

STORIES OF CONTRADICTION IN POLICY AND PRACTICE:
CHALLENGING THE UNSPOKEN REALITIES OF ACCOUNTABILITY POLICIES IN
PUBLIC EDUCATION

A Dissertation
by
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Abstract

STORIES OF CONTRADICTION IN POLICY AND PRACTICE: CHALLENGING THE UNSPOKEN REALITIES OF ACCOUNTABILITY POLICIES IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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The purpose of this study is to establish an understanding of the subjective reality of a teacher working in a low-performing school and how this reality influences their self-efficacy and autonomy in the classroom. This research allows for an understanding of the cognitive processes and self-perception of teachers as they approach instruction and assessment in a low-performing school. Recommendations for unique leadership practices that support positive self-efficacy beliefs in teachers and encourage professional autonomy are explored as a result of the research.

Throughout this research study, the effectiveness of using designations and performance grades to rate a school or a teacher's ability to perform within socially constructed standards will be questioned. By grounding this research in social constructionism supported by social cognitive theory, I examine the influence of school performance designations based on the personal experiences of teachers as they approach planning for instruction.

A qualitative approach using narrative inquiry is used to capture the voices of

teachers in North Carolina's public schools as they navigate through the discourses of legislative mandates. The told stories of the participants capture the human experience while at the same time provide for a clearer picture of the reality of the work in which teachers are immersed on a daily basis. A random sample of elementary teachers from a school designated as low-performing, the principal of the school, and a teacher from a high-performing school were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews.

The data from this study suggests that teacher perceptions of being designated low-performing or ineffective have a dramatically negative impact on what happens in the classroom, which also perpetuates low-performance in highly impacted schools. The unintended consequences of accountability policies are detailed in the participant's stories which support the contradiction between policy and practice. The information from this study will inform leaders of focus areas that could provide for unique leadership in schools designated as low-performing.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my late father, Leonard Northrop. His love for God, his family and country was instilled upon all of his children. His influence will forever remain a part of me.

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Chapter One

Introduction

I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that there are as few as there are any other great artists. Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit.

-John Steinbeck, Nobel Prize for Literature, 1962

There is an art to teaching (Marzano, 2007). It is much like a dance in which the teacher finds the right footing to be able to glide through standards, beliefs and a repertoire of instructional practices. The dance becomes the essence of teacher pedagogy and is what defines a teacher as a professional. Just like in a dance, if you miss a step, it becomes awkward and clumsy and does not produce orchestrated results. The teacher must become the choreographer of learning; the choreographer of the dance. The professional teacher must be able to utilize an array of strategies that will meet the individual learning needs of a diverse population in order to maximize learning and produce measurable outcomes. Robert Marzano (2007), acknowledges that research will never be able to identify instructional strategies that work for every student in every class. “Ultimately, teachers must decide which strategies to employ with the right students at the right time, thus acknowledging that a good part of effective teaching is an art” (Marzano, 2007, p.5).

Legislative mandates focused on producing measurable outcomes have been the death of the instructional dance. The accountability policies found within many legislative mandates have unfortunately all too often created an antithetical discourse between teacher instructional autonomy and efficacy in governmental accountability which challenges a teacher’s personal instructional and philosophical beliefs. Such mandates can stifle any

creativity of the dance. Ignorant of the frailty of the human element of schools, legislative mandates frequently inhibit the discretion of a teacher to act in a critical and informed way in the classroom based on their understanding of the students they personally know and teach, resulting in apathy within schools (Evans, 2009). The result of a misstep in the dance can have serious consequences, most especially when schools are designated as “low-performing” or teachers are publicly identified as being ineffective (Ravitch, 2010). Popham (2016) notes that students assigned to strong teachers are being urged to abandon the implementation of more effective instructional strategies, thus resulting in a lower quality of education by teaching to a test rather than teaching to the student. Classrooms then become places that do not engage students and do not meet the social, emotional or academic needs of a diverse population of students (Popham, 2006; Ravitch, 2010).

The approach to this study is an acknowledgement of my experience as a classroom teacher and principal with 25 years of experience in public education. Fifteen of these years have been as a principal of four different schools, both low and high performing, situated in three large urban school districts. I have experienced firsthand the effects of decades of legislative mandates imposed upon schools and the debilitating impact it has on teacher autonomy and efficacy in the classroom with regards to student achievement. I have witnessed the de-professionalization of teachers and the apathy it creates within a school, which ultimately determines the success or failure of a school. I acknowledge my experience as a teacher and administrator as it affects my views as a researcher. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) emphasize the importance of acknowledging the researcher’s reflexivity due to the power relations inherent in the research process. My professional experiences also allow me to be reflexive in the preconceptions I bring with me in relation to the subject. The

acknowledgement of my positionality will in turn help me establish a research relationship with my participants that will provide for a situational awareness between myself and the participants so as not to allow for a disruption in the co-creation of meaningful instruction by teachers, students and myself.

Statement of the Problem

Public education is controlled by legislation primarily at the state level, which may mandate changes with or without the necessary funding. At the federal level, schools must ensure that the constitutional rights of all students and staff are protected by school and district policies. The 10th Amendment to the Constitution allocates education as the function of the states (“The roles of Federal,” 2018). The maintenance and operation of schools is incumbent upon each state. All such legislation, whether state or federal, has relied upon accountability policies to education over the past several decades. Federal legislation such as the recently passed *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) of 2015, imposed on schools the intent to reform public schools and prepare students for success in college and careers. The law is a reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) of 1965, and represents the nation’s commitment to provide equal opportunities for all students regardless of race, income, zip code, disability, home language or background (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). The success or failure of a school is determined by how well students, teachers and schools are performing through high-stakes testing and other measures. The testing associated with these federal mandates is used to measure a school’s success. Success is defined based on artificially defined scores on high stakes annual tests by students in each school. These high stakes tests are the primary data points that are used to measure teacher and student success. The law maintains the expectation that there is to be

statewide accountability based on required state action to create positive change in the lowest-performing schools in which groups of students are not making progress or where graduation rates are unsatisfactory over extended periods of time (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b).

The ESSA of 2015 provides each state with the flexibility to design a school accountability system within parameters of the law. The accountability plan for each state must include academic indicators, a measure of student growth, graduation rates, progress in proficiency for English Language Learners and a measure of school quality and student success (NCDPI, 2017f). Specifically, in North Carolina, the General Assembly enacted School Performance Grades for North Carolina Public Schools. The school performance grade legislation, G.S. 115C-83.15, directs the State Board of Education to “award school achievement, growth, and performance scores” and an associated performance grade. For all schools the total school performance score is converted to a 100-point scale and used to determine a school performance letter grade of A, B, C, D, or F. “A” schools demonstrate no significant gaps between the highest and lowest subgroup performance on assessments or graduation rate (NCDPI, 2017f). The law also includes a requirement that the designation of student growth shall be displayed in an annual school report card. For schools that serve students in grades K-8, the school performance scores in reading and math will also be reported separately on the annual school report card (NCDPI, 2017f). The information must be made available to parents and the general public as to their schools status and performance, as well as district and state data covering several areas, to include teacher qualifications, school safety, and class and school sizes.

The ESSA mandates that schools not meeting standards be identified as a Priority,

Focus or Low-Performing school. Schools are also designated as *ineffective* or *effective* based on a state's accountability system. Schools receiving the designation *low-performing* are required to show improvement or risk being shut down, resulting in teachers losing their jobs (Ravitch, 2010). The requirements are tied to federal funding, which force school systems to comply or lose millions of federal dollars. In states such as North Carolina, with high populations of poverty, these federal dollars are essential to their operations. Systems of school improvement and interventions by school districts are mandated by ESSA for struggling schools.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017b), the law also upholds the civil rights legacy by including all students and historically underserved subgroups. High-stakes testing frequently impacts minority students and those from poverty when curriculum is narrowed in order to ensure students pass the test (Ravitch, 2010). Many states tie teacher accountability to teacher evaluation, and as a result, produce unintended consequences, which actually have a negative impact on the very intention of the law. The role of the federal government was initially to provide funding for education that would promote equity, not select winners or losers (Ravitch, 2014; Vande Corput, 2012).

Much of the accountability in the current ESSA of 2015 is based on a statistical model, developed by William Sanders in the 1990's, a statistician who created the value added growth model. "Sanders claimed that his statistical model could determine how much value a teacher added to the student's testing performance" (Ravitch, 2014, p. 100). "He further reasoned that racial and socio-economic characteristics became unimportant and believed that student learning is quantifiable based primarily on the effectiveness of the teacher" (Ravitch, 2014, p. 100). This opened the door for public school reformers to believe

that a teacher's experience and education were irrelevant and that the only important element in determining the effectiveness or worth of a teacher was the performance of the students. According to Ravitch (2014) many ignore the fact that tests are social constructions whose questions and answers are written by fallible human beings. The test graders decisions affect the fate of students, the reputations of teachers, and the survival of entire schools (Ravitch, 2014).

This is in stark contrast to what social scientists have studied and come to believe over the past several decades (Ravitch, 2014; Reardon, Kalogrides, & Shores, 2017). Social scientists have argued that differences in the quality of schools can explain about one-third of the variation in student achievement (Ravitch, 2014; Reardon et al., 2017). The other two-thirds is attributable to non-school factors (Ravitch, 2014). These non-school factors may include a family's income, the student's disability status, language proficiency, and student's interest (Ravitch, 2014). The school is attributable to 20%-25% of the factors influencing student achievement, with 15% of those factors being attributed directly to teachers. The theory that the teacher is able to overcome factors that are out of his or her control, such as poverty status, is a myth that public school reformers continue to perpetuate without ample evidence to support these claims (Ravitch, 2014; Reardon et al., 2017).

Scholars such as Ravitch (2014) and Bandura (1987) have studied the impact of legislative mandates and the detrimental effect on teacher pedagogy, autonomy and efficacy. Several other influential scholars would agree that legislative mandates have created learning environments not conducive to learning, especially among young learners, those with individual learning needs, representative of diverse cultures and those with lower socioeconomic status (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Erskine, 2014; Evans; 2009; Vande Corput;

2014). “Every school has its own culture and context, reflecting the character of the community and competence of its staff” (Ravitch, 2014).

Research Purpose and Questions

I believe that professional educators are in the business of developing human beings, driven by the development of the nature of knowledge. With the exception of the military, no other profession in America is mandated to conform to politics or the pendulum swings of legislative mandates. The ESSA of 2015, and its system of identifying low-performing schools, exerts power and control within the educational institution by reducing the human element of schools to a numerical value or statistical analysis which defines a school’s worth.

