don't you have a meeting with those students that are low performing and ask them what's going on. Because there are these other kids that are high performing. So clearly I've taught something... Stop judging me based on these low performing kids. Why not pull together that group of kids and say let's try to encourage and motivate them to work harder, ask questions... And I understand if I were just kicking my heels up and doing nothing... They come in, they observe; I'm clearly working my butt off... And they rank us together. They're like: 'See your coworker? Look at their scores' and I go 'un huh, look at their students.'

Using test scores as a measurement for student success is simply inadequate (Ravitch, 2010).

Test scores are one indicator in a complex system of potential indicators for student performance. Test scores are popular because they make data collection and assessment simple and easy for administrators, regulators and policy makers. They may create reliable numbers and

units of measurement that seem easy to analyze but there is no validity in terms of knowledge actually learned in the classroom. A student can enter a class, watch YouTube the entire year, and score 90% on the test because they had the knowledge when they entered the class at the beginning of the year. Alternatively, another student might enter a fifth grade class with a second grade reading level, work really hard all year to achieve a fourth grade level, and still fail the fifth grade reading comprehension test. The second student both worked harder and performed better in terms of actual learning, but the test would never reflect that without additional qualitative based information.

This thesis argues that a teacher's ability to teach is only one small piece of a very large and complicated puzzle. All fourteen teachers interviewed openly discussed how much they enjoy watching their students grow and learn. It was also clear that each was working hard in their classroom. Yet, their student's test scores remain heavily correlated with their neighbourhood's SES, because it is not as simple as caring about students and providing information. Basing teacher income and school funding on student performance by test scores serves to stratify the system further. Moreover, it runs the risk of pushing out the truly good teachers that are so desperately needed, as they are already close to exhaustion.

While pressure stemming from teacher assessments was a common theme among many teachers interviewed, more data is needed on this subject to determine best practices for measuring both teacher and student performance.

## **TECHNOLOGY**

Human life is constantly changing with the continuous invention of new gadgets and useful tools. Research into the positive and negative effects of living and growing up in a

constantly adapting technological society is becoming more and more prevalent. Some argue that too much screen time is bad for children, and causes societal withdraw and loss of valuable communication skills. Others say it has changed the way the brain thinks and functions, but that is not a bad thing, and rather than fight those changes we should adapt our teaching and learning styles to work with the technology (Bester & Brand; Ching, 2009; Mangen, Walgermo, & Bronnick, 2013). These advances in technology impact teachers and students, as such, it is important to consider how technology affects the classroom environment. This section will focus on three technology related themes that appeared consistently across interviews: access to information, decreased ability to remain focused in the classroom, and the struggle of having to continuously learn new technology for teaching purposes.

#### ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Today almost anyone can get access to the vast database of knowledge known as the internet, regardless of class, location, or status. Thanks to low cost cell phone carriers and affordable family plans, most families are able to maintain access to smart phones, even if they can't afford a computer. According to Ms. Adams, who teaches in a very low SES neighbourhood in Pasadena: "even though they're poverty, they still have the newest phones out there... And the kids have phones too. My kids have the same phone that I do. They have iPhone 7's." Kristin, who teaches at a low SES school in Hawthorne, used to feel that her students did not know about current events or politics, and now she's noticed a big change in terms of students engaging in both:

We used to... Wondered how much rich conversation our kids were getting at home about the world, and about nature and extra-curricular stuff. And it just seemed like they didn't have it to bring to the table, and the curriculum didn't always value that, or relate

to them. But now I feel like it's all internet, and they're not prepared for... kids have changed that much... But I bet you their parents have more access to information also. Many students had very little knowledge or interest of current events, and now they are coming to school with not only knowledge of current events, but with opinions and thoughts on the matter. It would be interesting to consider how much of this is due to easier access to information, and how much was sparked by recent changes in the political climate. The internet ensures almost anyone can get an instant answer to any question that pops into our brains, at any time, day or night. Experiences and issues that used to be easily swept under the rug and ignored now show up in the form of viral videos sweeping across social media. At the same time, knowledge posted online can be put there by anyone and is relatively unregulated. Not everything one reads on the internet is true, and even with parental controls the content has to be marked as inappropriate before they work. This has severe ramifications for students today.

Firstly, it is now more important than ever that students learn to think critically. A wide array of "fake news" and the multitudes of websites full of half-truths can be detrimental to the community, society and wider reaching country. The current political climate in the United States is an excellent example of the dangers of an inability to separate good sources from bad ones, and think critically about the information one receives. Students must be taught to understand what constitutes a reliable source, to ask where it comes from and to think critically about all information they stumble across. When asked the purpose of education, Stacey Sanders said: "To create people who can make good decisions and good choices, and vote more intelligently than we did recently... So that they can see the trees for the forest and be those kinds of critical thinkers that make a difference."

Additionally, it is increasingly difficult to control which TV shows and movies students have access too. Parental controls are great with content that is properly rated, but media sites such as YouTube rely on users to provide that information. Until the right person sees a video and flags it as inappropriate, anyone can watch it. Young kids tend to be more tech savvy than the average adult (NDP Group, 2007), and it is hard for most parents (let alone teachers) to keep ahead. Given the size of a cell phone screen it is not easy to keep an eye on what a student is viewing every minute of every day, especially in a class of thirty students. Dr. Smith spoke in depth about her concerns regarding an imbalance between over protective parenting versus the information children can easily find online:

And maybe it's just the political climate, maybe it's because of the climate of the world. I think kids know... more than we think they do. Because they're privy to so much, and I don't think... they're emotionally equipped to handle a lot of stuff... It's interesting how we think we protect our kids now, god forbid kids should be playing outside on their own... Or you would never see kids hardly ever shopping by themselves. Or getting on a bus... That doesn't happen anymore. It's funny what we monitor and what we don't. And I'm concerned that... we aren't talking to them... To put into perspective more about what's going on around them... Because they don't know what to do with it, they don't have enough experience to be able to put things in context.

Most teachers referenced the access to information that students have, and that kids are learning a lot of inappropriate innuendo much earlier than they saw just ten years ago. Karen Ramsey often finds herself asking what they watch at home: "They're quick to say things to each other and be inappropriate... and they know exactly what they're doing and it's so inappropriate and

I'm going: 'What do you watch? How do you know that?'. Mr. Harris also spoke in depth about how the media affects his students:

They see way more than we did when we were younger. So these insinuations, any institution at all that has to do with anything sexual or... Boys know more than... They know the innuendos. So they know the actual association of things, whereas girls who are probably going through the changes already, they're like embarrassed and they crawl into the hole and they get very uncomfortable.

These examples demonstrate that students are picking up on sexual references much earlier than even ten or fifteen years ago, potentially due to increased access to online content, and potentially television as well. This increased knowledge of inappropriate subject matter not only distracts students from lessons they should be learning, but it can also make the girls, who may have already started puberty, very uncomfortable.

Both the increased importance of critical thinking and student access to information affect classroom teachers in hidden ways that don't always align with the curricula schedule they are supposed to adhere to. Access to inappropriate media can create behavioural situations and distractions in the classroom that facilitate other unanticipated situations that impede student learning.

#### MAINTAINING FOCUS

Another major issue many teachers spoke about was their student's inability to focus on the subject matter at hand. In a previous section I mentioned most teachers have noticed an increase in ADD and ADHD in students over the past few years. Most attribute this to technology although more research is needed to confirm their suspicions. Teachers spoke in detail about kids having trouble focusing on assignments, and being frequently distracted by

technology. In classrooms like Ms. Adams', where every student is provided a chrome book, getting them on the task at hand, and off YouTube, is a major challenge:

Like they want the kids on the computers, on the chromes, but the kids don't always go on the website that they're supposed to be on. They're on YouTube, they're just all over the place... and thank goodness they're not in any porn or nothing like that. I'm sure there's those parental controls in place, but the point I'm trying to make is that they're always in the website that they're not supposed to be on... We have in place this program that's supposed to block those programs out. And even those programs, when they get blocked out, they go on the computer because the computer has games.

