Taking Back the Standards: Equity-Minded Teachers' Responses to Accountability-Related Instructional Constraints

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This article offers three case studies of teachers who have been specially prepared to serve diverse students and examines their interpretations and instantiations of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)-driven language arts reform in "underperforming" schools, largely composed of Spanish-speaking English Learners (ELs). Drawing on literature that focuses on unique barriers faced by equity-minded agents of change, teachers' experiences are examined through technical, political, and normative lenses. Findings outline teachers' efforts to "take back the standards" with a Critical Professional Practice—*a stance and collection of strategies that incorporate standards-based policies with equity-oriented pedagogies. Implications for equity-minded teaching and teacher education are discussed.*

INTRODUCTION

Researchers and educators have written extensively about the importance of preparing teachers to serve students from marginalized groups. Many claim this preparation must be distinctive, addressing curriculum and pedagogy in ways that explicitly support teachers to meet the needs of students from racially, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds (e.g., Banks et al., 2005; Cochran-

Smith, 2004; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 1999; Oakes & Lipton, 1999; Sleeter, 2001; Valdés, Bunch, Snow, Lee, & Matos, 2005; etc.). Heeding this call, an increasing number of university-based teacher education programs in the U.S. have begun to shift their focus; some have named "preparing urban teachers" or preparing teachers to "work for social justice" as central objectives (see note no. (1) at end of article), while others have incorporated coursework that addresses theoretical and practical dimensions of teaching diverse students. These programs commonly conceive of equity-minded teachers as both instructional leaders and agents of change, whose efforts should bolster the academic achievement of students from marginalized groups and help transform struggling schools and the educational system, writ large, into more equitable enterprises. Throughout this paper, I refer to teachers who have participated in specialized teacher preparation programs as "specially prepared."

Although the intention of specialized teacher education programs is to provide teachers with material and ideological tools they can apply in their own diverse classrooms, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and a growing emphasis on school accountability has led to greater federal, state, and district control over classroom instruction, particularly in high-needs schools (Bush, 2002; California Department of Education, 1999c). Through the installation of extensive academic content standards, standards-aligned, oftentimes scripted curricula, and high-stakes standardized tests, teachers—regardless of their preparation, background, or students—are commonly told what and how to teach (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Sleeter & Stillman, 2007). Since curriculum standardization and accountability tend to target high-needs schools, teachers working with marginalized students are among the most likely to experience instructional constraints. One reason for this is that non-dominant students, and especially English Learners (ELs), have a history of scoring poorly on standardized assessments relative to their white, middle class, native English-speaking peers. A recent study of California ELs' performance on the SAT 9 and CAT 6 between 1998 and 2004, for example, indicates that wide performance gaps between ELs and English Proficient students have remained relatively constant (Parrish, Perez, Merickel, & Linquanti, 2006). Menken (2008) explains that test score disparities between ELs and English Proficient students are related to the fact that most standardized tests are designed to evaluate English Proficient students' content knowledge. She argues that, as a result, these tests tend to measure ELs' language proficiency rather than their content knowledge and also present cultural and linguistic complexities for EL test takers that can result in measurement error. As such, schools with high concentrations of ELs are especially prone to being labeled "underperforming" for their failure to meet state and/or federal academic performance goals. Once schools receive this label, they can expect to undergo even more intense pressure than that endured by "high-performing" schools. Gutiérrez, Asato, Zavala, Pacheco, and Olson (2003) describe these schools as having a "tight-tight" school culture—meaning that *tight* reforms are accompanied by *tight* state and district

monitoring. In contrast, schools that predominantly serve affluent and native English-speaking children and who meet state and federal goals on standardized tests, undergo less scrutiny and experience a "tight-loose" school culture; tight reforms may exist, but are only loosely monitored. Thus, in the current climate, there tend to be differences between the curriculums of high- and low-poverty schools, particularly when low-poverty schools have high concentrations of ELs (Menken, 2008).

The stringent regulation of teachers' instruction in "underperforming" schools raises questions about whether and how teachers, who have been exposed to multicultural and/or culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogical methods and content, can put this knowledge into practice. This article examines how such teachers grapple with this tension. Drawing on three in-depth case studies of specially prepared teachers of ELs of color, this article explores teachers' attempts to navigate the current NCLB-driven reform climate in California without abandoning the theories and practices obtained during their preservice preparation. Though the study on which this article reports focused on teachers' language arts instructional practices in relation to California's language arts standards and ELs' language and literacy needs specifically, its findings build toward a more widely applicable construct—Critical Professional Practice, a stance towards one's work and a collection of strategies that specially prepared teachers can use to adapt standards-based policies to be consistent with their preparation. These findings have implications for equity-oriented teacher education programs, whose faculty strive to support specially prepared teachers to both sustain integrity in their equity-minded teaching practices and also avoid disadvantaging marginalized students within a system largely defined by high-stakes accountability demands.

THE CONTEXT: STANDARDS AND STANDARDIZATION

Language Arts is one area of instruction that has been profoundly impacted by NCLB. This is no surprise since the "reading wars" have long been a source of national interest, and debates about the most scientific way to teach literacy abound (Bush, 2002; Coles, 2000; National Research Council, 1998; Shannon, 2001; Taylor, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Public discourse about literacy instruction is even more contentious in California where one in four students in the K-12 public system are ELs and where the politics surrounding immigration and language acquisition are heated (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003) (see note no. (2) at end of article). In this context, language arts instruction takes on further importance, as English proficiency is a gatekeeper for language minority students—affecting both their short-term class placements and long-term academic trajectories (Gándara, et al, 2003).