Diane Ravitch (2014) explains the effect of this oppressive system of accountability as:

Those at the top will still be at the top and imagine that they deserve their exalted position, and those at the bottom will remain at the bottom, convinced that the tests have certified their lesser achievement and their lesser value. The test scores grade, rank, and brand students, who believe that they deserve the labels they receive. After all, the tests are supposedly objective. (p.267)

This positivist system of accountability and reform is where the debate in the literature lies - that knowledge is not only quantifiable but also objective. The personal nature of relationship building between teacher and student becomes irrelevant in this view of education. This is the stance that several public school reformers have taken in the past decade to create a hierarchical system of worth by publicly announcing a school’s effectiveness solely based on student achievement as demonstrated on a standardized test. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 supports the finding that public announcements of hierarchy of worth create oppressive environments and teacher apathy, which seem to be the intent of some politicians and, unfortunately, is somewhat contrary to the very intent of the law.

The numerous changes in the field of education have led to the de-professionalization of teachers (Ravitch, 2014). I believe this de-professionalization particularly addresses teacher self-efficacy beliefs and teacher autonomy - two critical elements in restoring teacher professionalism. In a professional environment, professionals have the autonomy to do their work and are not expected to follow scripted programs or orders written by non-professionals (Ravitch, 2014). The emotional toll of sanctions and designations such as low-performing or teacher ratings of “not effective,” have severely impacted how teachers perceive their autonomy and efficacy as professional educators as well as their pedagogical practices (Bandura, 1997; Evans, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to establish an understanding of the subjective reality of a teacher working in a low-performing school and how this reality influences their self-efficacy and autonomy in the classroom. This research will also allow for an understanding of the cognitive processes and self-perception of teachers as they approach instruction and assessment in a low-performing school. Recommendations for unique leadership practices that support positive self-efficacy beliefs in teachers and encourage professional autonomy will be explored as a result of the research.

Educational leadership and professional development programs can benefit from this research by making future leaders aware of school policies and procedures, indicating levels of expectations, which impact a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy. The outcome of this research could further inform legislators and educational leaders as they shape policies and laws to re-establish the importance of the professionalization of teachers. Policymakers will be able to weigh whether the laws for which they advocate will promote failure or success in schools. Throughout this research study, the effectiveness of using designations and

performance grades to rate a school or a teacher's ability to perform within socially constructed standards will be questioned.

By grounding this research in social constructionism supported by social cognitive theory, I will examine the influence of school performance designations based on the personal experiences of teachers as they approach planning for instruction. Specifically, the following research questions will be addressed:

- What are the perceived realities of teachers working in low-performing schools?
- What is the impact of legislative mandates on teacher efficacy and subsequent beliefs of autonomy in low-performing schools?
- How do teacher beliefs about autonomy and self-efficacy affect pedagogical approaches to instruction and assessment in low-performing schools?

Definition of Terms

This study will refer to several terms present in the relevant literature. In order to provide clarity, I am including this glossary of key terms.

Teacher efficacy. Teacher efficacy is a factor of the success of a teacher. It cannot be ignored, as it is related to collaboration and connectedness, a central factor that is consistently related to teacher efficacy as a way to positively influence student learning and behavior (Kinsey, 2006). Ware and Kitsantas (2011) define teacher efficacy as a teacher's belief in their abilities to organize and execute courses of action needed to bring about desired results. Developing a teacher's perception of efficacy can have a positive effect on instructional practices by promoting involvement in curriculum development, problem-solving and decision-making.

Autonomy. Teacher autonomy is highly related to a teacher's perception of their professional status and job satisfaction. Teacher autonomy refers to the professional discretion of the teacher to make decisions in the classroom as to what and how content is taught. Teacher autonomy has been studied by several researchers. According to Strong and Yoshida (2014), teachers have autonomy primarily in the areas of operation and decision making (as cited in Blase & Kirby, 2006). In the area of operations, teachers have autonomy to some extent within the classroom, when making decisions concerning student discipline or classroom procedures. Teachers can also have some autonomy through decisions they make concerning pedagogy, including instructional and classroom assessment choices (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Decision-making autonomy allows for choice in determining those critical issues that surround their duties as a teacher (Strong & Yoshida, 2014).

Human agency. The belief that you have the ability to produce desired results through their actions in order to be motivated and persevere in a difficult situation (Craighead & Nemeroff, 2004).

Legislative mandates. A legislative mandate occurs when a law is passed by the General Assembly and that law explicitly or implicitly requires that a regulation be amended or that a new regulation be promulgated ("Legislative Mandate," 2017). This research specifically focuses on the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) of 2015. The law is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and replaces the No Child Left behind Act of 2002.

Social constructionism. Social constructionism is a way of understanding the nature of knowledge. The concept embodies the thought that we live in a social system and that over time we create mental representations of reality based on that social system. According

to Burr (2015), social constructionism argues that the ways we commonly understand the world, through the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific. The theory examines how our realities are dependent on our experiences and interactions with others.

Social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory is informed by the work of Albert Bandura and relies on the social constructionist perspective. Social cognitive theory provides for an understanding of how individuals operate cognitively in their social experiences and how these cognitive operations influence a person's behavior and development (Grusec, 1992). Albert Bandura is a prominent psychologist whose work and theory have been used to understand organizational behavior.

Theoretical Framework

Using a social constructionist theoretical perspective embraces what I know and understand to be multiple truths within a contested reality. I believe that teachers operate within a socially constructed institution. The reality of this cultural group is subjective and constantly changing. Labels, designations and school performance grades are part of a political system that affects teacher agency, subjectivity and power to operate within a social institution.

A micro-level theory has been chosen in order to support the larger theoretical framework of social constructionism. Understanding and utilizing social cognitive theory, which is informed by a social constructionist perspective, opens the door to a mid-level or micro theory in my research.

The requirements of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) of 2015, specifically, the use of school report card grades and designations to communicate the success or failure of a

public school, will be critiqued using a social constructionist perspective. Finally, the implications for using social constructionism as a theoretical framework and social cognitive theory as a micro level theory will be explored through the voices of teachers working in a low-performing school in order to understand the relationship between legislative mandates, teacher autonomy and self-efficacy beliefs.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is an epistemology embedded in many theoretical perspectives including symbolic interactionism (Crotty, 1998). An epistemology frames the lens for how we see our world by helping us to understand how we know what we know. Social constructionism as a theoretical perspective will inform my research topic and influence the methodology in which my work will be situated. Using social constructionism to frame my work will expand my thinking by allowing me to understand the reality of others and how the nature of knowledge is constructed.

Social constructionism, rooted in the field of sociology, is associated with the postmodern era in qualitative research (Andrews, 2012). Social constructionism became a way to understand the nature of knowledge. The emphasis on social constructionism can be traced back to the work of William Isaac Thomas and the Chicago sociologists in the 20th century, as well as phenomenological sociologists and philosophers such as Alfred Schutz (Social Constructionism, 2017). The thoughts of these men centered around the idea that society is produced from human behavior and social structures (Social Constructionism, 2017).

The term became widely understood through the 1996 work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (Burr, 2015). Berger and

Luckmann's work was heavily influenced by Alfred Schutz, Max Weber, George Herbert Meade and Herbert Blumer (Cole, 2015). The ideas that informed their work have a long history and were influenced by several philosophers who came before them. Berger and Luckman's work provides for a synthesis of ideas from Emile Durkheim and George Herbert Meade resulting in the now widely used term, social constructionism.

Social constructionism is a way of understanding the nature of knowledge. The concept embodies the thinking that we live in a social system and that over time we create mental representations of reality based on that social system. When others accept these mental representations through reciprocal interactions the representation becomes institutionalized and its meaning becomes embedded in society (Burr, 2015).

Social constructionism as an epistemology relies upon the understanding that knowledge and reality provide context to an individual. The world is understood through social interchanges which are historically situated in time and place. One's culture is ever present in understanding how the world works and how one comes to "know" or gain knowledge. According to Crotty (1998), constructivism rejects the objective view of human knowledge. That is, there is no objective truth waiting for us to discover. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of our world (Crotty, 1998). Social constructionism is a belief that we create our realities based on the meanings things have for them. Meaning to an individual is socially constructed and is always fluid and changing. According to Rubin (2012), social constructionism posits there are multiple realities of truth and constantly changing realities. Meaning is divergent and forms of representation provide the means through which meaning is made (Eisner, 1993).

Designations and performance grades are representations that provide meaning in accountability models.

Social constructionism is related to symbolic interactionism, which is a theoretical perspective that deals directly with issues such as language, communication, interrelationships and community (Crotty, 1998). Furthermore, Crotty (1998) explains that symbolic interactionism embeds those basic social interactions whereby we enter into the perspectives, attitudes and values of a community. The meaning of our realities is based on social interactions with others and how we interpret them. Reality then becomes subjective in nature. This theory is focused on how we use and interpret things as symbols to communicate with each other, how we create and maintain a self that we present to the world and a sense of self within us, as well as how we create and maintain the reality that we believe to be true (Cole, 2016). For example, grades are socially constructed symbols that communicate achievement, whether good or bad. In our society, there is a universal understanding of the meaning of an “A” versus that of an “F” based on our own prior experiences in school.

Criticisms of Social Constructionism

Scholars who criticize social constructionism believe it is an anti-realist theory in that it denies that knowledge is a direct perception of reality (Andrews, 2012). By believing reality is socially constructed and not objective in nature, tension is created between realism and relativism (Andrew, 2012). Critics argue the worth of a social constructionist perspective in qualitative research because the perspective presents that multiple realities exist. The presentation of multiple realities causes some researchers to question the legitimacy of social constructionism as a theoretical perspective. Andrew (2012) posits that

realism and relativism represent two different perspectives - one an objectivity reality and the other multiple realities. A realist position ignores the way researchers construct interpretations of the findings and assumes that there is knowledge that can be agreed upon as being verified as accurate or true (Andrews, 2012). Relativism leads to the conclusion that nothing can ever be known as definite; there are multiple realities with none having more importance than the other (Andrew, 2012). To an end, Andrews (2012) explains, critics and scholars suggest that using a social constructionist framework lacks any ability to create change because there is nothing against which to judge the findings of research.

A Critique of Social Constructionism as a Tool of Educational Inquiry

According to Gergen (2015), in order to appreciate new directions in education, it is important to discuss how we conceptualize knowledge; that is, what students should know. There is an accepted understanding among many in society that the transfer of knowledge, as in schools, is based on an unbiased truth. Education, as we know it, should prepare students to enter the world independent as independent citizens, able to survive and contribute to society. However, for many students this goal may never be realized. Gergen (2015) presents two major premises to education. The first being to move students from the condition of ignorance to knowledge. According to this premise, knowledge is based on fact and logical reasoning that is transferred to students. The second premise is that in order to ensure the student possesses the required knowledge, one must frequently assess knowledge. Students must “measure up” or be punished (Gergen, 2015). Curricula are determined for them without regard for what personally interests the individual or affects their cognitive or affective ability to learn.