With 33 students, all on computers, it is impossible to monitor what each is doing; let alone teach a lesson at the same time. Even at home it has become an issue. Later that interview, Ms. Adams mentioned suggesting parents get multiplication times table apps on their iPhones, thinking it's an easy way to motivate kids to learn the necessary skill: "And a lot of parents said 'Oh no! I don't wanna do that!'" When asked why the answer was overwhelmingly similar: "every time I put [them] on the computer to do multiplication games they go on YouTube."

Mr. Gonzales has also noticed a decrease in focus over the years: "I think it's also the technology... Kids spending more time in front of computers, in front of video games... That's one thing that is kind of... The focus is not there." There are many valid arguments for the importance of technology in the classroom, but navigating the balance between usefulness and distraction is a real struggle for teachers. Kristin has a hard time with her students paying attention, even when they are not online they are fiddling with computer settings:

Their knowledge of how to use technology is improving, there's still part of the maturity factor for them... That's kind of a struggle. It's like, they're allowed to change their

screen saver and I don't care, but if you're spending a bunch of time, when you're supposed to be doing an assignment...

She continues to say that she's noticed them in "messy things because of the internet." Ms. Sarra also spoke about the positive and negatives of technology:

Having increased technology in the classroom is wonderful because it's obviously gonna prepare them for a technologically advanced world... But at the same time, the way that they just plug in at home and disconnect from their families is horrifying. It's truly scary... I have not been teaching for very long, but I can already see the difference. Like the difference between the class of fifth graders that I was student teaching, and this grade just five years later, yup. And it does affect the development of their brains... Their brains are not getting the right kind of exercise or use that it needs when they're just watching a video on you tube. And its concerning.

This lack of communication skills, along with focus issue, was a common concern among teachers interviewed, regardless of SES or performance level of the school.

Thanks to technology, students have access to exactly what they want when they want it. Many teachers referenced higher rates of entitlement and a need for instant gratification. Melissa, who teaches at a private school in Culver City, is glad she doesn't have to navigate raising her own children in this age of technology: "my gut is that a lot of the impulsivity, and a lot of the need to have stuff right away, not being able to wait... Not that technology causes it, but I think it's that piece of the puzzle." Miss Adams pointed out that most adults are guilty of the same thing: "I'm like 'oooh! I like that song by Justin Bieber too!'" Stacey Sanders expressed the same sentiment: "I mean we all are a little bit like that too. We want things now, right away, and

I can!” If adults have trouble avoiding the desire for instant gratification, how can students be expected to?

#### LEARNING NEW TECHNOLOGY

One concern referenced by a couple teachers was the struggle of keeping up with all the new technology. Ms. Adams states that technology has drastically changed her entire job:

When I first started teaching twenty years ago, everything was on paper. Grades were paper, the kids did paper. Everything was paper. Report cards were on paper. And now they want everything on the computer, they want all the lessons on the computer, report cards on the computer, everything... So it's kind of hard changing everything I've ever done completely. I'm not a tech person.

Teachers are expected to learn and utilize new technology on a regular basis. While technological advances come with the intention of making life easier, program implementation and fixing bugs, become a huge impairment to available class time. This impacts teachers' already nonexistent spare time. In addition to serving on committees, coaching the basketball team, and grading, they also need to figure out how to use a new computer program. Ms. Adams asserts that many of her colleagues feel the same:

We feel like they're just kind of turning our world upside down because they're expecting us to change the way we teach and pretty much overnight. Like they throw all these programs at us at the same time, like it wouldn't be so bad if they wanted us to learn one or two programs a year, but they give us like six or seven programs every year. And they want us to master them, implement them, teach them, and it's really overwhelming, especially for our salaries.

This is just another way a teachers' personal time is affected by work, adding yet another strain to an already over-stressed situation. They cannot learn the programs while teaching the students, or grading their work, suddenly the eighty-hour work week becomes 85.

This section has considered concerns teachers have about the ever-changing technological advances and their use in classrooms. Technology drowns students in more information than they can process, especially without the necessary skillset to sift through what is good versus bad information. Moreover, they are provided access to inappropriate subject matter that they may not be equipped for emotionally. There are significant potential impacts on their ability to maintain attention and focus, and the constant availability of knowledge is propagating the already too-prevalent desire for instant gratification. Who wants to work on math assignments with a multitude of fascinating YouTube videos right at their fingertips? Finally, the constant barrage of new technology is hard for some teachers to keep up with, and adds more strain to a situation already under severe constraint.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

In the findings section I discuss several factors influencing a teacher's ability to teach, and their students' ability to learn. These factors exist across multiple levels from student and socioeconomic level, to administrative and bureaucratic constraints including resources, funding, workload, relationships, curriculum and teacher assessments, to technology. The interviews provide evidence that these factors play a role in shaping the educational experience for both teachers and students, and potentially influence student learning outcomes. But what does this mean? While there are always similarities, every class comes with its own personality, and unique set of challenges. Moreover, each class is affected by a combination of the contributing factors in a different way. No single adjustment can be made to address every situation because it is not a single factor that causes the outcome. Rather, it is the intersection of many, continuously changing factors. Having resources helps but does not fix everything. Most importantly, what works for one classroom will not necessarily fix another. It is understanding this need for flexibility and adaptation that is imperative to improving chances for student success.

### **A CASE STUDY: COLLABORATIVE GROUP WORK**

To better understand how intersecting factors such as socioeconomic status and class personality can affect a single teaching strategy, we shall consider a brief case study involving the popular teaching strategy of collaborative group work. The name differs across districts, but the concept is the same. Students work together in groups of two to six, solving problems together as a means of learning the material. Talking out and problem solving assignments as a group, is believed to foster a more thorough understanding of the material. Effective groups feature a range of levels so stronger students can assist weaker ones. The actual execution of

group work differs from classroom to classroom, but many public school teachers are using, or attempting to implement, some form of this methodology. Mrs. Paige has begun using it to move away from traditional authoritarian teaching styles, to an approach where students are more involved in their learning:

I've put a lot more of their learning in their hands...They've done more group work, and less of me just standing up in the front and talking to them and teaching them that way. But giving them problems to work on, or tasks to do as a group...And now I'm trying to learn, teach them how to be better listeners and discussion people... I think they enjoy learning things much more, and I enjoy teaching this way much better, because I would get bored with just 'okay we're going over this page in this book, I very rarely use textbooks anymore.'

This student directed learning approach is becoming a popular trend among administrators and curricula. Hawthorne and Pasadena are not on the same curricula, but both have recently implemented new curriculum that mandates a form of collaborative groups as part of the structure.

Mitch Stevenson has been using a variation of collaborative group learning throughout his twenty-eight-year career, and feels he has pretty near perfected it. He was trained in Jeanne Gibbs's *Tribes* methodology (1994), which uses collaborative groups to foster effective and supportive learning communities among students. Mitch's school is located in an upper-middle class neighbourhood, and part of a district long known for progressive teaching strategies, the ideal place to hone the *Tribes* methodology. Mitch spends the first couple of weeks with a new group of students rotating desks through various groupings, trying out different combinations in order to discern how specific groups of students work together. He advises against pairing

friends as they tend to distract from learning, and instead focusses on academic levels, placing one very strong student, one very weak student, and a couple in between, in the finalized group. When things come together perfectly, groups are balanced out to include a strong reader, strong mathematician, and a strong writer. Once the groups are finalized they remain together for the next two years, since Mitch keeps his students both grades four and five. He explains:

If you have them for one year, you get one years' worth of work done. If you have them for two years, you can literally get two and a half years. You get more time, because all that time in August and September, when I'm just getting to know them, and they're getting to know me, and they're figuring out how things run, we come back on day one and we're ready to go.