In California, three standards documents dominate K-12 language arts instruction (see note no. (3) at end of article). Although the installation of more

rigorous content standards has the capacity to raise expectations for students who have been traditionally underserved (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997; Delpit, 1995), California's English Language Arts (ELA) standards do not simply offer benchmarks that teachers can use to improve their teaching and student performance. Rather, the ELA standards, because of their close alignment with mandated language arts curricula and their enforcement through high-stakes standardized tests, can be described as language arts curriculum standardization (Meier, 2000; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). Scholars have argued that standardizing instruction in a diverse context like California is troubling, since embracing a single definition of what it means to be well educated, or to assume that an "expert" has the right or capacity to craft this definition, threatens to silence debates about knowledge construction (Apple, 2000; Banks, 1993; Meier, 2002; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2000; Sleeter, 2003). Smith and O'Day (1990), intellectual architects of standards-based reform, further problematize curriculum standardization, explaining that the purpose of standards

> is neither to legislate a particular pedagogy nor to specify a short-term curricular scope or sequence. Rather the standards should set out desired intellectual curricular themes, topics, and objectives, in sufficiently long-range chunks… to allow for maximum flexibility and creativity at the local level. (p. 248)

Standardization is especially problematic when it comes to California's ELA standards. A recent content analysis reveals that the standards engender technical concerns by promoting a skills-based, direct-instruction, and Reductionist (see note no. (4) at end of article) approach to learning and literacy (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005) (see note no. (5) at end of article). This approach rebuffs prevailing empirical and theoretical perspectives on language acquisition and literacy development for ELs, and counters professional guidelines articulated in state teacher certification documents (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2006; Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, 2002; Cummins, 1996; Gándara, et al, 2003; Luke, 1994; Moll & Greenburg, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, Gutiérrez, Asato, Santos, & Gotanda (2002) argue the standards emerged amidst numerous *backlash pedagogies*—anti-immigrant initiatives and an assortment of allegedly race neutral educational reforms, such as, high-stakes accountability structures and scripted reading programs, that affect students of color and ELs more severely than their white, native-English-speaking peers (Crosland & Gutiérrez, 2003; McNeil, 2000; McNeil & Valenzuela, 1999).

These technical, normative and political concerns suggest that following California's ELA standards with fidelity may exacerbate existing gaps in achievement between ELs and native English speakers. Nevertheless, a collection of aligned reforms systemically enforces the standards. This likely poses dilemmas for specially prepared teachers who allegedly possess a knowledge base that arms them with the

technical savvy and "conscientization" (Freire, 1995) or ideological clarity (Bartolomé & Trueba, 2000) important for challenging the inequitable educational conditions marginalized students commonly experience. Indeed, the approaches sponsored by the standards and the norms and politics that underlie them may oppose what specially prepared teachers have been prepared to teach, and also how they think about their students and their purpose(s) for teaching.

TECHNICAL, NORMATIVE, AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF REFORM

School change scholars offer an antidote to standardization concerns by demonstrating that discrepancy in reform implementation is commonplace (Cuban, 1993; Fullan, 1991; Sarason, 1990; Spillane, 2004; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), and considered by some to be desirable (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Furhman & Elmore, 1995), despite policymakers' intended outcomes. Numerous scholars locate the cause of implementation variability in individual and collective teacher agency (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Olsen & Kirtman, 2002). Naming teachers as the central mediators between policy and practice, they argue that teacher knowledge impacts how reforms are interpreted and instantiated. Such accounts suggest that specially prepared teachers have some discretion over how they implement the standards. Nevertheless, these explanations cannot comprehensively predict how such teachers would use California's ELA standards with ELs in underperforming schools. This is principally because traditional accounts of school change commonly extract the policies and the teachers upon which they are imposed from the complex contexts where they are situated. For example, when the school change literature claims that providing teachers with reform-specific training leads to implementation fidelity and instructional improvements (e.g., Cohen & Hill, 2001), it overlooks the possibility that a reform, like California's ELA standards, may propose instructional changes that collide with what research has demonstrated to be most effective for the students the policy affects. In addition, though the change literature commonly attributes reform variability to contextual factors, such as school organization and leadership, and professional development opportunities (Furhman & Elmore, 1990; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Little & McLaughlin, 1993; Rosenholtz, 1989), questions remain about how factors beyond the school setting, such as the political climate, might also influence policy implementation. Finally, traditional accounts of school change rarely foreground equity-minded concerns or examine how reforms might specifically impact marginalized students. Instead, the change theories presented in the mainstream literature tend to assume that technical changes, such as supporting teachers to have collegial relations, opportunities for reform-specific professional learning, and the time and resources necessary to implement with fidelity, will lead

to improvements in instruction and academic performance for all students. This depoliticizes the reforms themselves and the teachers who instantiate them.

By emphasizing equity-minded goals and practices, research and practice in the area of teacher education challenges the technical framing of teacher agency conveyed in the school change literature. In particular, research about specialized teacher preparation conceives of the agentive role of teachers as both a learning problem and a political problem (Cochran-Smith, 2004). The call for specially prepared teachers to "teach to change the world" conjures up similar notions of teachers as equity-minded political actors whose work in education advances social justice goals (Oakes & Lipton, 1999). These representations suggest that specially prepared teachers act as more than neutral mediators between policy and practice and may even contest reforms they believe would disadvantage their students.

Still, until recently, little has been written about how teachers might act as change agents within the tightly monitored contexts that often result from high-stakes accountability demands. Whereas it used to be common practice to advise specially prepared teachers to "close their doors" to sustain professional autonomy in the face of school policies that contradict their preferred instructional approaches, the predominance of standardized tests has decreased the viability of this tactic. A recent article that describes the experiences of two novice teachers in California, for example, demonstrates that district officials not only figuratively required teachers keep their doors open so that their adherence to a standards-driven, scripted language arts curriculum could be monitored, but also illustrated the consequences—one teacher was fired and the other transferred to a more affluent district that continued to protect teacher autonomy—when the teachers exercised professional discretion and resisted following the mandated curriculum with fidelity (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006).