Paulo Freire recognizes the traditional model of school as one in which the teacher dispenses the knowledge and the students passively receive the knowledge (Flinders & Thornton, 2013). Scientists and scholars decide where the truth lies within this prescribed body of knowledge with little, if any input, from classroom teachers. Teachers are disregarded in these decisions as they are expected to deliver a standardized curriculum without change. They are denied an opportunity to create educational experiences that go beyond the adopted curriculum while using their professional judgement or risk the consequences of accountability measures based on tests geared only to measure this prescribed curriculum (Gergen, 2015).

Social constructionists believe that education should be a relational process. The world is becoming increasingly complicated. Decisions are too important for a person to make on their own. Gergen (2015) believes we must not work in isolation. Collaboration and relationships should become the educational focus. The constructionist view of education allows us to appreciate the many different claims to knowledge such as visual knowledge, musical knowledge or practical knowledge. While art, music should be essential to students many should assume they are for the privileged. The superiority of one knowledge. For example, some schools may value empirical knowledge over musical knowledge. This is an example of a value judgement, which is a reflection of the culture of the people associated with it during a specific timeframe (Gergen, 2015).

Social constructionism can become a tool for educational inquiry as it offers an alternative to the top-down traditional model of education. Gergen (2015) maintains that if what we take to be knowledge is an outgrowth of communal relations, then the emphasis shifts from individual knowers to the collaborative construction of knowledge. Emphasis is

then placed on the quality of relationships, between teachers and students, among students, and between the classroom and the surrounding world (Gergen, 2015).

It is important to realize that measures of student performance are not pictures of just the student but cultural constructions (Gergen, 2015). According to Gergen (2015), social constructionists believe evaluations of students tell us less about the students than they do the standpoint of the evaluator. A grade communicates to us the success or failure of a student. The grade becomes a value judgment based on the views and assumptions of the evaluator. Social constructionists believe we never act in isolation. We are a product of our social interactions with others, so with this in mind, it would not be fair to evaluate a student on a fixed belief that there is only one truth. This is no different than when a legislative mandates assigning a school performance grade, designation or sanction to a school based solely on the assessments given in a specific time and place. Schools are social organizations with many stakeholders. The achievement status of a school should not communicate the success or failure of a school to the public. The school should be representative of the culture, values and beliefs of the community it serves. According to Gergen (2015), evaluations are typically based on comparisons which establish *hierarchies of worth*. Gergen (2015) asserts that these *hierarchies of worth* create an oppressive environment within the school by suggesting some students, some teachers, and some families are either inferior or superior based on this limited measure. This single judgement, simplistic in its formulation and failing to either measure or provide insight into the context of the school which affects teacher and student performance, colors the way others treat or view individual cultures, school or school community.

School performance grades and designations are socially constructed and grounded in symbolic interactionism. In other words, the letter grade associated with school performance and the designations associated with it are symbolic in nature and represent a “meaning” associated with the symbol. School performance grades and designations have become part of the culture of a school and are politically, socially and historically situated in a given time and place. They provide for a process from which an organization can develop understanding or meaning of a school’s capacity to provide for academic achievement. The meaning behind a grade or designation is understood by the culture sharing group (e.g., parents, students, community, district office, etc.) and is socially constructed within the perspectives, values and attitudes of the community. Grades are symbols we use to communicate with each other about the performance and perceived value of a school, and as a result, are used to help us make sense of a subjective truth to create a reality which we believe to be true. The symbolic interactionism of socially constructed performance grades and designations, as dictated by legislative mandates, not only shape our worldview of school, but also lead us to take action based upon what those meanings are to us.

Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura, a social psychologist, founded social cognitive theory as a way to analyze the psychological processes that govern human behavior (Wulfert, 2016). The goal of the theory is to explain how behavior develops, how it is maintained and through what processes it can be modified (Wulfert, 2016). Bandura took the position that people are controlled by their environment through a system of external rewards and punishments and internal thoughts, expectations, motivations and beliefs. Through the use of self-regulatory

processes, however, a person can exercise some control over their own behavior. The most central of these of self-regulatory processes is self-efficacy (Wulfert, 2016).

According to Bandura (1986, 1997) self-efficacy is defined as one's belief in his or her ability to perform a given task. These beliefs influence motivation, thought processes and emotions that can either hinder or help an individual in their ability to bring about positive action. A person's self-efficacy beliefs can determine the goals they set for themselves, whether or not they anticipate success or failure, and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles (Wulfert, 2016). A person formulates judgements of their self-efficacy through four psychological sources of information: mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experience, and physiological and emotional arousal (Bandura, 1986, 1997).

Mastery experiences are the strongest influencers of self-efficacy (Kelleher, 2016; Wang, Tan, Li, Tan & Lim, 2017). In order to boost self-efficacy, one must have the perception that past performance has been successful in order for future performance to be successful. One must also have a clear understanding of the criteria for success and the tools for meeting or exceeding those criteria. In other words, success breeds success (Kelleher, 2016). Repeated failures lower one's confidence in delivering successful outcomes in the future (Wang, Tan, Li, Tan & Lim, 2017).

Verbal persuasion refers to receiving encouragement from someone we respect and trust, which in turn increases our belief to perform a task (Kelleher, 2016). Encouraging feedback helps one to persevere in the face of setbacks and can have a profound effect on those who receive the feedback. Verbal persuasion can contribute to a successful performance by leading a person to try new strategies or to try hard enough to succeed

(Bandura, 1986). Such verbal persuasions must be clear and closely related to the criteria of success to boost confidence and performance.

Vicarious experiences, otherwise known as role-modeling, can be a powerful tool in promoting self-efficacy beliefs. That is, when someone sees people similar to themselves succeed, it raises the observer's beliefs that they too have the capacity to succeed, particularly if they share similar background, experiences and training with the person doing the modeling (Wang, Tan, Li, Tan & Lim, 2017). Vicarious experiences can include observing colleagues' classes, images in the media and professional literature, and conversations in the teachers' lounges in schools (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy & Hoy, 1998).

The physiological and emotional state of a teacher can influence their self-efficacy beliefs (Kelleher, 2016). Stress and anxiety can negatively affect self-efficacy by leading one to perceptions of incompetence. According to Kelleher, (2016), physiological symptoms such as headaches, back pain and stomach pain, can often be interpreted as evidence of poor performance which only leads to feelings of low-self efficacy.

Bandura's (1986, 1997), social cognitive theory and his hypothesis of the four sources of efficacy are essential in understanding the relationship between legislative mandates, teacher self-efficacy and autonomy. Leaders must convey to teachers and faculties a sense of capacity to improve despite past performances and commonly held beliefs in the staff as a cultural group. I believe teacher commitment is related to a high degree to a leader's ability to navigate legislative mandates while at the same time providing for a supportive autonomous school culture where teachers can enact agency in their profession.

Policymakers are using accountability systems to identify a school's effectiveness without regard to the philosophical underpinnings that support teacher efficacy. Understanding the relationship between social constructionism and teacher self-efficacy beliefs and autonomy can inform future policy decisions by providing insight into some of the issues surrounding legislative mandates and accountability policy as it relates to educational reform using social constructionism as the theoretical lens. Teacher perceptions of being designated low-performing or ineffective can have a dramatically negative impact on what happens in the classroom, which also perpetuates low-performance in highly impacted schools (Evans, 2009). The subjectivity, or how the teacher identifies themselves as a professional, then becomes dramatically altered.

Legislative mandates are imposed upon schools with the intent of improving educational equity for disadvantaged, minority and underperforming students. The ensuing designations and status associated with either being a low-performing school or an ineffective teacher, all too often reinforces what teachers believe about themselves and their students. If the school designation is not an accurate reflection of the factors that generate the measure and does not take into account the context of the school, it will not accurately reflect the reasons for the school's performance and most certainly will have a deleterious effect on teachers and students. This in turn will create an oppressive environment in the school by negatively affecting a teacher's subjectivity and identity. The de-professionalization of the teaching profession has rendered teachers to perceive themselves and behave in a way that is consistent with their designation or status.

The literature review in Chapter 2 will explore and synthesize the existing research on the relationship between legislative mandates, self-efficacy beliefs and teacher autonomy

in the classroom through the theoretical framework of social constructionism and the conceptual framework of social cognitive theory. I will review historical and current literature to include the legal, political, and institutional policies and requirements of the ESSA of 2015. The literature review will include strengths, weaknesses and gaps in the research, as well as, future implications. By examining the available research I will support the argument for the necessity of supporting the teacher's voice in developing accountability policies.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Reality is not a function of the event as event, but of the relationship of that event to past, and future, events.

-Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men*, 1946

In order for the reader to gain an understanding of the context and lens from which myself as the researcher and my participants are operating, I begin this literature review with a historical context of public education legislation.

Historical Context of Education Legislation

President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a “War on Poverty” in 1965 by committing to equal access for all students to a quality education (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). The creation of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA) brought education to the forefront in America as a civil rights law. ESEA became an extensive statute funding primary and secondary education with an increased emphasis on standards and accountability. The funds come in the form of grants to districts serving low-income students. ESEA funds provided for professional development, instructional materials, resources to support programs and the promotion of parent involvement (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2016). The law has been reauthorized every five years which include a variety of revisions and amendments.

A provision within the ESEA is the Title I program. The Title I program was created by the U.S. Department of Education to distribute funding to schools and districts with high percentages of students from low-income families and accounts for five-sixths of the total funds authorized by the law (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2016). The original

purpose of Title I was to close the skill gap in reading, writing and mathematics between children living in poverty and children from middle-class households. Modest gains were made in closing the achievement gap through the Title I program; however, the gains still did not live up to the claims made by President Johnson's "War on Poverty" (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2016). The ESEA law has been viewed over the years as still being worthy by providing the means of getting results for the nation's poor and undereducated. As a result, the ESEA has been reauthorized by many presidents during their term in office.

The conversation on education shifted in the 1980's from a financial emphasis to an emphasis on student achievement. The Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Act of 1988 refocused Title I on school improvement and excellence, which subsequently allowed federal legislation to impose accountability in student achievement for low-income students (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2016). A major overhaul of the original ESEA occurred in 1994. The Improving America's Schools Act, which coordinated federal resources and policies with existing efforts at the state and local levels to improve student instruction, gave more local control to states allowing them to make improvements with fewer requirements from the federal government (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2016).