Mitch's attributes the *tribes* methodology to his students learning to effectively communicate with each other, solve problems, provide constructive criticism, and to keep each other accountable and focused. The key seems to be in pairing weaker students with stronger ones. This allows the stronger student to assume a position of leadership, effectively mentoring peers until they catch up. This mutually beneficial partnership allows the stronger student to hone valuable leadership skills, and often times the weaker student leaves Mitch's class a strong student in their own right. Most importantly, Mitch doesn't have to do anything other than teach his class the material and provide a bit of extra support here and there as needed, it frees up valuable time to focus on students with special needs, or to reflect and improve the lessons. He utilizes his strong students to provide the weaker ones with the extra support and individualized attention that a teacher is simply unable to provide with thirty students in a class. In Mitch's eyes, everyone wins. It is possible that in this scenario the stronger student may feel resentful when they are expected to help weaker students, or that they are being held back academically,

but Mitch believes that the leadership skills they leave the classroom with at the end of the year are more valuable. In the working world, most jobs involve some form of collaboration, and one doesn't often get the opportunity to pick and choose their colleagues, or clients. The ability to communicate ideas clearly, and constructively critique others' work, will provide more benefits in the long run.

Here we see compelling evidence that, collaborative groups can be extremely effective for fostering learning, and allowing for efficient group strategizing. It also provides valuable leadership and collaboration experience that students can take with them into the working world. In fact, there is a lot of evidence in the literature attesting to the benefits of collaborative groups as a learning structure (Adams, 1992; Jin & Kim, 2018). But does it work the same in every classroom?

Mr. Gonzales' low SES school in Pasadena has implemented the *balanced literacy* approach, which he explains expects students to be independent and work in groups, doing different tasks for twenty minutes at a time. For example, one group might be working on spelling, while another reads, another is writing, and another is working with the teacher on a lesson. Mr. Gonzales has found his students struggle to maintain focus during this time:

They don't have the discipline, and the independence, and the responsibility, to do their work and so this is very difficult for me. So I have to switch, I'm kind of doing different ways but that's the goal to... Hopefully at one point we do that. Right now, what I do is, we call them rotations. So instead of doing rotations, the whole class does the rotation. So everybody does independent reading, everybody does writing, everybody does... And then I try to work with the groups where I just kind of walk around and help.

Mr. Gonzales feels the pressure to follow the methodology mandated by the curriculum, but his students are unable to focus and stay on task while working independently. His solution has been to adapt the program to suit his class' needs and he is hopeful that as his students will mature, eventually they can move toward a more independent structure.

In Hawthorne, Mr. Harris, who has been teaching in his low SES neighbourhood for 26 years, explains that the emphasis today "nationally" is on collaboration:

I've seen good in collaboration, but I've also seen a lot of distraction. If you have kids that are really immature, and they can't work together because they get off topic so quickly... It's very counterproductive. And then you're just trying to restore law and order, and then you're losing all kinds of time. Instead of that structure and discipline that we all grew up with. It's... Not working that way these days, at least for this class. If all kids had the skills in place, and they're already advanced, you could do these things. Talk about this project, and these theories and this... Anyways so, I allow them to collaborate but not nearly as much as they expect. But if I did... My room would be chaos.

Over 26 years of teaching lower SES classes, Mr. Harris has become well versed in managing a classroom of thirty-plus students. He has seen collaborative group work be successful with the right students, but has come to understand the students' capability to focus on independent work depends on many intersecting factors, including: the ability to remain focused and stay on task, academic level, and organization skills. In his experience, the contributing factors work against his students, and a collaborative group structure culminates in more time wasted than gained.

This was a common similarity across many classrooms in lower SES neighbourhoods, as reflected in the interviews.

What is it that has kept Mitch's collaborative groups running seamlessly for twenty-eight years? Why was Mrs. Paige able to implement group work easily over the past couple years whereas Mr. Harris and Mr. Gonzales have to struggle to keep their kids to on task? Mitch described one year, when he and the principal were not getting along. When Mitch refused to stray from his trusted *Tribes* pedagogical structure, the principal stacked his class against him. She put five of the most challenging kids in the school in his class at the same time. By Mitch's account, it was one of his most difficult teaching years, but he managed and to this day chalks it to a valuable learning experience. The following year, a new principal took over, he took one look at Mitch's class and said: "This is insane, there's no way these people should all be in your class. I'll split them up and put them in other classes." This statement says a lot; mainly that some would consider it 'insane' to have five difficult children in a single class. Insane in an upper middle class neighbourhood, such as Santa Monica, maybe, but numbers work very differently in neighbourhoods of lower SES status. Karen Ramsey talked in depth about: "The Five," her current group of spirited students who "make [her] life really difficult." This is alongside other students with special needs that also require special attention. Yet, nobody seems to raise an eye in her direction. For many teachers, in low SES neighbourhoods having five difficult students is more of the norm, perhaps even a vacation.

Getting back to the key of Mitch Stevenson's set up, the pairing of stronger students with weaker ones. If there are five difficult students in a class and six table groups that is one difficult kid per table group. At the same time there's one strong student per table, and some in the middle. This suggests a teacher needs at least six strong student leaders to help the struggling students, and keep them on task. But at a school in a lower SES neighbourhood, where you have

eight kids with special needs, five with behaviour challenges, twenty that are below grade level, and maybe two that are strong, the balance is not so easy to achieve.

The purpose of this case study is not to argue for the need to remove difficult children from classrooms, or to mix up kids in different SES schools. It is also not to say that Mitch Stevenson has had it easy, because that is highly unlikely. Different classrooms in different SES neighbourhoods have different challenges, including the distribution ratio of strong to weak students. Therefore, one solution – even one that works so well for Mitch Stevenson – cannot solve every classroom’s issues. Expecting a strategy like collaborative group work to function the same across all academic levels and all SES statuses is not rational. Moreover, comparing test scores of teachers like Mitch Stevenson against those of Mr. Harris is not fair, because it doesn’t accurately measure anything.

### **THEORETICAL ANALYSIS: THE INTERSECTION OF CLASS, ETHNICITY AND GENDER**

The above case study indicates a trend toward a curricular emphasis on collaborative group learning, as well as clear evidence that this strategy does not produce the same outcomes across the full spectrum of socioeconomic status classrooms. Teachers in classrooms where group work has proven ineffective must choose whether to attempt to follow the curriculum, like Mr. Gonzales (and maybe modify the strategy slightly in the hopes that it will help), or go against the mandate and make use of a different strategy, like Mr. Harris. As with most complex situations, socioeconomic status is not the only factor at play. It is also important to consider the intersection of socioeconomic status, race, and gender.

While my data did not provide much information in terms of the effects of race and ethnicity, one observation stood out. The two white males interviewed (Mr. Stevenson and Mr.

Harris) each described experiences where they felt they had to go up against administration. Further, both teachers felt confident in their ability to do so, because they felt well situated in their positions in both their respective schools and the teaching union. Mr. Gonzales, on the other hand, being of Latino ethnicity and having grown up in a working class family, did not feel the same flexibility despite having a significant eighteen years' teaching experience. When he and his colleagues went to their union about their negative experiences with their administrator, the union did nothing to help them. Rather than go up against his administrator, he switched schools.