Analyses of equity-minded policy reform efforts also problematize decontextualized examinations of policy implementation. Oakes (1992) argues that to understand why equity-minded policies are so difficult to enact, school change researchers must acknowledge the normative and political dimensions of schooling rather than foreground technical dimensions of policy implementation. In order to understand how "tracking structures inequality" (Oakes, 1985), for example, Oakes (1992) explains that it is necessary to consider (a) its normative aspects, which "requires a critical and unsettling rethinking of the most common and fundamental educational beliefs and values," and (b) "the political interests… that are shaped by these norms" (p. 19). It makes sense then, that in studies of schools' attempts to detrack, Oakes and her colleagues found that many change agents "were caught unprepared when the process and shape of their equity-minded reforms were profoundly affected by… norms and politics concerning race, gender, sexual orientation, language and socio-economic status" (Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 1998, p. 955). Oakes recommends that to better understand equity-minded reform efforts, researchers apply a three-pronged—technical, normative, and political—conceptual lens to their analyses of school change.

In the case of standards-driven reform in California, this three-pronged conceptual framework can provide a window into specially prepared teachers'—who also self-identified as "equity-minded" change agents—thinking and the politicized contexts where they use the standards. This lens can additionally help to uncover some of the ideologies underlying the standards movement, and support the documentation of technical aspects of practice and the normative and political dimensions of teaching. Using this framework, I attempt to answer the following research questions: How does "specially prepared" teachers' technical expertise influence their instantiations of California's ELA standards in "underperforming" schools largely composed of ELs? How do their ideologies influence their instantiations of the standards in "underperforming" schools largely composed of ELs? How do these "specially prepared" teachers respond to local and statewide contextual factors, as they interpret and implement the standards with ELs?

METHODS

This qualitative multiple-case study (Yin, 1994) draws on data collected from September 2003 through December 2004. I employed purposive sampling (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) to select three specially prepared upper elementary teachers who work in state-identified "underperforming" schools in California. All possessed Bilingual Cross-Cultural, Language and Academic Development (BCLAD) credentials, the highest level of certification offered by California to serve ELs (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2006), and masters degrees, which they earned through their participation in specialized (equity-minded) university-based teacher education programs. Though the three teachers attended different teacher preparation programs, each of the three programs claimed to focus primarily on the preparation of teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners and named equity in education as a central goal. At the time of the study, each teacher had been teaching for at least three years working in a school and classroom that was predominantly composed of Spanish-speaking ELs (> 75%). All of the teachers had additionally engaged in professional development opportunities and advocacy efforts related to the educational experiences and outcomes of language minority students of color. Importantly, each of the teachers reported that he/she became a teacher in order to advance equity in education. It is also worth noting that prior to the start of this study, I mentored each of these teachers in various capacities and, through the process, became familiar with their qualifications to teach ELs. I worked with two of the teachers (Xitlali and Isabel) (see note no. (6) at end of article) when they apprenticed with a university-based professional development project that aimed to prepare teachers to deliver research-based language arts instruction to ELs. Jorge was my student in a foundations and field-based seminar for the two years during which he completed his bilingual teaching credential and masters degree. Though Xitlali and Isabel became casually acquainted through their work with the

professional development project and each was aware of the other's participation in the study, they did not stay in contact with one another, nor did they communicate with one another about how they responded to pressures related to accountability demands.

Though the three case teachers worked in different state-identified underperforming schools, they shared many of the same experiences. Not surprisingly, they all experienced considerable pressure to increase test scores. They were also pressed to implement the standards through Houghton-Mifflin's *Reading California*—one of California's two state-approved standards-aligned language arts curricula that each of their districts had elected to adopt. Nonetheless, the degree to which teachers were monitored was largely dependent on the number of years his/ her school had been identified as "underperforming," individual principals' perspectives on standards-driven reform and principals' roles in mediating the pressure imposed by state and district officials. Table 1 lays out some of the distinctions in these contextual characteristics.

TABLE 1. Individual and Contextual Characteristics of Case-Study Teachers

Teacher	Race/ ethnicity	Years of teaching	Demographic information	High-stakes context
Isabel	Latina	4	• Central CA • Suburban • 76% ELs • 80% Free or reduced lunch	• API: 1(3–4 years) • AYP: Low performing • Strong district pressure to comply • Strong principal pressure to comply
Xitlali	Latina	6	• Northern CA • Rural • 75% ELs • 71% Free or reduced lunch	• API: 2/3 (2–3 years) • AYP: Low performing • Moderate district pressure to comply • Balance between principal pressure to comply and principal protection of teachers
Jorge	Mixed: Caucasian, Latino	3	• Southern CA • Urban • 75% ELs • 93% Free or reduced lunch	• API: 1 (3–4 years) • AYP: Low performing • District pressure increasing from weak to moderate • Strong principal protection of teachers

Although I used a multiple-case design in order to conduct in-depth analyses of several teachers, it was not my intention to compare or contrast the "effectiveness" of these teachers' instructional approaches. Instead, this research design supported me to identify patterns in how specially prepared teachers made sense of and used

California's ELA standards in classrooms largely composed of ELs and to think about the ways in which local school contexts and the broader statewide socio-political climate bear on teacher practice and agency (Maxwell, 1998; Merriam, 1998).

Data collection consisted of classroom observations, teacher and principal interviews, and teacher focus groups. I conducted two in-depth interviews with each teacher and followed up by interviewing the principal from each school site. I also facilitated a focus group with teachers from each school site to glean a more comprehensive sense of the school contexts. To triangulate these self-reported data (Merriam, 1998), I completed two, one-week rounds of classroom observations (totaling approximately 50 hours) in each teacher's classroom. To develop a thorough and accurate understanding of classroom activity, I bounded classroom observations around a "cycle of learning," which tends to last approximately one week (Greene, 1994). During observations, I wrote extensive field notes, which I typed following each site visit. On most occasions, I used my field notes to conduct structured, after-school conversations with the teacher to ask questions or clarify particular classroom occurrences. Reflecting feminist methodologies (Harding, 1987; Smith, 1999), I also acted as a participant-observer in classrooms (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998); after taking field notes during the allocated language arts period, I remained in the classroom to offer assistance to the teacher. My extended time in each classroom helped me to gain a more expansive sense of the teachers' technical practices and their navigation of the norms and politics of schooling. Because I arrived and left school with the teacher, I was also able to develop a strong rapport with him/her. Considering the contentious politics surrounding standards and accountability in underperforming schools, this proximity to subjects generated opportunities for open conversations between the participating teachers and me, which I believe led me to a better understanding of the struggles and successes specially prepared teachers experience in tightly monitored school contexts.

Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), data analysis was ongoing. Thus, preliminary findings guided subsequent classroom visits and the development of follow-up interview protocols. I initiated my analysis by using imported codes from my theoretical framework (e.g., technical, political, and normative). These broad themes were then divided into more discrete groupings, or derived codes, which illuminated how specially prepared teachers made sense of and used the standards with ELs in underperforming schools.

In the following discussion of thematic findings, I attempt to articulate what I refer to as Critical Professional Practice—an equity-minded stance and a collection of technical and political strategies that specially prepared teachers can draw upon in tightly monitored schools. This idea is fleshed out through a description of the patterns in teachers' technical beliefs about and actual accommodations of the standards, an exploration of how teachers' ideologies guided this work, and a portrayal of the political dimensions of teachers' responses.

Although my intention is to focus on patterns in teachers' responses, it is worth noting that one of the strengths of case-study research, particularly in classroom-based research, is that it enables the researcher to look closely at context and how variation in context influences classroom practice. I address these variations in some depth elsewhere (Stillman, forthcoming), but variations in teachers' school contexts and responses to accountability demands also influenced how the findings are presented here. In particular, the contextual characteristics of Xitlali's school made it possible for her to observably engage in a Critical Professional Practice with more frequency and sophistication than the other case teachers. This was primarily due to the support provided by her principal—an instructional leader who believed strongly in the importance of teacher autonomy and who actively sheltered Xitlali from some district pressure. The findings reported below reflect this contextual variation in that Xitlali is referenced more than the other teachers.

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND MODIFICATIONS OF THE LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS

"The Standards Aren't The Problem"

During the first round of teacher interviews, Xitlali, Jorge, and Isabel claimed that, despite the pressures and conflicts they had experienced in relation to their language arts instruction, they also found the standards to be a useful technical tool. As Xitlali explained, before the installation of the standards,

> I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be teaching… I wasn't sure… what do these kids really need for sixth and seventh grade? What are their needs for college? And so now at least with [the standards], it's kind of clear. (*Xitlali, May 2004*)

Teachers also reported that the standards provided a mechanism for holding other teachers accountable, namely those who underestimated the academic capacities of ELs. Xitlali claimed that the "good thing about the standards is at least now we know what kids have to learn. And now we can actually tell people, 'you're not teaching kids that'" (*Xitlali, May 2004*). Finally, the teachers argued that the standards helped them offer more explicit instruction and supported them to articulate expectations to students. Each of the teachers, for example, introduced language arts lessons with a clear description of the concepts and/or skills to be covered—using the language of the standards to do so—and an explanation of the purposes for learning them.

The teachers also specified numerous reservations about the standards, focusing most on the standards' failure to value native language knowledge or encourage native language instruction. As Jorge put it,

> That the whole standards are focused on English is divergent from what I believe in… If I could be liberated from having to focus on one

language, then I [could] provide language arts instruction that would empower students to be the most literate that they could be. (*Jorge, May, 2004*)

Teachers additionally shared the belief that there were "too many standards," and criticized the standards' privileging of discrete skill instruction over thematic and contextualized teaching, approaches they argued would better support ELs to make meaning. Despite these doubts, however, teachers claimed to have the latitude to draw upon their own technical knowledge and beliefs about their students as they organized their instruction. According to Isabel, because "there isn't anything in the standards that says how to do it, …you can still have your own professionalism, some kind of interpretation. You can apply your own professional knowledge in how you deliver… and use all your training" (*Isabel, June 2004*). In other words, the teachers did not believe the standards documents imposed pedagogical limitations.

Importantly, teachers attributed the pressure they experienced working in underperforming schools to the strict enforcement of the standards-based language arts curriculum—Houghton-Mifflin's *Reading California*—adopted by their respective districts as part of efforts to raise test scores. According to Xitlali, "If you were to follow a canned program in the way that [Houghton-Mifflin] expects you to deliver it, then there's no leeway" (*Xitlali, May 2004*). Jorge shared these sentiments, criticizing the standards' links to standardized tests and "test prep" programs that treated the standards like "rules" instead of "guidelines." Arguing that the standards were not "intended to define practices," he asserted, "I think that they were intended to define skills that we would like students be able to achieve. …Teachers realize, after they've taught somebody how to read, that not everybody learned it the same way" (*Jorge, December 2004*). Xitlali further referred to *Reading California* as "ditto-driven," and "drive-by teaching" while Isabel called it "pedagogically shallow." Locating the "problem" in the "seamless web" (Sleeter, 2003) of reforms that enforce the ELA standards, the teachers avoided condemning the standards per se, and instead disapproved of the systemic use of them, which they argued standardized the language arts curriculum.

Given these sentiments and experiences, understanding specially prepared teachers' interpretations and instantiations of the ELA standards with ELs required an investigation into how the mandated language arts curriculum and pressure to increase scores on the language arts portions of the CAT 6 and CST mediated teachers' responses. Thus, future comments about the "language arts (ELA) standards," also refer to roles that the state mandated language arts curricula and standardized tests played in enforcing them.

"Taking Back the Standards"

Since teachers did not have the freedom to simply reject the aspects of the standards they found objectionable, each of them spoke extensively about how they

strategically used the standards while sustaining integrity in their pedagogical approaches. Isabel referred to this practice as "taking back the standards," while Xitlali and Jorge, respectively, called this process "making the standards my own" and "striking a balance between the standards and my own training." Though the teachers revealed contextually dependant ways of going about this, they agreed upon two central means of modifying the standards to meet their ELs' needs: (1) prioritizing "essential standards" and (2) making the standards "culturally relevant."

In response to there being too many standards, teachers reported they prioritized the "essential standards." As she determined which standards to emphasize, Xitlali considered the following questions: "What do [students] really need for the next grade? What do they need for survival? What do I know they need to get into college, and succeed after that?" Jorge claimed he privileged standards he considered to be most "relevant to the community." This is an example of what school change scholars might call "discrepancy" in reform implementation; Jorge, on the other hand, viewed this decision as a principled approach to culturally relevant teaching.