During President George W. Bush's term in office, parents, educators and legislators recognized the need to overhaul the ESEA in order to expand opportunities for all students and support schools by strengthening our education system and economy (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). The 2001 reauthorization of ESEA would become the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Once again, accountability was strengthened by implementing

standardized tests to measure student progress and school performance. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017b), schools were required to publish annual report cards detailing student achievement and school demographic data. NCLB became the first legislation to label schools with a pass/fail designation. Schools failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) were sanctioned with mandatory corrective actions, possibly including complete restructuring if the school failed to meet standards three years in a row (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). While NCLB helped to close achievement gaps and protect the civil rights of at-risk students, many states would lower their standards to ward off sanctions from a system which punishes failure rather than reward success.

Current Federal Legislation and Relationship to NC Accountability Policies

The latest reauthorization of the ESEA is now the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) of 2015. The ESSA grants flexibility to states regarding specific requirements of NCLB in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state developed plans designed to close achievement gaps, increase equity, improve the quality of instruction, and increase outcomes for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). The law maintains the expectation that there are accountability measures and policy action by the state in order to create positive change in the lowest-performing schools where groups of students not making progress and where graduation rates are low over extended periods of time (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b).

Each state must submit a statewide accountability plan with ambitious goals and measures of academic progress toward closing statewide proficiency and graduation gaps (NCDPI, 2017e). States are given the flexibility to develop systems that meet the needs of their students. However, each plan must be in compliance with the regulations of the law,

which include valid and reliable measures of student progress disaggregated by subgroup and measures for each of the following: academic achievement; graduation rates for high schools and academic progress for elementary and middle schools; progress in attaining English language proficiency; and at least one other measure as determined by the state (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). Each state will have to identify and support the lowest 5% of Title I schools. High schools with graduation rates lower than 67% will be identified as Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CIS) schools in the state plan (NCDPI, 2017e). Furthermore, schools with consistently underperforming subgroups will be identified for Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI). The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) reports that states must set aside 7% of federal Title I funds to make grants available to low-performing schools (NCDPI, 2017e). Since the definition of a low-performing school will be defined by individual states, the General Assembly in North Carolina enacted the use of School Performance Grades as a way to communicate a public school's effectiveness and identify low-performing schools. For North Carolina Public Schools, public law G.S. 115C-83.15, directs the State Board of Education to “award school achievement, growth, and performance scores” and an associated performance grade (NCDPI, 2017c).

North Carolina Public Schools currently label and publicly report a school's performance with the use of a performance grade of A, B, C, D or F on an annual school report card. “A” schools demonstrate no significant gap between the highest and lowest subgroup performance on assessments or graduation rate (NCDPI, 2017c). According the North Carolina State Board of Education (2017c), schools that earned a letter grade of D or F, and did not exceed growth are considered *low-performing*. *Persistently low-performing*

schools are those that have been *low-performing* for two of the previous three consecutive years (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2017). For all schools, the grade is calculated using 80% overall proficiency of students and 20% on the growth of students (NCDPI, 2017c). Growth is defined by the NCDPI (2017c) as the comparison of actual performance of the school’s students to their expected performance, which is based on students’ prior performance on testing. The total school performance score is then converted to a 100-point scale and used to determine a school performance letter grade. Table one identifies the number of schools and districts designated as *low-performing* and/or *persistently low-performing* in North Carolina during the 2015-16 school year (NCDPI, 2017c). Fewer schools and districts were identified as being *low-performing* for 2015–16 than in 2014–15. However, the number of recurring *low-performing* schools has increased (see Table 1).

Table 1

Number of Low-Performing Schools and Districts

	2014–15	2015-16	Difference
Low-Performing Schools	581	489	-92
Low-Performing Districts	15	10	-5
Persistently Low-Performing Schools	401	415	+14

NCDPI, Accountability and Reporting, 2017

In an executive summary of results published by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2017a), the data for the poverty percentages for 2,473 schools in North Carolina show for each letter grade the percent of all schools reporting poverty at 50% or more of their students or reporting poverty at 50% or less of their students. Schools with

greater poverty earned fewer letter grades of A and B and earned more C's, D's, and F's than schools with less poverty (NCDPI, 2017a).

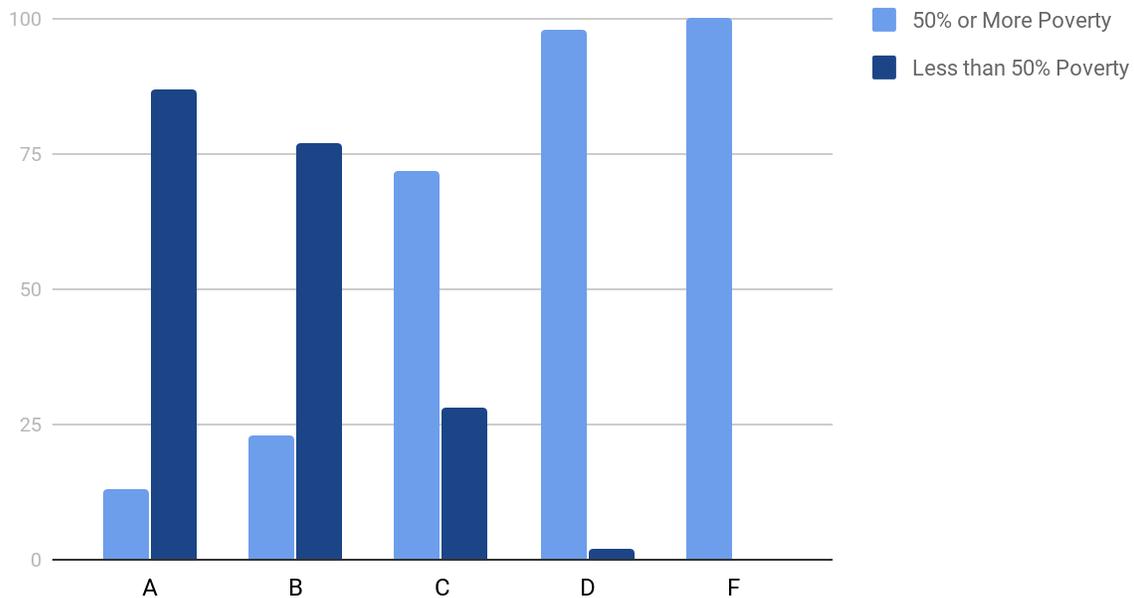


Figure 1. School Performance Grades by School Poverty Percent. From 2016-17 Performance and Growth of North Carolina Public Schools Executive Summary, NCDPI, September 7, 2017

Finally, the ESSA mandates states to report an overall picture of the performance of a school on an annual report card (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). The report card must include progress on the indicators of student achievement, expanded to include information on the following: homeless students, foster youth, students of parents on active duty in the military, information on acquisition of English proficiency by English Learners, and professional qualifications of teachers (NCDPI, 2017e).

In addition to the federal requirements of ESSA, North Carolina third-grade students receive additional testing due to the state's Read to Achieve (RtA) legislative initiative, a part of the Excellent Public Schools Act adopted in 2012 (NCDPI, 2017g). Under this state law, third-grade students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade will receive

special help, including summer reading camp and other interventions to make sure that they can read well enough to be able to do fourth-grade work (NCDPI, 2017g). According to the ExceLinEd Report on Read to Achieve titled *North Carolina Read to Achieve: An Inside Look* (2017a), the state law includes the following mandates and requirements for public schools in North Carolina:

- Mandates early literacy screening for K-3 students in order to identify those who are having reading difficulties and provide teachers with useful information that allows them to tailor instruction to meet each student's individual reading needs.
- Requires that parents of K-3 students identified with a reading deficiency be notified and ensures that intensive reading interventions are provided until the deficiency is remedied. It is further required that the progress of identified students be regularly monitored throughout the year.
- Mandates that summer reading camps be provided to students with a reading deficiency at the end of third grade. In 2015, the General Assembly appropriated \$26 million to expand summer reading camps to first and second grade students having reading difficulties.
- Ends social promotion of third graders who do not demonstrate sufficient reading skills on the state standardized assessment, an alternative assessment of reading or a test-based student reading portfolio. The law also includes good cause exemptions recognizing the special needs of some students.

The program has been updated in recent years to include accountability bonuses for 3rd grade teachers in North Carolina. According to the ExceLinEd Report on Read to Achieve (2017), the North Carolina General Assembly appropriated \$10 million for bonuses for third

grade teachers in 2016. Half the funds are reserved for bonuses to the top 25% of third grade teachers based on Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) growth scores, and the second half are for bonuses to the top 25 percent of third grade teachers in district (NCDPI, 2017a).

Legislative Mandates, Teacher Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Autonomy

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017b), ESSA continues to promote the civil rights legacy of the original ESEA law by focusing upon historically underserved subgroups. According to a study conducted by Reardon, Kalogrides and Shores (2017), children in the school districts with the highest concentrations of poverty score an average of more than four grade levels below children in the richest districts. The analysis also indicated that the largest gaps between white children and their minority classmates emerged in some of the wealthiest communities (Reardon et al., 2017). Economic, demographic, segregation and schooling characteristics explain roughly three-quarters of the geographic variation in these gaps (Reardon et al., 2017). The strongest correlates of achievement gaps being from differences in parental income, parental education levels, and patterns of racial/ethnic segregation (Reardon et al., 2017).

Eisner (2013) describes the ethos of accountability policies as a rationalization for the improvement of our schools. Quantification is believed to be a way to increase objectivity, secure rigor and advance precision in assessment (Eisner, 2013). Within this rationalization lies the downplay of interactions within schools and classrooms. Eisner (2013) further states that interactions should take into account personal qualities, expectations, orientations, ideas and temperaments that interact with simple conditions of the classroom. You cannot predict

the outcome of what is introduced without taking into account what a student makes of it (Eisner, 2013).

Many states tie teacher accountability to teacher evaluation, and as a result, produce unintended consequences, which actually have a negative impact on the very intention of the law. Eisner (2013) believes that students in schools that have different curricula or allocate differing amounts of time to different areas of the curriculum, should not be compared without taking into account their differences. Schools receiving the designation “low-performing” are required to show improvement or risk being shut down and teachers losing their jobs (Ravitch, 2010). Eisner (2013) describes schools being likened to businesses in which the survival of the fittest is the principle that determines which ones survive. The requirements are tied to federal funding which force school systems to comply or lose millions of dollars (Ravitch, 2010). The role of the federal government was initially to fund education in order to promote equity, not select winners or losers (Ravitch, 2014; Vande Corput, 2012). By using designations and performance grades as a form of representation, schools shape children’s thinking skills and, in the process, privilege some students and handicap others by comparing aptitude and opportunities in schools (Eisner, 1993).