With only three males interviewed, my sample size is not generalizable, but these cases offer an opportunity for theoretical reflection. Cultural reproduction theory attempts to explain how power is reproduced through a transmission of cultural capital within and through social institutions. In this example, teachers' own socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnicities affect their capital in the education system. Mr. Harris grew up in Manhattan Beach, a wealthy community in Los Angeles' South Bay. Mr. Stevenson grew up in the Midwest, where his family had enrolled him in private school for most of his primary years. It seems likely that their upper-middle class upbringing combined with the privilege afforded by their white skin has manifested in the form of cultural capital that gives them confidence when interacting with their administrations. Mr. Gonzales, on the other hand, does not have the same capital, which is reflected in his low confidence about confronting the administration.

We can take the analysis a step further and include gender. Of the female teachers interviewed, most who spoke about flexibility in their lessons and curricula were teaching in affluent areas. Two teachers in lower socioeconomic areas felt that they had some flexibility in the curricula, one being a white female (Ms. Warren), who sits on the curricula committee. The other (Ms. Sarra), is a Latina who teaches at a school right on the border of middle and working class

neighborhoods. Ms. Sarra is also the teacher who talks about having a supportive administrator, who had been a teacher herself prior to her position.

Here, Ms. Warren, a white woman who has taught abroad for a number of years, sits on the curricula committee, and had a say in which curricula was chosen. Ms. Warren's time spent teaching abroad, and her experience serving on the curriculum committee has provided her with cultural capital that other female teachers might not have. Ms. Sarra grew up in a working class neighborhood, but she had a well-educated mother who sent her to schools in more affluent neighborhoods, providing her a degree of capital that many in her neighborhood would not have had access to. The other two female teachers in low socioeconomic schools (Ms. Adams and Ms. Ramsey) spoke about butting heads with their administration, but they did not appear to have the same level of confidence as Mr. Harris and Mr. Stevenson. They did not appear to feel confident about going against the administration, or in the belief their union would protect them. Moreover, Ms. Hoffman and Ms. Sanders, both of which teach in middle class neighborhoods, expressed disappointment in their own inability to effectively communicate with their administrations, to get their needs met. This suggests that cultural capital from class alone does not fully cover the situation; one must also consider intersections such as gender, race and ethnicity.

Bourdieu asserts that schools commit "Symbolic Violence" through invisible maneuvers that mask arbitrary practices as legitimate ones, allowing students to believe that the outcome of their educational experience is the sole result of "their individual nature and lack of gifts" (Bourdieu 1974, p. 42). These arbitrary practices almost always benefit the dominant culture, and serve to perpetuate the reproduction of inequality; the invisibility of the arbitrariness further facilitates acceptance of the dominant culture's power from both minority groups as well as the schools themselves (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979).

This study's observations of divergent teacher beliefs, about their respective abilities to disagree with and/or confront their administration suggests that it is not only students who are affected by those factors highlighted by cultural reproduction theory, but the teachers as well.

#### **TYING THEORY AND LITERATURE TO THE FINDINGS**

Cultural reproduction theory provides an explanation for the way students arrive at school for their first day with varying degrees of cultural capital, and this is supported in previous literature. Annette Lareau (2011) found parents in upper middle class neighbourhoods provide their children with capital, including how to interact with authority figures as equals, communication and reasoning skills, and when needed, parents will step in as advocates for their children. Students in working class neighbourhoods receive different knowledge from their parents. Since their parents often work long hours, they spend their days interacting with other children. They are taught authority figures should be respected, and that children are to be seen and not heard. Lareau's work demonstrates how children in different classes receive very different types of capital. Upon arrival on the first day of school, students whose capital best reflects that of the education system (usually upper middle-class students) have an easier time adjusting. Moreover, since upper middle-class students often arrive with a certain measure of academic knowledge they have an additional leg up. Students from working class backgrounds have less academic skills when they arrive at the classroom and become frustrated and impatient when they feel they are not getting the material quickly enough. Since they lack practice communicating with authority figures they are not comfortable asking adults for help, and do not have any skills to combat their growing frustrations. It is important to consider how these skills acquired at home (cultural capital) intersect with classroom experience.

In the Student/SocioEconomic Status section of chapter four I present evidence suggesting classrooms in areas with a higher SES tend to have a lower percentage of behaviourally challenged students. For teachers, this affects their means for addressing the behaviour. Teachers with less behaviourally challenged students can focus directly on the individual situation and potentially pinpoint and address the underlying issue. Teachers with a larger percentage of challenging students must spend their energy putting out multiple fires simultaneously, while the students who are ready to learn are left waiting. I also address the increased pressure students feel to meet a bar that is continually rising. Finally, I emphasize how each class has its own unique personality, and that teachers must adapt to that class's needs rather than expect one technique to work for all.

Symbolic interactionism helps illustrate the importance of class personality, and to explain why it is not helpful to approach each scenario with the same strategic game plan. Symbolic interactionism shows us organizational behaviour is not a stagnant set of givens based off of the rules of the overarching institution, but rather that the organization functions based off the continued interactions and actions of its community members. This is imperative to understanding the importance of taking into account individual class personalities, and why they are all so significantly different. Within every classroom scenario, teachers (the actors), are continuously influenced by the indicators set forth by each of their students, their knowledge of previous interactions with those students, the environmental context they are situated in. For example: are they teaching a lesson in the classroom? Are they in the gymnasium for PE class? Are they in the gymnasium for an entire school assembly? Each scenario leads to different options in terms of how they might respond to a student who is speaking out of turn, or jumping up and down. Each actor in every class has his or her own respective perspective, their own set

of indicators and responses that continuously change based on experiences and interactions they encounter. By considering the combination of situational context, the specific students involved, the indicators they provide, and the teachers past interactions with all of those students combined, it becomes easier understand why the same basic scenario, or lesson, or strategy, does not have the same outcome for each group of kids. In fact, through the lens of symbolic interactionism, the one-size-fits-all approach seems downright absurd. Moreover, while socioeconomic status does emphasize valid trends and patterns that do affect the outcome and should be considered, one must understand that socioeconomic status is merely one indicator in a multitude. Symbolic interactionism provides explanation for why the same strategy does not always work for the same teacher every year, or for all groups of low-performing students.

I discuss the administrative and bureaucratic obstacles that teachers must circumnavigate every day, that often have nothing to do with teaching students, yet everything to do with the outcome. The force of each constraint varies by level of SES, which alludes to why higher SES neighbourhoods have higher achieving schools and better test scores. These administrative constraints include the amount of funding and resources each school has. I provide evidence including how fieldtrips feature different opportunities in different districts. I emphasize that while they may only spend six hours a day in the classroom, it becomes a twelve-hour day when one factors in the obligatory assessments, grading, data collection, lesson planning, meetings, and professional development that also accompany the job. I also point out that the amount of work teachers do is seemingly invisible, completely unnoticed by society's perception. Gray and Silbey (2014) demonstrate how individuals on the frontlines experience rules and regulations differently according to their level of autonomy and social status, and this is no different for teachers and administrators. Teachers are on the frontline, teaching their students and talking to

the parents and their experiences and autonomy is very different from that of the administration – including the principal – who operate under a completely different set of constraints and pressures. For instance, teachers have to navigate with parents and administration, and also navigate school politics which increases strain on teachers. Therefore, I argue that a supportive administration is imperative to a teacher’s effectivity in the classroom.

While the parameters of my Master’s Thesis lacked the resources to complete a full-fledged institutional ethnography, I was able to briefly consider the particularities of their daily lives in the context of the ‘relations of ruling’ that organizes those lives as classroom teachers. Institutional ethnography begins in everyday life and then extends beyond the original scenario, where a path is mapped between indicators and connectors to organizational relations and how they may enforce constraints and regulations upon seemingly individual everyday decisions and actions.