Isabel, with the support of her grade level teammates, had the most measured way of determining which standards were essential. The fourth and fifth grade teachers collaboratively selected standards that emphasized meaningful tasks, such as the development of higher-order thinking skills, reading comprehension, and authentic writing. They also prioritized standards they believed would help students to access higher education. Their decision to focus on expository reading and writing standards reflected their understanding that once students entered middle and high schools, most of their reading and writing activities would be expository in nature.

Still, at the time of this study, Isabel and her colleagues acknowledged that their internal identification of essential standards would not release them from the district's hold. As a Year 4 underperforming school, an increase in threats from the district to monitor the implementation of *Reading California* reflected the superintendent's lack of confidence in teachers' effectiveness and also a deep distrust of the school's historic approaches to language arts instruction. With the hope of staving off the encroachment of the district and the implementation of a program that many teachers, including Isabel, opposed, the teachers began to publicly articulate how their own program covered the skills and strategies sponsored by the ELA standards.

Drawing on the essential standards they had previously identified, the teachers compiled a list of the language arts skills they were committed to teaching and when each skill would be addressed. In addition, teachers came to consensus about the instructional strategies they would employ to teach these skills and which forms of evidence they would gather to demonstrate student mastery. For example, all of the teachers decided to rely on a particular application of Literature Studies to help students improve their reading comprehension and literary analysis skills. As an extension of each literature study, students would be required to write three expository essays over the course of the year, with each showcasing their abilities to

tie literature to social science themes, engage in literary analysis, and utilize academic vocabulary in both languages. Students' literature response journals and final drafts of their expository essays would serve as evidence that students had mastered related standards.

Teachers had also developed a unique approach to "Morning Message," a strategy commonly known as "Daily Oral Language." The teachers on Isabel's team agreed to use this strategy as one way to situate discrete skill instruction in meaningful content, and to use biweekly tests as data that could be shared with district officials. According to Isabel, two of the reasons she and her colleagues felt Literature Studies and Morning Message were reliable instructional practices were that they sufficiently allowed for academic and linguistic heterogeneity and for the infusion of content they believed would be engaging for students, and would support connections between students' lives and academic work.

This relates to the second frustration named by the case-study teachers: the standards and the standards-aligned reforms' tendency to be disconnected from their students' lives, which led teachers to try to make them more "culturally relevant." In one example, Xitlali drew on *Reading California*'s approach to teaching students about various strategies that "good readers use," since, based on formal and informal assessments, she believed her students needed to improve their reading comprehension. According to Xitlali, the curriculum developers recommended that teachers create posters that included six different strategies—predict/infer, decode, monitor/clarify, question, evaluate, and summarize—which students could use as resources while reading. Xitlali, returning to her own conviction that "Literacy is so much more than just being able to read text. It's being able to engage with the text and connect it to your life," decided that while these strategies might be helpful to her students, she could cover the standard more robustly and make the recommended strategies more useful to her students if she mediated her instruction by drawing on socio-cultural learning theory. Cole and Griffin (1983) refer to this practice as "re-mediation" or the "shift in the way that mediating devices regulate coordination with the environment" (p. 70), which the authors deem necessary when the extant system of mediation is reductive and may truncate students' opportunities for learning.

In the series of lessons I observed, Xitlali addressed the same six reading strategies mentioned above, but in a more student centered way. Rather than creating the posters herself, as Houghton-Mifflin suggested, she had students create their own posters, where they recorded the strategies they regularly used while reading. Although Xitlali relied on the Houghton Mifflin curriculum to provide students with the list of categories, she helped students form cooperative groups, with each group responsible for defining one of the strategies. The results were posters, which Xitlali promptly hung on the wall for reference, that reflected and valued students' own literacy practices. Figure 1 provides examples of these posters.
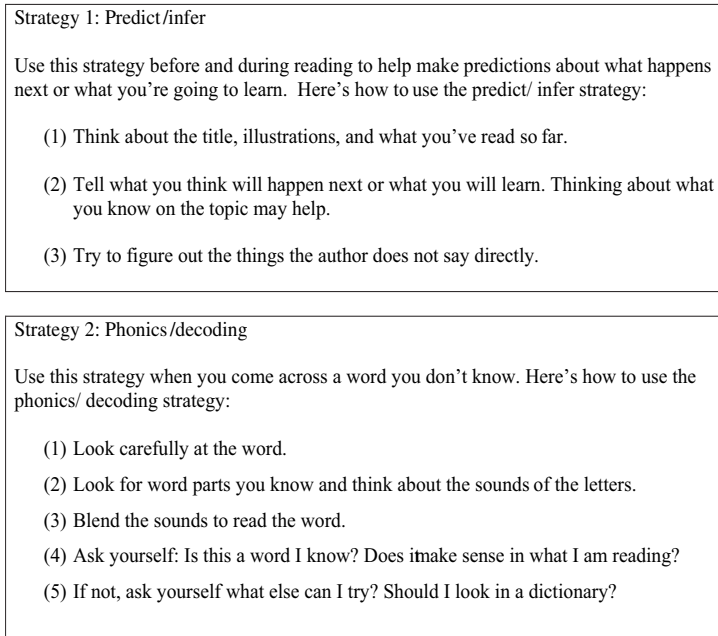

Strategy 1: Predict /infer

Use this strategy before and during reading to help make predictions about what happens next or what you're going to learn. Here's how to use the predict/ infer strategy:

  (1) Think about the title, illustrations, and what you've read so far.

  (2) Tell what you think will happen next or what you will learn. Thinking about what you know on the topic may help.

  (3) Try to figure out the things the author does not say directly.

Strategy 2: Phonics /decoding

Use this strategy when you come across a word you don't know. Here's how to use the phonics/ decoding strategy:

  (1) Look carefully at the word.

  (2) Look for word parts you know and think about the sounds of the letters.

  (3) Blend the sounds to read the word.