Much of the accountability in the current ESSA of 2015 is based on a statistical model, developed by William Sanders, a statistician who created the value added growth model. “Sanders claimed that his statistical model could determine how much value a teacher added to the student’s testing performance” (Ravitch, 2014, p. 100). He further reasoned that racial and socioeconomic characteristics became unimportant and believed that student learning was quantifiable with the effectiveness of the teacher. This opened the door for public school reformers to believe that a teacher’s experience and education were

irrelevant and that the only important element in determining the effectiveness or worth of a teacher was the performance of the students. “The model de-emphasized the parent and child’s responsibility for learning in and outside of the classroom as well as ignored the fact that standardized tests are social constructions whose questions and answers are written by fallible human beings” (Ravitch, 2014, p. 264). “For better or worse, the culture and process of testing affects the fate of students, the reputations of teachers, and the survival of entire schools” (Ravitch, 2014, p. 264).

The theory and practice behind a reliance of standardized testing to improve instruction and student learning is in stark contrast to what other social scientists have revealed over the past several decades. Social scientists have demonstrated that differences in the quality of schools can explain about one-third of the variation in student achievement. “The other two-thirds is attributable to non-school factors” (Ravitch, 2014, p. 102). These non-school factors include a family’s income, the student’s disability status, language proficiency, and student’s interest. The school is attributable to 20%-25% of the factors influencing student achievement, with 15% of those factors being attributed directly to teachers. Reardon et al., (2017) believe it to be more appropriate to think of an observed achievement gap as a proxy measure of local racial inequalities in educational opportunity. Ravitch (2014), concludes that the teacher being able to overcome factors that are out of his or her control, such as poverty status, is a myth that public school reformers hang on to without research evidence to support the claims.

Goldstein (2014) writes that teachers employed in some of the highest poverty schools in America, produce the biggest test score gains in their region. The latest value added research show that veteran teachers who have worked long-term in high poverty

schools are actually more effective at raising student achievement than inexperienced teachers who leave to work at higher performing schools (Goldstein, 2014).

Scholars such as Ravitch (2014) and Bandura (1987) have studied the impact of legislative mandates and the detrimental effect on teacher pedagogy, autonomy and efficacy. Several other influential scholars would agree legislative mandates have created learning environments that are not conducive to learning, and especially not conducive to young learners, those with individual learning needs, are representative of diverse cultures and lower socioeconomic status (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Eisner, 1993; Eisner, 2013; Erskine, 2014; Evans; 2009; Vande Corput; 2014). “Every school has its own culture, reflecting the character of the community and competence of its staff“(Ravitch, 2014, p. 276). The literature reviewed supports the argument that legislative mandates have often created a sense of urgency to perform without taking into account the knowledge and experiences that the educator possesses to create meaningful and engaging classrooms, which produce lifelong learners. Missing in the literature is a discussion on the unintended consequences, such as oppressive learning environments, that are created by invalid measures and labels, as well as, designations and hierarchies of worth in accountability legislation. Furthermore, no studies were found that examined the importance of teacher voice and perspective in the development and implementation of effective instruction and learning.

The Relationship between Legislation, Teacher Efficacy and Autonomy

In an optimum professional environment, teachers should have the autonomy over their work, rather than be expected to follow scripted programs or orders written by non-professionals (Ravitch, 2014, p. 276). The emotional toll of sanctions and designations such as low-performing or teacher ratings of “not effective,” have severely impacted how teachers

perceive their autonomy and efficacy as professional educators; as well as their pedagogical practices (Evans, 2009; Bandura, 1997). In order to understand the relationship between teacher efficacy and autonomy in this literature review, I first looked at understanding the definition of the two terms as presented by researchers and scholars.

Teacher efficacy is a factor of the success of a teacher. The efficacy beliefs of a teacher cannot be ignored, as it is related to collaboration and connectedness, a central factor that is consistently related to teacher efficacy as a way to positively influence student learning and behavior (Kinsey, 2006). A teacher's belief in their personal efficacy is defined as a judgement of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated (Bandura 1977; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Ware and Kitsantas (2011) define teacher efficacy as a teacher's belief in their abilities to organize and execute courses of action needed to bring about desired results. Developing a teacher's perception of their personal efficacy can have a positive effect on instructional practices by promoting their involvement in curriculum development, problem-solving and decision-making (Ware & Kitsantas, 2011).

Teacher autonomy is equally important and highly related to a teacher's perception of their professional status and job satisfaction. Teacher autonomy refers to the professional discretion of the teacher to make decisions in the classroom as to what and how content is taught. Strong and Yoshida (2014) argue that there are two areas in which teachers should have autonomy: areas of operation and decision making (as cited in Blase & Kirby, 2006). Teachers can have operational autonomy through teacher pedagogy and in individual classroom operations affecting classroom environment or management of student behavior (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Decision-making autonomy allows for choice in determining

those critical issues that surround their duties as a teacher (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Teachers must now operate within the confines of federal, state and district accountability measures. Given the prevalence of accountability policy in education, a teacher's freedom to exercise control over their classroom and within the school has been drastically reduced (Strong & Yoshida, 2014).

There are several studies that have focused on the effects of legislative mandates on teacher efficacy and autonomy if viewed through the lens of social constructionism; however, little has been studied on what the impact has been on effective teaching and pedagogy.

Inclusion of a Micro-Level Theory

A micro-level theory has been chosen to support this literature review to support the larger theoretical framework of social constructionism. Understanding and utilizing social cognitive theory, which is informed by a social constructionist perspective, will open the door to a mid-level or micro theory in my research. Social cognitive theory provides for an understanding of how individuals operate cognitively in their social experiences and with how these cognitive operations then come to influence a person's behavior and development (Grusec, 1992). Bandura, is one, who as a prominent psychologist whose work and theory have been used to understand organizational behavior, must be considered.

Individuals mentally represent their environments and themselves in terms of certain classes of cognition that include self-reflective and self-regulatory processes (Grusec, 1992). The construct of self-efficacy emerged from social cognitive theory with Albert Bandura as a key theorist, particularly in relation to teachers and schools. According to Grusec (1992), Bandura's basic premise is that an individual's sense of self-efficacy includes beliefs about

one's own capabilities, which then shape thoughts, emotional states, and actions in response to difficult or taxing situations (Bandura, 1986). In order to develop human agency one must have strong efficacy beliefs (Craighead & Nemeroff, 2004). In other words, a person must believe they have the ability to produce desired results through their actions in order to be motivated and persevere in a difficult situation (Craighead & Nemeroff, 2004).

Bandura contends that this basic principle also applies to organizations and collectively to those who work in them (Evans, 2009). Efficacy operates at both the individual and collective level, which influence each other. Reciprocal causality is a term used to describe the relationship between self and collective efficacy and to reflect to some degree the beliefs about the faculty's capabilities as a whole, both of which shape the culture of the school (Evans, 2009). This suggests that the specific social processes and collective beliefs within a school organization impact individual sense of efficacy (Evans, 2009).

Analysis and Critique of Reviewed Literature

Teacher Efficacy

Self-efficacy beliefs affect thought patterns that may be self-aiding or self-hindering (Bandura, 1989). These beliefs have a direct impact on human agency. Bandura (1989), further explains that the stronger a person's perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goals people set for themselves and the firmer their commitment to them. A strong sense of self-efficacy is essential in order to perform on tasks, especially in the face of judgmental failures. These failures can be judgements made through public pronouncements of designations or school performance grades. People who believe strongly in their ability to problem solve are more efficient in analyzing their current situation. Self-doubt causes one to become erratic in the ability to think analytically, which ultimately affects performance accomplishments

(Bandura, 1998). For example, when a teacher is faced with a difficult situation, such as performing on a standardized assessment in order to determine their effectiveness, their self-doubts about their capabilities negatively affect their performance and they quickly settle for mediocrity (Bandura, 1998). A person must have a strong sense of efficacy in order to persevere in difficult situations and accomplish what they have sought out to accomplish (Craighead & Nemeroff, 2004). As such, human agency must be supported and valued in order to accomplish a strong sense of self-efficacy.

Albert Bandura later expanded his social learning theory to include self-efficacy theory (Wulfert, 2016). In order to gain an understanding of behavior changes, one must first have knowledge of how to strengthen a person's perceived self-efficacy in difficult situations (Wulfert, 2016). Bandura (1986, 1997) identified four psychological sources of information that strengthen self-efficacy. According to Wulfert (2016), the most influential of these processes is mastery experiences whereby, successful experiences heighten self-efficacy while failures lower self-efficacy. Second, vicarious experiences which expose a person to seeing other people similar to themselves be successful raises one's own efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Wulfert, 2016). Third, verbal persuasion influences self-efficacy by convincing people that they have the ability to perform a given task (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Wulfert, 2016). This in turn may lead to success due to the person trying harder to be successful. Finally, Wulfert (2016), explains that teaching coping strategies to lower emotional responses can also increase self-efficacy. A review of the literature indicates that social scientists have widely accepted Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, which promotes the development of self-efficacy, as a primary means of changing human behavior.

The value of developing teacher efficacy should not be underestimated by school leaders and politicians developing legislation impacting the teaching profession. Teacher efficacy is strongly related to educational outcomes such as student achievement (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). The behavior of a teacher in the classroom, as it is related to the effort put into planning and the willingness to experiment with new and better methods to meet the needs of their students, is also attributed to teacher self-efficacy according to Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2001). Furthermore, strong self-efficacy beliefs enable teachers to be more persistent in their efforts working with struggling students and create an enthusiasm for teaching, which in turn results in longevity in the profession (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

Additional sources of teacher self-efficacy have been identified by researchers. Wyatt (2013), identifies teacher knowledge as a source of self-efficacy. Teacher knowledge includes content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Wyatt, 2013). Wyatt (2013) attributes growth in teacher knowledge to the development of more positive self-efficacy beliefs. A study conducted by Wang, Tan, Li, Tan and Lim (2017) identified additional sources of efficacy which include the teacher's perception of respect from students and parents, personal accomplishments, education attainment and their own prior experiences as a student. Teachers working in schools with high numbers of low-achieving students are at a greater risk of developing a low sense of competence in their profession (Woolfolk Hoy & Spero, 2005).

Several researchers explored teacher's sense of efficacy and its potential to influence school efforts to respond to accountability mandates (Evans, 2009; Hewitt, 2015; Kinsey, 2006; Ware & Kitsantas, 2011). The studies reviewed focused on teacher efficacy being

closely tied to teacher's beliefs about students' ability to learn, as well as their own ability to improve student performance (Evans, 2009; Hewitt, 2015; Kinsey, 2006; Ware & Kitsantas, 2011). According to Kinsey (2006), teacher efficacy is a factor of teacher success that cannot be ignored as it is a critical element of collaboration and connectedness. Collaboration is consistently related to general teaching efficacy as a way to positively influence student learning and behavior (Kinsey, 2006).