Institutional ethnography combines the tracing of interactions and indicators inherent to symbolic interactionism with a consideration of how ruling relations and power structures affect everyday life. I describe the current education policy climate in the United States and how this led to the Common Core, and additional teacher constraints. This includes the challenge of learning and implementing a new curriculum. For teachers in low SES neighbourhoods it also involves juggling the administration’s demand for results against a group of students who are significantly behind. I demonstrate how higher SES neighbourhood schools tend to have more flexibility for experimentation and how this leads to added benefits for their students who are likely already at or above grade level. I argue that the students who need the innovation and experimentation the most are the ones in the lower SES neighbourhoods, where teachers often are kept on a tight rein by their administrations. An understanding of institutional ethnography

allows us to trace the actions of classroom teachers to the indicators present in the classroom, including the students and the situational context, to the constraining pressures placed on them by the administrators (who are under more pressure set forth by the district). It becomes clear that a teacher's choices in the classroom, in terms of pedagogical strategy and curriculum, are often embedded in limitations set forth by determinants much more powerful than the respective needs of their students. It is not hard to see how the best interest of their specific group of students may not always be at the forefront of the final decision.

I conclude the Administrative and bureaucratic constraints section with a discussion of the pressure that teachers are feeling from an atmosphere of teacher accountability. I use Karen Ramsey's example, where her principal equates her performance to test scores, where her class scores are often compared against the scores of other teachers in her school. I demonstrate how student test scores have little validity in terms of ability to accurately measure the teaching and learning that is happening in the classroom. Pitting teacher against teacher is unlikely to foster an environment conducive to teaching or learning.

In the final part of chapter four, I briefly discuss the implementation of technology in classrooms and how this affects teachers and students. According to the interview data, many teachers are concerned about the access kids have to overly mature subject matter. Most appreciate the use of technology, and understand the importance of their students learning how to utilize it, at the same time they struggle with keeping students focused on the lesson at hand, and off computer games. Finally, I talked about how some teachers are struggling with the constant need to learn and implement new computer programs in the classroom, on top of an already grueling schedule.

## **CONSIDERING THE EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL OF EDUCATION**

This research began with a focus toward examining contributing systemic features existing within a school's organizational structure, and how factors such as socioeconomic status and bureaucratic pressure affect classroom life and student learning outcomes. It also aimed to consider ways teachers can foster an environment where students are able to productively learn. These initial topics intended to on examine the education system's dimensions of emancipatory and social control. While the nature of the study has shifted to a central focus surrounding autonomy and administrative constraints, it is still worthwhile to consider how the data can inform the original focus on.

Chapter four exemplifies many systemic features existing within the organizational structure of schools including: pressures on the administration for high test scores reflecting, new curricula implementation, and the ever changing world of technology. It also answers the question of how SES can affect classroom life in terms of access to funding and resources, the ratio of strong students to challenging ones, and lower performing students resulting in administrations under pressure to raise test scores.

To answer the questions of how teachers make sense of the competing tensions surrounding the function of education and how they can practice freedom in the classroom we must dig deeper. In Chapter Six, I will provide some recommendations of strategies for improving classroom experience, and potentially learning outcomes as well, including teacher collaboration and experimental or progressive teaching strategies.

The teachers I interviewed all expressed aspirations of improving student lives, and a constant search for innovative strategies that do just that. The difference was some feel more constrained in their ability to do so than others. In order to enable the practice freedom in the

classroom, teachers need a certain degree of freedom to conceptualize, to collaborate and to experiment with innovative techniques. The sad part is, the students that need the innovation the most, are the ones that are behind: the lower SES students, the behaviourally challenged ones, and most importantly, the ones whose teachers are often kept on the tightest rein.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

I began this research with the goal of learning more about classroom life in Los Angeles, more specifically, how classroom life is impacted in terms of the emancipatory and social control functions of the school system. As a result of the interview data, the research shifted to a closer focus on teacher experiences with autonomy and systemic constraints. While classroom life remained central, the overarching organization of education was a dominant theme in interviews. Through interviewing teachers who teach in a variety of SES neighbourhoods' I was able to obtain a detailed picture of classroom life and the constraints that teachers felt affected a teacher's ability to effectively teach.

### **LIMITATIONS**

As with all research, there were some limitations to this study. Qualitative research is time consuming by nature and it would have been nice to have more resources in order to get more interviews, and to have more time for the coding and analyzation process. I was unable to interview teachers currently teaching in charter schools, which I believe would have added valuable insight. Also it would have been nice to interview a couple students and see how they are making sense of the classroom happenings, but due to the ethics approval process I had to restrict interviews to teachers. Interviewing students would be very beneficial to the full account of educational experience (c.f., Fergusson, 2001; Lareau, 2011; Popadiuk, 2009; Shalaby, 2017).

Also it should be noted that my sample size, due to the nature of my recruiting strategy and the volunteer aspect of the participation, while very informative was not fully representative of all teachers. Teachers more likely to reach out for an interview were the ones with more of an investment and knowledgebase of social justice and inequality in the classroom, and other

teachers may have a completely different viewpoint of what is taking place. That said, I believe the sample I did interview had an invested interest in the social justice side of education, which improved the quality of the interviews in terms of the knowledge I was looking to obtain. For a project of this scope, it is impossible to interview enough teachers for true representation.

Therefore, this project was never a numbers game, but instead a quest provide a qualitative snapshot of what is happening in classrooms, how teacher and student lives are affected, and what can be done to address the situation going forward. Qualitative research is the only way to truly understand what is happening at this level, and I do believe that the quality of my sample and the number of interviews did function to that regard.

## **SOME RECOMMENDATIONS**

### TEACHER COLLABORATION

One theme that appeared repeatedly throughout the data was the idea of teacher collaboration. Teachers are so busy managing their classrooms, keeping up with day to day administrative tasks and responsibilities that they don't have many opportunities to get out and collaborate with other teachers. Even schools that set aside time for their teachers to gather and meet aren't really taking advantage of it. Stacey Sanders's school sets aside time for teacher collaboration, but it's not always as helpful as she would like it to be:

We sort of collaborate but sort of not, and I think some teachers really ramp it up. It depends on the intensity of the teachers and.... How long they've been out of teacher education schools... I would love it to be more collaborative, and every once in a while, we have a collaborative time and then it's not very fruitful.

Teachers have valuable knowledge, but so much gets swallowed up in the classroom because they simply don't have time to get out there and share strategies with other teachers or the public. Mr. Harris believes that rather than pitting teachers against each other, teachers that are successful should be spotlighted, and other teachers should have the opportunity and time to observe what it is those teachers are doing.

I think that all ideas and things should be shared, if it seems to be successful. It shouldn't be: 'this is my idea;' it should be: 'this works!' Now everybody has different personalities. It's not like whatever you do is gonna work for me, or vice versa. But if what I'm doing works for my kids, it should be positively emphasized within the school... We don't do that... There's not enough observation at all. And I think that every teacher has something to bring to the table positively, and it's not... we don't get to see it.

The interviews indicated that schools that foster environments that encourage teacher collaboration have positive results. In the curriculum section, I shared a quote from Mrs. Paige about her faculty's collaboration and how it cuts down on administrative paperwork in the form of lesson plans, and leads to productive and beneficial experimentation in the classroom.

This research suggests that more teacher collaboration and less pressure to perform better than other teachers would go a long way toward crafting open environments where teachers are able to be creative in the classroom. Those are the sort of environments that cultivate effective problem solving, and are essential for discovering best practices for practicing freedom, and helping kids that fall behind.

## PROGRESSIVE IN NATURE

The research suggest that it would be very useful to e to allow progressive experimentation in the classroom. Effective teachers in successful classrooms typically bring some form of creative strategy and/or progressive technique into the classroom. The extent of the innovation might depend on how much flexibility they are given by the administration, but it is always present to some degree.