  (4) Ask yourself: Is this a word I know? Does it make sense in what I am reading?

  (5) If not, ask yourself what else can I try? Should I look in a dictionary?

FIGURE 1. Student-Generated Reading Strategy Posters.

In a similar example, Xitlali adapted another Houghton-Mifflin lesson, which suggested that students read biographies about famous historical figures and then write book reports about them. Since Xitlali found the standards related to expository reading and writing listed in conjunction with this lesson to be important to students' access to higher education, she looked to the curriculum for ideas. Adhering to the program's initial suggestion, Xitlali's students read biographies of their choice. However, instead of requiring students to write simple summaries of these texts, Xitlali asked them to identify the major topics they encountered while reading (e.g., childhood experiences, major life challenges, her/his community, etc.), and to create a template they could later use to write biographies about their peers. After reading biographies both to comprehend and to deconstruct the components of various expository texts, students created questions for peer interviews. Answers to these questions functioned as the research necessary for writing biographies about one another. Xitlali explained her rationale:

> I try to take the content that they need to do and then do it in a way that's more authentic [and] engaging… that's student centered. We always talk about biographies being about special people and well, we're special too, and we're going to change the world too. So [students] need to feel like they're part of the learning… and produce stuff that is centered around them. Even though the standard is, 'write research projects,' it doesn't say in the standards what they need to write research projects on. …And yes, Houghton Mifflin has their

ideas. But I think that you take that and you adapt it to your students. (*Xitlali, May 2004*)

Xitlali's reorganization of the reading strategy and biography lessons illustrate that in making the curriculum more culturally relevant, she also avoided reifying her students' cultural backgrounds, and instead tried to provide opportunities in which she and students could address the dynamic histories and cultural experiences of classroom members. One of the ways Xitlali went about this was to rely on her belief that "students need to be learning about themselves." This approach was also evident in Isabel's adaptations. Following her grade level team's identification of fourth grade Reading standard 2.6—"Distinguish between cause and effect… in expository text"—as essential, Isabel created a morning message that embedded the idea of cause and effect in an exploration of the Mexican Revolution and its causes and lasting effects on Mexican people. Xitlali explained the rationale for such an approach in this way:

> Students' survival and their reality has to be talked about. I can't just say, well I need to cover standard 3.1 today. …They can't succeed in the class if they're not comfortable, if they don't trust me, and if I'm not dealing with what they bring. …Bringing all that in and making them an expert at something is important 'cause they know so much, and nobody ever bothers to ask them. (*Xitlali, May 2004*)

Knowledge Integration

When teachers prioritized essential standards and made the standards culturally relevant, they engaged in a technical process I have come to call *Knowledge Integration*, or the act of meshing their knowledge of the external expectations placed on them vis-à-vis standards-driven reforms, with the internal expectations that resulted from their own technical and ideological knowledge bases. Through this practice, teachers sought to provide students with robust language arts instruction and also attend to the high-stakes accountability demands that impact current instruction and students' future academic opportunities.

The tactics that teachers reported using as they engaged in Knowledge Integration, which, I also observed in practice, reflect Darling-Hammond and Falk's (1997) suggestion that rather than abandon standards altogether, teachers use them as tools to "support student learning." Acknowledging the delicate ground on which teachers tread in a high-stakes climate, Falk (2000) additionally recognizes that whether or not the standards are constructive, teachers no longer have a choice about whether or not they should use them. She recommends teachers separate the standards' "harmful" aspects from the "useful" ones, a practice the case-study teachers undertook when they privileged certain standards over others in their efforts

to avoid the harmful practice of sacrificing depth for breadth. And, since "meeting the standards" is currently equated with scoring well on high-stakes tests, Falk argues there is now a greater urgency to using standards to nourish high-quality teaching and learning—"teaching the way that children learn, that builds on diverse strengths, that stimulates inquiry and reflection, and that nurtures caring in our classrooms." (p. xii)

Xitlali, Isabel, and Jorge seemed to share this mindset. They knew they could not (nor did they want to) ignore the standards; they had to figure out how to use them in ways they believed would benefit their students. Xitlali, for example, explained that her principal expected her to use the standards, so she modified them according to theoretical and pedagogical guidelines.

> I look at the standards, at what I am supposed to teach, and then …I have to develop the activity based on what I know the kids need. … Will the students have opportunities to produce language? Will they have choices? Is there a meaningful context? Am I modeling for them? (*Xitlali, November 2004*)

Each teacher explained that by "taking back the standards," they could tap their own knowledge about diverse students to deliver language arts instruction that was more appropriate for ELs than the approaches recommended by the state adopted curricula. The teachers posited that, by both privileging essential standards and making the standards culturally relevant, they were able to counter the decontextualized and rote methods advocated by traditional standards-driven programs. The teachers claimed they could better "scaffold" their instruction, or provide students with the temporary assistance or guided participation necessary for task completion (Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1998; Wink & Putney, 2002). This was a practice each teacher named as critical to effectively serving ELs.

NORMS THAT GUIDED SPECIALLY PREPARED TEACHERS' STANDARDS USAGE

In addition to the shared technical practices described above, there was a set of common beliefs that guided case-study teachers' work. These findings are particularly salient, as the school change literature, along with Falk and Darling-Hammond's recommendations, do not address how teachers' modifications of instructional reforms might be based on their own ideologies about their students, on the specific needs of minority children, or more generally, on equity concerns. Though there were several norms that stood out—a strong conviction about valuing students' primary language being one of them—I focus here on the norm that appeared to most powerfully influence teachers' interpretations and modifications of the standards.