A faculty's collective sense of efficacy, as it is related to accountability policy and student achievement, is influential in the faculty's sense of their capabilities to affect student achievement (Evans, 2009; Ware & Kitsantas, 2011). According to Evans (2009), teacher's collective sense of efficacy is a group-level attribute that represents the collective beliefs of the faculty as a whole and is significant to the understanding of the school's efforts to respond to accountability policy. Studies of accountability policy in high and low-performing schools suggest their academic status shapes teachers and leaders conceptions of the policy itself and conceptions of their school's capacity to render a positive response to the policy (Evans, 2009).

Grusec (1992) discusses self-efficacy as it relates to social cognitive theory. He refers to self-efficacy as the perceived capability of an individual to organize and execute action needed to perform a specific task (as cited in Bandura, 1986). Therefore, for an individual or organization to execute the needed action for student achievement, they must actually believe that the equity mandate espouses reasonable, desirable and doable goals (Evans, 2009). Furthermore, the studies agreed that a relationship exists between accountability policy and mandates that shape or reinforce what teachers believe about themselves and their students (Evans, 2009; Ware & Kitsantas, 2011).

Teacher Autonomy

A review of the literature identified teacher autonomy as one of the most desirable workplace conditions, which also affects teacher's perceptions of their professional status and job satisfaction (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Dearman & Alber, 2005; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010; Strong & Yoshida 2014). One study by Strong and Yoshida (2014) used the Teacher Work-Autonomy Scale as a measure of U.S. teacher autonomy within the present educational context. Strong and Yoshida (2014) and Crocco and Costigan (2007) highly associated teacher autonomy with teaching efficacy. The literature reviewed supported findings that the erosion of professional autonomy undermines the responsibility teachers have to their work. Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2010) describe teacher autonomy as enhancing rather than undermining teacher responsibility by situating educators as the primary authors of their own success and failures.

Involving teachers in decision-making fosters the commitment needed to achieve and sustain change in the classroom. This is best achieved by forming collaborative networks, which develop a shared consensus of what constitutes effective teaching and learning for student achievement (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Dearman & Alber, 2005; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010; Strong & Yoshida 2014). The research on the impact of legislative mandates on teacher autonomy concludes that narrowed options for pedagogy and prescribed curriculums present challenges of how to teach in an age of heightened accountability (Crocco & Costigan, 2007).

Discussion

In order for a teacher to experience success within a school organization, he or she must work independently with a certain degree of self-efficacy, as well as in a group with a

healthy collective sense of efficacy (Evans, 2009). This is important for several reasons. First, with the age of accountability and legislative mandates in education, teachers must be able to work with some degree of autonomy in order to realize their potential as professionals. In a study by Evans (2009), Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, within the context of social cognitive theory, indicates that a school's success may be viewed as the sum of the individual contributions of teachers. Evans (2009) determines it is the interdependence and collective sense of wellness within the organizational system that contributes to teacher's individual sense of efficacy (as cited in Bandura, 1997). If a person or group decides that the cause of events, such as being labeled low-performing or labeled not effective, affects their sense of self-efficacy, then it will in turn affect their response to these events (Evans, 2009).

Teachers need to see that their success can be attributed to things they had control over. In other words, past success tends to persuade people that they have what it takes to succeed. Conversely, perceived failure tends to undermine future success in a school. According to Evans (2009), if teacher's counterparts in similar schools are unsuccessful, the experience may serve as validation for their own school's lack of success. In social cognitive theory, this becomes the model from which a school or teacher judges themselves (Evans, 2009).

Third, a collective sense of efficacy promotes the conditions needed to act on educational reforms by designing, selecting and implementing strategies that meet the needs of disadvantaged, minority and underperforming students (Evans, 2009; Ware & Kitsantas, 2011). In order to accomplish this task, a school faculty or teacher must believe that they are responsible and competent. If not, teachers will seek to avoid working with certain populations of students, in order to have a greater chance of success within a given accountability model (Hewitt, 2015). In higher performing schools, teachers typically set

higher expectations and goals for student performance. However, in a low-performing school, teachers feel overwhelmed by the challenges that disadvantaged students bring to school. They will often set lower expectations for performance, be less persistent and put less effort in teaching these students (Evans, 2009).

Finally, the impact of legislative mandates and accountability policies frequently have had a detrimental effect on an individual's or collective sense of efficacy and teacher autonomy in a school by hampering their ability to respond to such external mandates. A school's or teacher's designated status can seriously impact their agency or how they respond by causing them to narrow curriculum, implement boxed programs, teaching to the test and, most importantly, setting lower expectations for student performance. The studies reviewed here clearly show that legislative mandates and accountability policies often actually promote inequities within a school. High performing schools respond by focusing on instruction for higher student achievement, while low-performing schools respond superficially to address the imposed sanctions put upon them.

Implications for Future Inquiry

Teachers working in schools with high numbers of low-achieving students are at a greater risk of developing a low sense of competence in their profession (Woolfolk Hoy & Spero, 2005). Therefore, district and school leaders, particularly those in challenging schools, will be able to use this research to equip teachers with the tools necessary to support their professional development. Leaders must convey to teachers and faculties a sense of capacity to improve despite past performances and commonly held beliefs about race, class and achievement (Evans, 2009). Much of what leaders say and do becomes part of the teachers cognitive processing and psychological state (Evans, 2009). Teacher commitment is

directly related to a leader's ability to navigate legislative mandates while at the same time providing for a supportive autonomous school culture.

Further implications from this literature review would be to inform future policy decisions by providing insight into some of the issues surrounding legislative mandates and accountability policy as it relates to educational reform. Understanding the intentionality and effects of policy will provide an insight to lawmakers that what is intended does not always bring about the desired results and can actually produce outcomes, which were not intended. Teacher perceptions of being designated low-performing or ineffective can have a dramatically negative impact on what happens in the classroom and perpetuate low-performance in highly impacted schools (Evans, 2009; Woolfolk Hoy & Spero, 2005).

Moving Toward Alternative Accountability Measures

Understanding and integrating the teacher perspective in the development of legislation and accountability policy can help lawmakers and educators move forward by creating innovative ways to determine the effectiveness of a school that does not solely rest on a test score. Gergen (2015) proposes several creative ways to provide for evaluation alternatives that embrace a social constructionist perspective. These options include the use of student portfolios in place of exams and increasing the number of ungraded courses. Alternately, schools could allow students to move at their own pace toward achieving standards. Ravitch (2014) also proposes to eliminate high-stakes testing and instead rely on assessments that allow students to demonstrate what they know and can do. This would allow for tests to become formative in that they give feedback on how a student is progressing. A dialogic evaluation would allow for parents, students, administrators and

teachers to have a conversation about concerns, relationships with teachers and peers, and how the student is progressing toward defined goals (Gergen, 2015, p. 163).

Another promising alternative to the national assessment of students, teachers and school systems is “empowerment evaluation” (Gergen, 2015, p. 163). This would allow for the local community to be self-directed in determining activities, setting goals and taking necessary actions. Over time, the school system would chart their own progress and alter plans and programs on a continual basis. I believe this would honor the voice of teacher and re-establish professionalism while at the same time recognizing a teacher’s experience and education.

Conclusion

Further research is needed in how teacher self-perception impacts their professional growth with regards to school reform strategies and their ability to change and/or adapt. Few qualitative studies using a narrative inquiry approach exist in the current literature. Interviews and observations can provide insight and understanding into how the cognitive processes utilized while making decisions about classroom practices and pedagogy affect a teacher self-efficacy and autonomy. Providing the teacher perspective, while at the same time utilizing the philosophical underpinning of social constructionism, can support the argument for the necessity of including the teacher’s voice in developing accountability policies and teaching practices. The approach to this study reflects my own philosophical underpinnings and will allow me to uncover the thoughts, perceptions and feelings of teachers working in low-performing schools based upon the impact of accountability measures on their personal autonomy and efficacy.

In the words of Diane Ravitch, “if we believe in democracy, and if we believe that public schools must act in concert with the principles of democracy, then we must reject authoritarianism from any quarter” (2014, p. 288). Schools are a reflection of the community and must be able to respond according to needs of that community based on the context of the individual school without having external forces exert power and control over a teacher’s agency within the educational institution that we call “school.”

Chapter Three

Methodology

I approached the school with a hesitation in my step. A new chapter of my life had begun. Just like a kid on their first day of school, I had thoughts in my head like “would they like me?” I was told once that I have a quirky mannerism and sense of humor. What does that mean? There is a contradiction in my personality, one that is quiet and pleasant to be around and one that was once described by a secretary as “having a secret badass side that doesn’t come out until needed.” My blonde hair makes people assume that I am pushover, shallow and no depth to my personality. I wonder if they will think the same things about me. “I hope I can raise these test scores!” I said to myself as I looked up at the dilapidated school. Before I walked in I reflected on how I got here in the first place and felt a sense of calm come over me. There was a reason why I was here, a calling, a coming home of sorts. I had been full circle in my career leaving Fayetteville 12 years earlier. I worked in affluent schools, where the children really didn’t need me, they would be fine because their parents would make sure they had all they needed to be successful. This school would be a whole different ball game. A game where the team can’t seem to score for repeated strikes out. It would be my job to make sure that they scored, and not just score, but win the game. And so I walked in and prepared my desk to begin my first day.