Ms. Sarra teaches at a school in Pasadena that is situated right on the cusp the low and middle SES areas. She has a uniquely diverse combination of students with traumatic home lives and those who come from more balanced homes where parents work at the nearby University or science center. This year Ms. Sarra has adopted flexible seating in her classroom, where she has removed all desks and instead students choose if they want to sit at a table with benches, on the floor at a coffee table with pillows, or somewhere else. She got the idea from a workshop entitled: ‘Who Wants to Sit in a Desk All day.’ She realized: “That was one of the reasons I became a teacher... I don’t want a job where I sit at a desk all day and then I’m expecting my students to sit at a desk all day.” So she got rid of desks, and found it to be good for her students both in allowing them to move about and stretch out, but also in terms of social development:

At first I was worried they were gonna group themselves the same way every day... And they really do switch it up... They sort of decide, well I wanted to sit with you, but actually I’d rather sit here in this chair. So like I want to sit at a desk today and you want to sit on the floor, we’ll hang out during recess instead. So that has helped – I think – the class break down some of those barriers and some of those like... cliques that happen outside on the playground.

Danielle who teaches at a public school in an affluent South Pasadena neighbourhood also utilizes flexible seating. Similarly, she has set up stations throughout the room to allow students to move around upon assignment completion, so they are not sitting for several hours straight.

In my classroom I've got all kinds of different seating available, and activities available, and when a kid has to move you have... If you're done with your work there are magnet boards on the wall with other things on them, and go look at an animal for a few minutes or whatever. You have to be active. You can't sit. It's not normal. I never sit.

Flexible seating is one of the many innovative ways that some teachers make school more accessible for their students, especially the ones with ADD. Sitting in a desk for hours at a time is difficult, most adults can't stand it, and children have way more energy on any given day. Constantly being told to sit still and stop moving is hard for even the most obedient of students, impossible for those that constantly fidget, and exhausting for teachers.

Both Danielle and Mitch Stevenson make use of a form of what Mitch called multiage classrooms. Traditionally, multiage classrooms are defined as "the practice of teaching children of different ages and ability levels together without dividing them (or the curriculum) into steps labeled by grade designations" (Heins, Tichenor, Coggins, & Hutchinson, 2000, p. 30). For Mitch, multiage classrooms includes teaching the same class for two years. He keeps his fourth graders for fifth grade as well, before popping back down to a new group of fourth graders, although he has in the past had more than one grade at a time. Danielle has a grade 4/5 split class and keeps her students for both years whenever possible. Either way, both attest to the extraordinary benefits that stem from keeping students for a second year. Danielle explains the group dynamics change every year, but even with the current group, which happens to have a lot

of students with special needs: “I always know that by next year they’re gonna be my leaders, they’re gonna mature.”

In the curriculum section of chapter four I discuss the importance of the freedom to deviate from assigned curriculum. While there are many interpretations of the Common Core, one of the main purposes behind its implementation was to bring autonomy back to teachers (Dana, et al. 2013). Based off interview data, that autonomy and flexibility is not always provided by the administration in lower SES schools. I discussed Mrs. Paige’s success with experimentation and continued collaboration with her fellow teachers, and how she has been able to foster effective student centered learning. I provided the example of Ms. Sarra using her knowledge from teaching older grades, to ensure her students have the social skills in place to be able to ask for help and advocate for themselves in middle school. I also talked about Mr. Harris making sure his students walk out of his classroom with valuable life and organization skills, and how his administration frowns upon his steering subject matter away from the curriculum.

Danielle talked in depth about the benefits her students gain from her efforts to provide them with individualized instruction:

I really believe in... Changing instruction... My philosophy is that if I teach the whole class I’m reaching a third of them. A third of them already know whatever it is that I’ve been putting out there, and a third of them aren’t going to get it. So I’m teaching to... So there’s no point in doing that.

Luckily her school, which is in an affluent neighbourhood, features a lot of team teaching and special programs that make it possible to divide her students into groups and teach to their individual level, rather than focus on one level that some have already surpassed, and some have not met yet. Her school’s resources allow her to devote a great deal of time and effort to ensuring

she provides support and the best education possible to each individual student. She is known in the district for being an effective teacher, especially skilled with special needs students.

Teachers are uniquely equipped with experiential knowledge that allows them to assess the needs of their students, and tailor the material presented in the classroom to best meet those needs. But this only works if they have the flexibility to do it. It would be incredible if all teachers could have the resources, time, and energy, to devote to providing individualized learning... But despite the current constraints, there is evidence that teachers of lower SES schools find ways to creatively manage the resources they do have. We see this in the way they utilize busses during off hours for field trips, or taking walking trips so don't need a bus. This resourcefulness is crucial to effective teaching, it is imperative to protect a teachers' ability to problem solve, and adapt matters to the situation at hand.

The Social-Emotional wellbeing of students is becoming recognized more and more in the literature as a crucial indicator of student success (Durlak et al., 2011; Green et al., 2005). In my interviews six teachers talked about addressing their students' socio-emotional needs and providing coping strategies. Melissa teaches at a progressive private school in California and explains: "It should be [important]. You can't really learn if you're not connected socially emotionally to yourself, to others..." Jessica, who teaches in a middle class neighbourhood near Hermosa Beach, mentioned that most social problems happen outside, usually out of range of the teacher or lunch monitor. So her school makes a point to address it with the students in the classroom: "we talk a lot about that kind of stuff, trying to help kids talk about it, identify it, give them coping strategies." Stacey Sanders' upper middle class school has a counselor that her students can request to visit at any time: "kids feel very empowered to go and say like: okay I need help now." Danielle starts every morning with mindfulness: "I find that mindfulness is a

wonderful technique and especially, I mean for everyone. I think especially the kids with special needs or anxiety issues or whatever. So I do guided mindfulness to start every day.” This trend toward the socio-emotional wellbeing of students is becoming more prevalent. Focusing on social-emotional needs allows teachers to provide coping strategies and resiliency that result in better concentration and retention of academic material. Yet, when the day is full of rigorous curriculum, it can be hard for teachers to find the time, especially in lower SES schools.

Another theme that appeared in interviews was the importance of providing students with a social justice education. A topic that is somewhat ignored in the literature/math focused common core, but was very important to at least five of the teachers interviewed. Most teachers referenced a true desire to make a difference as a main influence for becoming a teacher. Mr. Gonzales said that he got into teaching specifically because of the Social Justice aspect, he wants his students:

To understand that they have a place in society where they’re going to make a change when they get older. So I try to drive them to that as well. ... You’re not just gonna be a worker. You’re going to have to vote, you’re going to have to make sure that you respect women...If you’re a woman you make sure that your voice is heard wherever you go.

Mitch talked about his fears for the future of education in the country, and the dangers associated with a country that has a vast ‘anti-intellectual’ population. Many teachers specifically referenced the importance of teaching students how to vote intelligently. Social Justice education is very big at Melissa’s private school, and she believes the young mind is perfect for building a compassionate and open mindset:

Like a very small child, ‘that’s not fair, that’s not fair!’ And so they are ripe for doing activist work... But with a fifth grader you can really ask them questions... Around

systems that have occurred over time, and you can ask them to look for patterns and nuances and I love that...they're really open.

Melissa argues that while it's only natural to want to simplify everything and categorize, it is crucial to push past the simplistic way of thinking, away from "black and white thinking."

Autonomy in the classroom, and the ability to experiment with new ways to make students more comfortable and foster an environment that is conducive to learning is critical. Teachers everywhere have been using their experience and knowledge to design unique methods to successfully adapt to their students' needs, so that it works for each specific group of kids. I highlighted a few of the progressive methods teachers have been using including: flexible seating, multiage classrooms, curriculum experimentation, tailoring material to student's individual needs, and also adhering to the social emotional and addressing social justice. Teachers take their job of educating the next generation of adults seriously, now society needs to get on board and provide the resources, respect, and autonomy teachers need to do their job effectively. This already seems to be take place in the middle to higher SES neighbourhood schools, but the systemic rules and regulations enforced by strict administration is making things very difficult for many teachers in lower SES schools.