A Sense of *Authentic Purpose*

A normative pattern that all three teachers embraced was a strong sense of *Authentic Purpose*. This was evident in their stated reasons for becoming teachers and choosing to work in underserved communities. Jorge, for example, described an experience in college during which,

> The power of the teacher to present and open doors really became apparent to me. …When I would go into classrooms, the students had such insightful questions. And they had so much passion and interest and it just really made me realize that the classroom could be a place for change. (*Jorge, June, 2004*)

Similarly, in her explanation of why she chose to be a teacher and work with ELs, Xitlali shared,

> I think I've always been a real political person… and I was very aware of what was happening in the educational system, and what was happening for some children and not for others. And I decided that that was the place I needed to be… to empower the students and give them the skills they need to succeed, and to use those skills to empower the community. And that's why I decided to be a teacher, 'cause I thought, where could I be of most help to my people? (*Xitlali, May 2004*)

Exemplifying the fundamental tenets of critical pedagogy, Jorge and Xitlali's comments speak to the possibility that schools can serve as sites of political struggle and transformation (Freire, 1995; Giroux & McLaren, 1986). This perspective also played out in the teachers' expressed skepticism about schools treating marginalized students fairly and respectfully. Xitlali, for example, expressed her critical ideology when she questioned the integrity of the standards and their authors, particularly in relation to ELs, given anti-immigrant sentiments in California. Rhetorically, she asked,

> Who made the standards? …Whose idea of proficient is it? … I don't know who was involved... And what's the purpose of them? …Is it really to level out the playing field? …We hope that's what it is… but sometimes I wonder if it's just another way to keep kids out. (*Xitlali, November, 2004*)

A related normative theme that emerged as teachers described their knowledge and beliefs about language acquisition and literacy was the importance of language arts instruction also being authentic—ensuring it has a real purpose in students' lives and supports students to develop critical literacy practices that enable them to "read the world" as well as the word (Freire, 1995). As Jorge explained, "Attacking discrete letter sounds or discrete strategies without having it be contextualized in a broader

curriculum… [is not] relevant… It doesn't become relevant unless students can use it… and see its relevance to their lives" (*Jorge, December 2004*). These guiding principles reflect a central premise of socio-cultural learning theory, namely that, "literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in social goals and cultural practices" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p.7).

These two notions of authenticity guided the different ways in which teachers engaged in Knowledge Integration. For example, as teachers identified which standards to prioritize, their beliefs about their roles as teachers, the purpose of language arts instruction and schooling, and their expectations for their students had a profound influence. Isabel, for example, reported to identify "essential standards" based on each standard's capacity to support students to "analyze what they read, to give opinions, to be thoughtful readers" (*Isabel, November 2004*).

In a similar fashion, teachers' senses of Authentic Purpose helped them determine how far they would go to comply with external demands. After participating in a district-mandated workshop about how to raise test scores "at any cost," Isabel expressed anger about the suggestion that she "teach to the middle" while ignoring students who score in the highest or lowest ranges. Explaining that she became a teacher to "serve her community" and had high expectations for all students, she asked, "How could I in good conscience put test scores above my kids?" She continued, "I don't care what they do to me anymore. My students are the bottom line" (*Isabel, October 2004*). This was a conviction shared by all of the teachers. That is, despite the constellation of NCLB-related demands they faced each day, the teachers consistently struggled to privilege students' authentic needs.

POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF TEACHER AGENCY
IN STANDARDS-BASED REFORM

Engaging in *Strategic Negotiation*

In the few years since Darling-Hammond and Falk's (1997; 2000) texts were published, the accountability-driven reform climate has intensified. Consequently, in addition to Knowledge Integration—thoughtfully picking and choosing which skills and practices to implement and modifying mandated reforms to meet the needs of their EL students within the safety of their own classrooms—"taking back the standards" in Xitlali, Isabel, and Jorge's worlds also demanded public negotiation with local and district administrators and officials.

Data indicate that in order to engage in Knowledge Integration and apply their notions of Authentic Purpose to their work, teachers needed to appropriate the spaces to do so, oftentimes, rebelliously and/or surreptitiously. This makes sense given the standards' affiliations with a seamless web of aligned reforms, and the tightly monitored working conditions prevalent in many underperforming schools (Gutiérrez, Asato, Zavala, Pacehco, & Olson, 2003). I have come to call these more

public efforts *Strategic Negotiation*.

In Isabel's case, onsite and district administrators rarely perceived Isabel and her colleagues' efforts as viable alternatives to the mandated language arts curricula. In addition, because of the district's tight scrutiny, teachers argued they seldom had the latitude necessary for engaging in these technical struggles. As such, many teachers believed that if they compellingly and publicly demonstrated they were adhering to the ELA standards *and* preparing students to perform well on standardized tests, this would afford them the necessary autonomy to sustain their own practices (*Focus Group Interview, November 2004*).

To placate district administrators, the fourth and fifth grade teachers at Isabel's school made several straightforward attempts to articulate how their language arts goals and practices were standards-based. To begin, Isabel and her teammates offered the district the list of the standards they had prioritized during grade level collaboration. In case of surprise district visits, several teachers, including Isabel, additionally listed the standards they planned to cover during a particular activity on their daily agendas. Prior to delivering her lesson on cause and effect, for example, Isabel wrote a two-column agenda on the whiteboard; one column listed the day's activities, such as "Morning Message," and the other included aligned learning goals, such as "The History of Mexico, Immigration/Migration, and ELA Standard 2.6: Cause and Effect." Before scheduled district visits, many teachers also posted related standards and student-friendly, standards-aligned rubrics on bulletin boards next to students' completed assignments, making it plain to district officials that even without a rigid curriculum, students were able to meet the standards. Xitlali similarly wrote specific terms or phrases from the ELA standards and from *Reading California* on her daily agenda as a way of describing one of her already established language arts practices. This served both as evidence that she was adhering to the standards, and also as a mask for the fact that she was not using the mandated curriculum.

In one of the most consistent enactments of Strategic Negotiation at Isabel's school, she and her colleagues collaboratively prepared for the district's monthly walkthroughs by redefining the goals of the visitation to reflect their own instructional vision rather than the district's NCLB-driven agenda. By changing the name of these visits from "district scans" to "focus walks," Isabel and her colleagues essentially "took back" the language of reform, which allowed them to seize some power out of the district's hands and bring legitimacy to their own professional knowledge and instructional leadership.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Together, these three constructs—Knowledge Integration, a sense of Authentic Purpose, and Strategic Negotiation—indicate that Oakes' (1992) framing of school

change as technical, normative, and political can help unpack the complexity of specially prepared teachers' responses to high-stakes accountability. Teachers' multi-dimensional responses also point to the shortsightedness of viewing reform efforts as benign attempts to make technical changes in schools, and as devoid of ideological and political underpinnings. Indeed, teachers' attempts to "take back the standards" refute the idea that teachers, particularly those who have participated in specialized training, are mere technicians who implement reforms with fidelity, regardless of the content or pedagogies they advance.