The first staff member I would meet would be with a seasoned teacher who knew how to play the game. Her students had scored but never won the game. She is a third grade teacher in her 30th year of teaching. She has taught Kindergarten, first, third, fifth and 6th grades. As an experienced veteran, she was approached by her former principal to teach the third grade. Third grade is a grade level that is held accountable to the NC Read to Achieve

legislation, which dictates that a student must be proficient in reading by the third grade or be retained. It is not a desirable grade to teach due to the amount of testing and accountability tied to the grade level. Thus many teachers avoid wanting to teach 3rd grade. The testing associated with this grade level reads like a can of alphabet soup: Reading 3D, 3rd grade BOG and EOG, as well as, Read to Achieve (RtA) portfolio assessments for those not passing the BOG in the Fall. She is seen as a teacher leader at the school. She has mentored several beginning teachers and serves in various leadership roles within the school. She is pleasant to be around, always smiling and views her work with a positive attitude. She is the type of teacher that principal's wish they had on every grade level. She produces good test scores and students show growth every year. She is deemed as an "effective teacher" within NC's accountability system. In my view as her principal, she is one of many teachers that have learned how to "play the game" by teaching to the test. But "playing the game" is hard work. It entails having a laser like focus on prescribed standards and curriculum. There is little leeway for creativity or allowing for a student to discover who they are as a learner. There is no time to discover wherein a student's interests lie. Let alone allowing any student to pursue those interests. Playing the game is stressful and affects teacher morale in the building. (K. Northrop, Personal Narrative, April 20, 2016)

I share this narrative of one of my own experiences as a principal navigating the complexities of working within the context of legislative mandates in public education. The inclusion of one of my own narratives is used to acknowledge my own subjectivity as a researcher on this topic. I hope to establish my positionality through this personal reflection by making one of my experiences and thoughts visible to the reader. This short narrative also allows me to be reflective in how I establish meaning in the given phenomenon and sets the

stage for the reader to embark on the journey of creating meaning through personal experiences within a political phenomenon affecting public schools in America. My interest lies in how teachers interpret their experiences within the current political climate in education and how these experiences influence their self-efficacy and autonomy in the classroom. I would be remiss in not acknowledging my own experiences as a principal navigating the politics of public education.

Professional educators are in the business of developing humans, driven specifically by the development of the nature of knowledge. Teachers focus on the development of the student and then reflect on their craft. They are reflective practitioners. The work they do is juxtaposed within a complex web of policies and bureaucracies through which they must navigate on a daily basis. This navigation allows for a door to be opened to a story; a story of the teacher's experience within their chosen profession. Narrative inquiry is just that, the story of a *lived experience* (Kim, 2016). The personal and professional stories of a teacher bring great value in understanding the nature of the profession and the complexity of navigating through accountability policies. Through the use of narrative inquiry, the experiences of a teacher can be interpreted and made personal and meaningful. Stories in educational research help us to make sense of what goes on in schools and allow us to engage in deliberate conversations about the schooling experience (Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry as a methodology has made a transformative impact in education and has contributed to the advancement of education research, curriculum and instruction, teaching and learning, and teacher education (Eisner, 1993; Kim, 2016). The reality of this cultural group is subjective and constantly changing. Labels, designations and school performance grades are part of a political system that affect teacher agency, subjectivity and power to operate within a social

institution. Narrative inquiry will be the methodology employed in this study to allow for the voices of teachers working in schools identified as low-performing by federal accountability policies to be heard through the stories they tell of their lived experience (Eisner, 1993; Kim, 2016).

It is important to realize that measures of student performance are not just pictures of the student but also cultural constructions (Gergen, 2015). According to Gergen (2015), social constructionists believe evaluations of students tell us less about the students than they do the standpoint of the evaluator. A grade communicates to us the success or failure of a student. The grade becomes a value judgment based on the views of the evaluator. Social constructionists believe we never act in isolation. We are a product of our social interactions with others, so with this in mind, it would not be fair to evaluate a student on the fixed belief that there is only one truth. This is no different than legislative mandates assigning a school performance grade, designation or sanction to a school based solely on the assessments given in a specific time and place. Schools are social organizations with many stakeholders. The achievement status of a school should not be the sole indicator for the success or failure of a school to the public. The school is representative of the culture, values and beliefs of the community it serves. According to Gergen (2015), evaluations are typically based on comparisons, which establish *hierarchies of worth* (p.162). These hierarchies of worth create an oppressive environment within the school by suggesting that some students, some teachers, and some families are either inferior or superior. This single judgement colors the way others treat or view an individual, school or school community.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the cognitive processes and self-perception of teachers as they approach planning for instruction in a low-performing school. By

grounding this research within social constructionism and social cognitive theory as a micro theory, we can surmise the influence of artificial designations, such as *low-performing*, and the experience of teachers as they approach planning for instruction. Specifically, the following research questions will be addressed:

- What are the perceived realities of teachers working in a low-performing schools?
- What is the impact of legislative mandates on teacher efficacy and subsequent beliefs of autonomy in low-performing schools?
- How do teacher beliefs about autonomy and self-efficacy affect pedagogical approaches to instruction and assessment in low-performing schools?

Narrative Inquiry as a Methodology

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe narrative as the study of the ways human experience the world. Narrative inquiry utilizes the theoretical underpinning of social constructionism in order for a researcher to interpret and focus on the human experience situated within a phenomenon. Through the narrative, the researcher retells or interprets the socially constructed stories to find meaning in human actions and agency (Somekh & Lewin, 2011). The stories are then situated by the researcher within a social, political or historical context in order to understand a phenomenon.

First person accounts of experience told in story form become the data used in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Jackson and Mazzei (2013) refer to narrative data as being a voice that beckons to “speak for itself” (p, 261). The data and theory in qualitative research should flow along the same connectives; they are both little machines (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). Jackson and Mazzei (2013) go on to write that data and theory are

both productive forces in their potential for difference: in traditional form, qualitative interview data has been treated as pure, foundational, truth as presence. Data and theory, however, should stay on the move, seeking connectives and assemblages to interrupt (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). The use of narrative inquiry in this research will allow for the disruption of data and theory as the told stories of the participants reveal the unspoken realities of what is happening in our public schools as a result of accountability policies.

Stories of experience can also be located in different narrative genres such as biography, life history, oral history, autoethnography and autobiography (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the text of these different stories forms the data which is in turn analyzed in narrative inquiry. Kim (2016) describes the researcher taking on the role of a midwife in order to mediate a story into being. The story is always mediated by voice, a style of writing, camera angles, actor's interpretations so that what we call a story is really what a researcher constructs (Kim, 2016, p. 119). The story must honor the participant's voices, their feelings and experiences. In order for this to occur, the researcher must step back as researcher and envision their own story in the inquiry, the stories of the participants, and the larger landscape in which the story is situated. (Kim, 2016). Researchers writing a narrative inquiry often position their work within a certain genre in order to stay attuned to a direction for the data collection and writing; however, often the researcher's work does not necessarily fit within a specific genre. Kim (2016) asserts that many researchers use genre as a means but not an end to their research. Often the lines are blurred when mediating a story in order to engage the reader. Multiple forms of genre are often used to write a compelling story in order for it to have a transformative impact on the reader.

Hermeneutic philosophy, or the study of written texts, informs narrative inquiry by focusing on interpretation (Somekh & Lewin, 2011). From a hermeneutic point of view, human life is perceived as a narrative interpretation (Somekh & Lewin, 2011). Life is meaningful, but the meaning is implicit, and it only becomes explicit in our narratives or stories (Somekh & Lewin, p. 158). Narrative inquiry using phenomenology as the interpretive framework, begins with subjectivity (Kim, 2016). Kim (2016) explains subjectivity as giving personal meaning to a phenomenon, acknowledging that each human has his or her own outlook on reality shaped by his or her own experience. Thus narrative inquiry allows for the exploration of a phenomenon as a way of inquiring by offering deeper insights into what it means to live and what it means to be human in a complex society (Kim, 2016).

A narrative inquiry extends this study of written texts to include in-depth interviews, historical memoirs and creative non-fiction. Stories can be analyzed through a psychological approach which would concentrate more on the thoughts and motivations of an individual. This is described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as holistic in that it acknowledges the cognitive, affective, and motivational dimensions of meaning making. As the researcher and author of the story, we construct the story and its meaning through analytical descriptions based on human action and experience. Narrative inquiry allows for the acknowledgement of humans as complex actors and the integration human subjectivity into the research. Somekh and Lewin (2011) state that narrative inquiry allows the researcher to reflexively engage their personal life and stories with those of the participants as a way of co-constructing meaning.

Rationale for Using Narrative Inquiry

Constructionists believe that there is a reality but argue that it cannot be measured directly, only perceived by people, each of whom views it through the lens of his or her prior experience, knowledge, and expectations (Rubin, 2012). Furthermore, what we know is not objective; it is always filtered through people, always subjective (Rubin, 2012). For this reason, the use of narrative inquiry is used as the methodology for my research. The key to this type of qualitative research is the use of stories as data, and more specifically, first person accounts of experience told in story form (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The use of a narrative inquiry will allow for the participant's experience working in a public school under the current legislative mandates to be told firsthand. Narrative inquiry will also provide for an understanding of the meaning that accountability designations have on the participants as it relates to their autonomy and self-efficacy beliefs in the classroom. Somekh and Lewin (2011) state that narrative inquiry allows the researcher to reflexively engage their personal life and stories with those of the participants as a way of co-constructing meaning. The use of narrative inquiry provides a venue to think reflexively by using my background and experiences to situate myself as the researcher into the narratives of the participants.

The narrative inquiry takes a psychological approach concentrating more on the thoughts and motivations of the participants within the given context. An emphasis will be a holistic approach where the story is analyzed and thematic patterns are found within the different parts of the story. First person accounts of the participants experience are an integral portion of the text. According to Merriam and Tisdale (2016), the psychological approach is holistic in that it acknowledges the cognitive, affective, and motivational dimensions of the making of meaning.

Studying the experiences of teachers from a purposefully selected group allows me, as the researcher, to understand and describe the participant's perspective. This perspective describes the impact of a school performance grade and how it affects the group's experiences and their psychological state during the teaching and planning process.

Data Collection Methods

Narrative inquiry uses collaboration between the researcher and the participants from beginning to end as plot outlines are continually revised in order to develop points of importance in the revised story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Jackson and Mazzei (2013) posit that data interpretation and analysis does not happen via mechanistic coding, reducing data to themes, and writing up transparent narratives that do little to critique the complexities of social life. Although I have used Maxwell's (2012) model for conducting research, I want to make readers aware that I have also heavily relied on field notes and transcription data in the hopes of making what Jackson and Mazzei (2013) call a coherent and interesting narrative that challenges interpretive qualitative inquiry.

The model for conducting the research is based on Maxwell's (2012) interactive design for qualitative research. Maxwell's (2012), model provided me with methods of data collection, selection of participants, data analysis, and the establishment of the relationship between researcher and participants. I utilized a semi-structured interview method with purposively selected teachers working in a school or schools identified by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) as low-performing. According to Esterberg (2002), a purposive sampling is one in which the researcher chooses the participants for the specific perspectives they bring with them. According to Maxwell (2012, p. 235), a small sample that has been systematically selected as typical of all of the participants provides far

more confidence that the conclusions adequately represent the mean of the population than does a sample of the same size that incorporates substantial random or accidental variation. In order to have in-depth interviews the number of participants will be small with 3, and no more than 4, subjects. The small number of participants will allow for rich description in the field text, which in turn became the research data.