### **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

This study opens up many avenues for further research. Qualitative research is imperative to understanding classroom experience, as well as to assessing teacher performance, and measuring student success. This research provides detailed information about teacher experiences of classroom life, but much more research is needed going forward to truly understanding the situation at hand.

This paper should be seen as an addition to the ever evolving conversation about Education in North America, and improving the lives of students everywhere. My research has identified many areas for future research including but not limited to: research into the pressures faced by school administrations, and how that relates to the amount of autonomy they provide classroom teachers. Best practices for effective assessment for teachers, and best practices for assessing student progress. How can we effectively and affordably utilize more qualitative methods for these purposes? More and more students are showing an interest into current events and politics, it would be interesting to find out if this was caused by increased access to information, or the current political landscape. More research is needed toward the positives and negatives of technology in the classroom, and how it relates to students in terms of attention, focus and instant gratification.

Moreover, it is important to bring the students perception of classroom life into the conversation. Participant interviews with the students of teachers interviewed would provide additional and equally important insight into how their lives are affected personally. It would also be good to do an ethnography where one goes into various classrooms and observes the interactions in person. This would allow the researcher to identify patterns or nuances that the teachers and students do not always see, but are nevertheless there.

In future research, I plan to continue this line of research to include ethnography and participant interviews with students, as a means to supplement the knowledge gained here, and to cross reference if the paradigms emphasized in my interviews are visible in the classroom. I also think it would be good to continue this project into an Institutional Ethnography that maps out the systemic constraints in the system, that lead to the curricula and administrative support issues emphasized in this paper. There is almost an exclusive focus on classroom happenings in current

research, rather than searching for a wider understanding of the implications of those happenings.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Schools are supposed to provide students everywhere – regardless of class, ethnicity, gender or other category – with the skills and knowledge necessary to both survive in the adult world and also to have a chance at social mobility, to make something great of their lives, and to liberate them from the inherent systemic oppression that is built into American society. The question this research seeks to answer is: *How do factors such as socioeconomic status and administrative constraints affect teachers' abilities to effectively teach students in the classroom?* There are a multitude of factors in classroom life that affect a teacher's ability to teach, and students' chances of optimal learning potential. At the very heart of these factors lies a sobering truth. The intersection of socioeconomic status and the classroom influences the effectiveness of every teacher, in every classroom. Different levels of socioeconomic status create different and varying invisible obstacles that teachers and their students must jump through in attempts to achieve results. Schools in higher SES neighbourhoods have fewer obstacles than schools in lower SES neighbourhoods, and the lower one gets in status, the higher the obstacles get. These obstacles make it difficult for a teacher in a low SES school to achieve the same results as a school in a more affluent area, regardless of how hard the teacher works and how high they and their students jump. And it gets worse: because the students aren't achieving the same results as their higher SES counterparts, increased pressure is placed on the administration to ensure the teachers perform better. This results in a tighter rein placed on teachers, further constraining their ability to adapt and experiment in their classrooms, and find innovative solutions to help liberate

their students and build successes. This culminates in a self-perpetuating cycle that serves to cement lower SES students in their oppression and maintain the inequality that the system is meant to remove.

Teachers are the ones at the forefront of the action. They are the ones that see what is happening in the classroom, and watching their students struggle. They are the ones with the knowledge and experience to truly make a difference. But the harsh reality is that until the outside world recognizes that teachers are important, and provides them with the resources and freedom that they need, there is only so much they can do. Teachers need to be taken more seriously, they need to be properly compensated and they need to be given the autonomy to do their jobs. As it stands now, there is a huge imbalance between the amounts of training and credentialing required for teachers and the amount of compensation for the job itself. If teachers were given the respect and compensation worthy of their position, then a lot more people who should be teachers might become teachers, and a lot of the current teachers might not be at risk of burning out and becoming disenfranchised with the system.

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# **APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Again I want to thank you for sitting down with me to talk about your experiences in the classroom. The idea behind this interview is that you are the expert, and I want to learn what you know. So if you have a story or idea to share please go ahead anytime. But if needed I have prepared some questions to use as a starting point.

1. Where do you teach?
2. How would you describe your students?
3. What does a typical day in your classroom look like?
4. What grade do you teach? Have you taught any other grades before?
5. In what ways have teaching former grades informed your knowledge of your current grade?
6. How have you found your classes differ from year to year?
7. What are your classroom demographics/ratios like?
8. Boys/Girls/Other?
9. Ethnicity?
10. Cultural Differences?
11. Class Differences
12. What is your favorite thing about teaching your current class?
13. What are some of the challenges of your current class?
14. How would you describe how your students group themselves, for example if you tell them to get into groups of four what happens?
15. What are the friendship structures/Networks like in your class?
16. How do your students navigate challenges amongst themselves?
17. How do you help your students navigate challenges? Can you provide an example?
18. Do your students act differently when they think you aren't watching? How so?
19. What do your students not realize that you know about them?
20. Tell me about something that happened in your class last week.
21. Tell me a story about your quietest student.
22. Tell me a story about our loudest student.
23. Tell me about the class clown.
24. Tell me a story of a student who is often misunderstood.
25. Tell me about a student who you can't figure out.
26. Tell me about the last field trip your class took.
27. Tell me about a time when a child surprised you.
28. What was the biggest challenge this year?

29. Tell me about your biggest accomplishment this year.
30. How do you see your students home lives reflected in the classroom?
31. How has your viewpoint of students changed over the years?
32. What do you wish more people knew about your students?
33. What is the most common advice you give to parents?
34. What advice do you give to parents of a struggling child?
35. What advice do you give to parents of your higher achieving students?
36. What would you/do you tell a substitute-teacher who is taking your class for a day?
37. How do you get your students attention fast?
38. How do you handle student infractions in your classroom?
39. How do you assess behaviour?
40. How long have you been teaching?
41. Did you teach at other schools before this one?
42. What sorts of differences have you noticed between your students in this class and that/those classes?
43. Did you notice a difference in classroom challenges? How so?
44. What is something that surprised you about teaching?
45. Your students are at an age where things are either beginning to or about to rapidly change for them, how do you see them coping with this?
46. How do you cope with friendship disputes in your classroom?
47. Can you give me an example of any student interactions that may be defined as bullying?
48. How do you help your students cope with bullying?
49. How do you discourage bullying?
50. What is something that most people get wrong about students?
51. What made you decide to be a teacher?
52. Where did you go to school?
53. What was school like for you?
54. What was your favorite school experience when you were a kid?
55. What was your least favorite school experience when you were a kid?
56. Who was your most memorable teacher and why?
57. IS there anything you wish you could go back and tell student you, now that you are a teacher?
58. How did your childhood experiences shape your teaching practices now?
59. How long have you been teaching?
60. Where did you go to teaching college?
61. What do you wish you had known before becoming a teacher?
62. What about your teaching education was the most useful?
63. IF you could change one thing about education, what would it be?
64. How would you describe your educational background?
65. Why did you become a teacher?
66. Can you think of any other teachers that might enjoy participating in this study?

## **APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM/PARTICIPANT HANDOUT**

### **Education that Counts: Considering Social Factors in the Classroom**

You are invited to participate in a study entitled "Considering Social Factors in the Classroom," being conducted by Suzanne Wood at the University of Victoria(UVIC). Suzanne is a Graduate Student in the Department of Sociology at UVIC and can be contacted by email at any time with questions.

This research is for Suzanne's Thesis which is part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Sociology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Garry Gray. You may contact Garry by email or phone<sup>12</sup>. You can verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria by phone or email. This is a verbal consent script; a full copy will be provided to you (the participant). The interviewer will now read the script out loud, and proceed only if you say "yes."