Findings also intimate that Oakes' framework is not only applicable to analyses of school change, but might also be a useful way to think about specialized teacher education, and teacher agency more generally. If nothing else, a delineation of the technical, normative, and political challenges specially prepared teachers are likely to face upon employment in high-needs schools provides compelling reason to incorporate a focus on these challenges into university coursework and professional development efforts. Such a change would expand upon previous calls to equip specially prepared teachers with the content and pedagogical knowledge needed to effectively serve marginalized students (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1997; Gay & Howard, 2001; etc.), by linking the beliefs and practices introduced in specialized teacher education programs to the professional struggles these teachers are likely to face. In other words, preparing teachers to develop a Critical Professional Practice would extend beyond equipping teachers with equity-minded knowledge and dispositions that can only be applied when they close their classroom doors, and might support teachers to apply their technical, normative, and political knowledge in the restrictive settings commonly found in high-needs schools.

These findings also push up against traditional notions of individual teacher agency, like those portrayed in the school change literature, which tend to place unreasonable expectations on teachers to solve enormous educational problems. While data demonstrate that enacting a Critical Professional Practice may diminish the potentially negative effects of the ELA standards on specially prepared teachers' instructional practices and EL students, it is essential to note that despite their best efforts and resilient stances, Jorge, Xitlali, and Isabel were consistently overpowered by the reductive approaches sponsored by standards-based reforms. For example, since increasing scores on English standardized tests was each school's exclusive means of shaking its underperforming status, teachers frequently found the allotted ELA instructional time to be insufficient. As a result, teachers commonly cut into designated primary (Spanish) language instruction time, despite their strong convictions about upholding bilingual education. Other potentially problematic inclinations among teachers included structuring most lessons in whole class rather than small group activity settings, privileging teacher talk over student participation, and emphasizing skill building over contextualized, thematic instruction. Each of the teachers expressed ambivalence about these tendencies and struggled with the fact that their instruction did not match their ideals. These internal conflicts, along

with facing the daily pressure that accompanied working in an underperforming school, took a heavy emotional toll on teachers. Xitlali lamented,

> It's not a good time to be a teacher… It's extremely stressful. We all get our assessments, and sometimes I look at it and I want to cry 'cause the kids didn't do well and I just have to step back and just look at it critically and say, OK maybe I didn't do enough and then put it on myself and think…what can I do more of or what could I do better? …I don't mind putting in the hours… but it's frustrating putting all those hours in and then stressing like it's still not enough. …I'm not always sure how to do it or what I can do without completely killing myself. You know, how can I meet everyone's needs? It's just really hard. (*Xitlali, May 2004*)

Let me be clear that I do not share these teachers' shortcomings or emotional vulnerabilities to expose them as ineffectual practitioners, especially in light of their sophisticated responses to the pressures that accompany working in underperforming schools. My intent, rather, is to argue that traditional notions of teacher agency, which rely on specially prepared teachers to interrupt reductive instructional policies and practices, will not likely root out structural problems associated with accountability-driven reform. At a time when the rhetoric of accountability dominates decisions about classroom instruction, equity-minded teacher educators cannot justifiably place the onus to "fix" the most vulnerable schools on teachers alone. In addition to outfitting teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they most certainly need to survive in and transform struggling schools, specialized teacher education programs can also use their institutional clout to make structural changes in the schools where they expect their candidates to work. For example, when districts that struggle to attract and retain highly qualified teachers appeal to urban or social justice preparation programs for recruiting purposes, equity-minded teacher educators are well positioned to take a stand against district-adopted reforms that oppose the knowledge and beliefs they imbue in their preservice teachers. While this is just one example of how university faculty can act as social justice educators alongside the teachers they prepare, it is also a call to action to think carefully and critically about the multiple levels on which teacher educators can advocate for diverse students.

NOTES

(1) For example, the Lynch School of Education at Boston College is "committed to a model of education that serves the goals of social justice (The Lynch

School, 2006), while Center X, at the University of California Los Angeles, claims to "embody a social justice agenda," and use "the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of our Los Angeles community as an asset as we construct extraordinarily high-quality education for all children in Los Angeles and particularly for limited English proficient, and low-income, children of color in urban schools" (Center X, 2006).

(2) For more than a decade, numerous propositions related to immigrants and language use have appeared on California's ballots. Proposition 187, which passed in 1994 only to be determined unconstitutional several years later, attempted to prevent undocumented immigrants from receiving any health or public educational services. In 1996, Californians overwhelmingly voted for Proposition 209, eradicating affirmative action programs from public schools, colleges, and universities as well as other state agencies and state sponsored organizations. Proposition 227, also known as *The English for the Children Initiative*, was voted into law in June of 1998, and virtually eliminated the use of any language other than English for instructional purposes. Most recently, Californian voted to defeat well-known conservative, Ward Connerly's Proposition 54, which set out to prohibit state agencies from collecting race-based data, and threatened to undermine healthcare, education, law enforcement, and general civil rights for all Californians. The law likely would have affected communities of color more negatively than the state's white population.

(3) These include (1) the *English-Language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools* (California Department of Education, 1997), (2) the *Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools* (California Department of Education, 1999a), and (3) the *English Language Development Standards* (California Department of Education, 1999b).

(4) Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Asato (2000) explain that reductive literacy practices extract the teaching of discrete skills from the literacy practices that would support ELs to make meaning.

(5) For an extended content analysis of California's Language Arts and Social Studies standards, see Sleeter & Stillman (2005).

(6) Names of people and research sites are pseudonyms.

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