### **General Information**

Thank you so much for taking the time to sit down with me to talk about your experiences teaching students in grades four through six. The purpose of this research is to learn more about the day-to-day happenings in the classroom and the networks of interaction between students and their teachers. I am specifically interested in social processes taking place in the classroom, and how these processes and interactions affect student learning outcomes over the long term.

### **Procedure**

Your participation will consist of one interview for the duration of about one-hour, and no longer than two hours. Questions will focus on your classroom experiences while teaching grades four through seven. Your participation is completely voluntary: if at any point during the interview you don't feel comfortable with a question, please do not hesitate to say so and we will skip it. We can stop the interview at any time, at your discretion, for any reason, and you may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason, without explanation or consequences.

I will provide a non-alcoholic beverage of your choice, should you leave the interview early for any reason you are welcome to take it with you. This is for the sole purpose of maintaining your comfort while speaking.

### **Risks and Benefits**

There are no known risks to this research, and no immediate benefits. However, there are endless benefits to more knowledge of how classroom social factors affect student learning outcomes.

### **Private Information**

The only identifying information I will keep with my notes is your name, which will be kept secure on a security-encrypted password protected USB flash drive. Any information

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<sup>12</sup> Please note: all contact information has been removed from the appendices for privacy purposes, but was included on the actual handout.

derived from this research that personally identifies you will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as specifically required by law. Upon completion of this project (estimated completion May 2018) all audio files and any identifiable information will be deleted. Notes and de-identified transcripts of these interviews will remain on my security-encrypted password protected USB flash drive for archival purpose, and possibly be reviewed and used as part of my future dissertation research.

The data from this project will not be used for any commercial purposes. I am the only person who will have access to the data from this interview. I will not show or provide any of this data to anyone else without contacting you for consent.

I will take every precaution to ensure your anonymity remains protected. As such, all data will be kept de-identified, and all names in the final paper will be changed. This includes your name, and the names of any individuals that come up throughout the process of the interview. During this interview we will be talking about your day-to-day experiences and you may mention students or colleagues in your life who are not here. To protect their privacy, I recommend using indirect pronouns such as: "A student" or "A colleague" That said, any names or other identifying information that happens to come up will be kept confidential.

It is anticipated that I will present the results of this research to my committee for my Master's Thesis. The results may also be presented at Sociology Conferences throughout North America, posted online on UVicSpace, and published in an academic journal. Should you withdraw from the study, all data from this interview will be destroyed and removed from the final paper unless you give additional consent otherwise.

### **Full Disclosure**

There are no known conflicts of interest in this study, this research is not funded or sponsored by an outside entity.

### **Verbal Consent**

Do you have any more questions? Do you understand? Do you consent?

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Additional Consent for Audio Recording**

I would like to record your answers on a voice recording device. This is completely optional and you are welcome to say no without explanation or consequences. The audio file will have no personal information, just your name and answers and I am the only one with access to it. It will be stored on a security-encrypted flash drive and I will delete the recording after my project is complete – by September 2018 at the latest. Again, this is completely up to you, and you are welcome to request I turn off the recording device at any time. Do you mind if I record our interview?

**APPENDIX C: HREB CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL**



Office of Research Services | Human Research Ethics Board  
 Administrative Services Building Rm B202 PO Box 1700 STN CSC Victoria BC V8W 2Y2 Canada  
 T 250-472-4545 | F 250-721-8960 | uvic.ca/research | ethics@uvic.ca

## Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: <b>Suzanne Wood</b> UVic STATUS: <b>Master's Student</b> UVic DEPARTMENT: <b>SOCI</b> SUPERVISOR: <b>Garry Gray</b>	<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;"><b>ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER:</b> 17-248</td> <td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;">Minimal Risk Review - Delegated</td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE:</b> 20-Jul-17</td> <td><b>APPROVED ON:</b> 20-Jul-17</td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE:</b> 19-Jul-18</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	<b>ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER:</b> 17-248	Minimal Risk Review - Delegated	<b>ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE:</b> 20-Jul-17	<b>APPROVED ON:</b> 20-Jul-17	<b>APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE:</b> 19-Jul-18	
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<b>APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE:</b> 19-Jul-18							

**PROJECT TITLE: Education that Counts: Considering Social Factors in the Classroom**

RESEARCH TEAM MEMBER None

DECLARED PROJECT FUNDING: None

**CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL**

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol.

**Modifications**

To make any changes to the approved research procedures in your study, please submit a "Request for Modification" form. You must receive ethics approval before proceeding with your modified protocol.

**Renewals**

Your ethics approval must be current for the period during which you are recruiting participants or collecting data. To renew your protocol, please submit a "Request for Renewal" form before the expiry date on your certificate. You will be sent an emailed reminder prompting you to renew your protocol about six weeks before your expiry date.

**Project Closures**

When you have completed all data collection activities and will have no further contact with participants, please notify the Human Research Ethics Board by submitting a "Notice of Project Completion" form.

### Certification

This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Participants.



Dr. Rachael Scarth  
 Associate Vice-President Research Operations



Certificate Issued On: 20-Jul-17

## **APPENDIX D: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE**

Date:

Hello,

My name is Suzanne Wood, I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology, at the University of Victoria (UVIC), in British Columbia, Canada.

This letter is an invitation to participate in a research project I am conducting as part of my Master's degree thesis requirement, under the supervision of Dr. Garry Gray. The title of my project is "Considering Social Factors in the Classroom." What follows is some information about this project which explores the social factors that impact student learning in the classroom, and what your participation would entail.

The purpose of this research is to learn more about the day-to-day happenings in the classroom and the networks of interaction between students and their teachers. I am specifically interested in the social processes taking place in the classroom, and how these processes and interactions affect student learning outcomes over the long term.

I am looking to talk to Los Angeles teachers who teach grades four through six. The purpose of these interviews is to gather classroom stories and experiences. I believe that teachers have unique understandings of the social processes taking place in the classroom, and that their voices are necessary to understand the complex processes taking place. At the end of this study, the publication of this thesis will share the knowledge of Los Angeles teachers with other educators and families all over North America.

### **WHO IS INVOLVED**

I am looking for thirty to forty teachers in the greater Los Angeles area. The ideal candidate is anyone who teaches students in grades four through seven.

### **WHAT IS INVOLVED**

One interview, of approximately one hour (two hours' max), at a location, day and time that is convenient to you (the participant). As a thank you, I will provide a non-alcoholic beverage of your choice, such as coffee, tea or water.

Participation is completely voluntary; you should make your own decision as to whether or not you want to be involved. You also have the right to stop or withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, without any penalties.

To support the findings of this study, quotations and excerpts from the stories will be used labeled with pseudonyms to protect your identity. All names will be changed regardless

of if it is yours, a name mentioned in the interview or a school. I will do everything in my power to ensure you are not identifiable in any way.

There are no known or anticipated risks to this study. All data will be kept on a security-encrypted password protected USB flash drive for the duration of the study, and all identifiable materials will be destroyed once the project is completed (no later than September 2018). Only myself and my supervisor, Garry Gray, will have access to these materials.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you are willing to participate in my study, please email me to set up an interview. If you have any questions regarding the study you can contact me by phone or email<sup>13</sup>. You may also contact my supervisor by email with questions.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board. You can contact them with any questions regarding the ethics approval process by email.

I hope that the results of my study will be beneficial to teachers and students everywhere as well as the broader research community. I thank you in advance for any assistance you can provide with this project.

Yours Sincerely,

Suzanne Wood

Masters Candidate

Department of Sociology

University of Victoria

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<sup>13</sup> Please note: all contact information has been removed from the appendices for privacy purposes, but was included on the actual invitation to participate.