Semi-structured interviews allow a topic to be explored more openly while allowing the person being interviewed to express their opinion and ideas in their own words (Esterberg, 2002). By using a semi-structured interview format I was able to ask follow-up questions, ask for elaboration or change the question based on the direction of the inquiry. In essence, the participants' responses shaped the interview allowing for rich and more in-depth participant stories. One in-depth interview session per participant was conducted using thirteen open-ended questions. Three additional questions were utilized for demographic purposes.

After the interviews, I conducted an analysis of the school improvement plan. Each school in N.C. designated as "low-performing" is required to submit a plan that addresses the strategies the school will use to improve the school performance grade and growth score (NCDPI, 2017c). The plan was extensive with fourteen key indicators or goals for improvement and 61 action strategies. The plan encompassed four overall core functions for school improvement: instructional excellence and alignment, leadership capacity, professional capacity, families and community.

Narrative data collection involves a process where the field texts are co-created with the researcher and participant (Maxwell, 2012). A relationship evolves during this process which must be acknowledged by the researcher who is ethically charged with caring for and

delivering the participants stories (Clandinin, 2013). In addition to acknowledging the researcher/participant relationship, a researcher must be reflexive in their thinking about how their positionality can influence the delivery of the narrative (Clandinin, 2013; Maxwell, 2012). A basic principle of qualitative research is that data analysis should be conducted simultaneously with data collection (Clandinin, 2013; Maxwell, 2012). For this reason, a field journal was kept by myself in order to reflect on my interactions, observations, thoughts on analysis etc. The field journal allowed for me to reflect on how my philosophical, ethical and political beliefs are or can influence the field texts. These are external factors which can influence design decisions (Maxwell, 2012).

Selection of Site and Participants

Three districts located in southeastern North Carolina were considered for locations to conduct my research. The districts were selected were chosen due to proximity, demographics, accountability scores and schools that were labeled both low and high performing. I have no professional standing in these districts which alleviated any conflict of interest or threats to validity. I contacted a representative of each county to discuss the approval process needed to conduct research in their county. One county did not respond to my repeated request for research approval. The second district was taken out of consideration as only one of the schools located within the county was identified as low-performing by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Permission was granted by the Superintendent of the third district after a research proposal was emailed to him for consideration. The Associate Superintendent for Instruction of that district was contacted in order to identify the schools labeled “low-performing” by the North Carolina Department of

Public Instruction. Four such schools were identified; two elementary schools and two middle schools.

All four principals were contacted through email with a brief summary of the proposed research. Two of the four principals responded, one elementary and one middle school, agreeing to send out my request for research participants. Four participants from the elementary school and two participants from the middle school responded. The respondents from the middle school were not interviewed as they did not teach a subject that is part of the North Carolina Accountability program. The only qualifier to become a participant was that the participant was employed as a teacher in a tested grade or subject in a school labeled as “low-performing.”

The demographics of the participants are as follows:

Pseudonym	Race	Years of Experience
Greg	White Male	19
Iris	White Female	Approximately 8
Jennifer	White Female	4
Michelle	White Female	11
Dr. Simmons	Black Female	15
Donna	White Female	20

According to the N.C. School Report Card (2017), the school’s poverty rate is 63.7% versus 49.2% of students across the state that are economically disadvantaged. The school received a letter grade of D on the N.C. School Report Card (2017). The teaching experience of the

staff are 30% with 0-3 years of experience, 36.7% with 4-10 years of experience, and 33.3% with 10+ years of experience.

The interviews were arranged directly with the participants at a location of their choosing. The interviews took place at the school where they are employed and at a restaurant. Allowing the participants to choose the location of the interview provided for the comfort of the participants in a non-threatening environment during the interview process. The interview questions were sent to the participants prior to the interview upon their request. Prior to the interview, a written description of the research topic and the process was given to each participant in an informed consent form which was signed prior to the interview.

A follow-up interview was conducted over the phone with the principal of the participant's school in order to gain the perspective of the leader of the school. This interview was conducted after the interviews with the teachers. A second follow-up interview was conducted with a teacher at a high performing school within the same district in order to have a narrative from a teacher still working within the North Carolina Accountability model but in a school with a different demographic. The inclusion of a participant from a high performing school allows for the data to become more generalizable in findings while at the same time enhancing the validity of the study.

Data Collection Methods

Participant interviews were the collected data for this research study. The stories of the participants allowed for rich description on how legislative mandates, specifically school performance grades and labels, affect a teacher's autonomy and self-efficacy beliefs. The questions for the semi-structured interviews are below:

- 1) Tell me about the standardized assessments associated with your grade level.
- 2) Do you believe these assessments reflect the quality of your instruction?
- 3) In what ways do these assessments influence your decisions as a teacher?
- 4) In what ways do these assessments influence student learning in your classroom?
- 5) Do the results of the standardized assessments give you important feedback about how well you are teaching in each curriculum area? Describe the kind of feedback you receive. Can you give me examples of how you use this feedback?
- 6) How do you feel about yourself as a teacher when you view your test results?
- 7) Do you feel pressure from your administrators to perform well on the required state assessments? If so, describe how the pressure is delivered from your administrator?
- 8) Do you feel pressure from the parents and or community to perform well on the required state assessments? If so, describe this pressure.
- 9) Can you tell me how you view the low-performing label and the performance grade that North Carolina has assigned to your school?
- 10) Has this label influenced how you feel about your teaching ability? If so, in what way?
- 11) Does this label influence your perceptions of the school or the student body? If so, in what way?
- 12) How has the low-performing label and performance grade influenced your planning for instruction and student learning?
- 13) Has the low-performing label influenced staff morale in your school?

The following questions are for demographic purposes:

- 1) Which grade level do you teach?

- 2) How many years of experience do you have?
- 3) How many years have you taught at this school?
- 4) Have you taught at other schools that have been designated as low-performing?

Each interview was recorded and then transcribed by a commercial transcription service.

Data Analysis

Maxwell (2012) purports that every qualitative study requires decisions about how the analysis will be done. These decisions should influence and be influenced by the rest of the design, (Maxwell, 2012). Narrative analysis examines the description of experiences as told in story form, according to Rubin (2012). These stories allow for the narrative to be analyzed through the research questions, the researcher's epistemological position and lived experiences within the context of the research topic (Clandinin, 2013). The narrative stories will represent the realities of the participants as seen through their lens of experience. According to Clandinin (2013), these stories have a realist/constructionist representation; meaning the realities of the participants are only as good as the interpretation of the writer or researcher. The analysis of the data or narrative inquiry reveal or expose thematic experiences from which I interpret and make visible to the reader the participants experiences of working within the confines of legislative mandates in public education. The relationship of these mandates to the participants' self-efficacy beliefs and autonomy speak for themselves through the words of the interviewee. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to allow for easy readability of the interview and to also allow for easier coding of themes. A thematic analysis of the interviews allowed for connections to be made between the experiences and thoughts of the teachers interviewed with the labels and designations assigned to their schools.

Ethical Considerations

Before this research project began, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Appalachian State University was submitted for approval. Once permission was granted, I sought approval from a school district to conduct the research at a school or schools identified as “low-performing” or “persistently low-performing” by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). Participants were given an informed consent form. The form provided a description of the research project, as well as, information about the purpose and the aim of the study and how the results will be used. Participants were advised that they can withdraw from the research project at any time. The names of the participants and the school where they are employed will remain anonymous. Pseudonyms will be used in the research texts in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Participants will be allowed to review transcripts of their own interview, if they desire to do so. Recordings and original transcripts of the interviews will be kept secure and in my possession for a designated period of time.

Ensuring the highest ethical standards is of utmost importance during the research process. Participants may not be comfortable conducting the interview within the confines of the school in which they work. Fears of colleagues and administrators overhearing the interview could affect the truthfulness of the participant. Untruthful responses would skew the data and make for an unreliable interview. To alleviate this concern, participants were allowed to choose the location for the interview. A school district, other than the district which I am employed as a principal, was chosen so that participants would not fear any retribution from a position of authority within the school district they are employed.

Conducting the research outside of my school district allowed for a truthful and trusting relationship between myself, the researcher, and participant.

Validity

Standards for qualitative data collection will be maintained throughout the research process in order to establish trustworthiness and credibility (Creswell, 2013). The use of extensive quotations from the participants is used to make connections and generalize thematic findings which may be applied in other or similar situations. I acknowledge my own positionality throughout this research in order for the audience to know that decisions about what data to include or exclude are influenced by my own experiences. This acknowledgement allows for recognition of the limits of an absolute presentation of the data. The use of a research journal will allow me to reflect on how my experiences may affect the findings of my research. The use of extensive quotations from the participants will enable me to present the data without the political and epistemological influences from myself, which in turn allows for the validity of the data (Creswell, 2013).

Conclusion

Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), describe writing as being a viable method of inquiry in order to learn about yourself and your research topic. The use of language and storytelling is a powerful force in re-creating the lived experiences of a person navigating a particular phenomenon. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) propose that language is how social organization and power are defined and contested and the place where one's sense of self - one's subjectivity—is constructed. Furthermore, language constructs one's subjectivity in ways that are historically and locally specific (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). For this reason, I choose to present my research in a qualitative manner, employing narrative inquiry

as a methodology, to unfold the realities of those working within the confines of accountability legislation in public education. I believe the relationship that exists between legislation and practice will only be understood through the lens of the person living the experience. It is my hope and desire to expose this relationship, as vivid and detailed as possible, to the reader so as to exact an emotional response which will lead to change in current accountability policies and practices.

Chapter Four

Findings

The broader one's understanding of the human experience, the better design we will have.

-Steve Jobs, CEO and cofounder of Apple

The exploration of the human experience can be discovered by listening to the stories, the voices and the experiences of people. Their stories provide a clearer picture of the reality of the work in which they are immersed on a daily basis. The stories and experiences of the participants in this research will make vivid to the reader what a survey or quantitative methodological approach cannot: “the human experience.” The study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) write that the notion of a narrative into the view of education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories. The human experiences presented here encompass the data that challenge the unspoken realities and unintended consequences of accountability policies in public education. My goal as the researcher is to explore and discover the participants' stories and let the research process unfold (Creswell, 2005). First person accounts of experience told in story form become the data used in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Jackson and Mazzei (2013) refer to narrative data as being a voice that beckons to “speak for itself.” Stories in educational research help us to make sense of what goes on in schools and allow us to engage in deliberate conversations about the schooling experience (Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry allows for the reader to get a glimpse into the reality of a cultural group which is subjective and constantly changing. By using narrative inquiry in this research, I am able to allow for the disruption of data and theory as

the stories of the participants reveal the unspoken realities of what is happening in our public schools as a result of accountability policies.

The research for this study was conducted in a rural school district located in Southeastern North Carolina. The district serves approximately 20,000 students in 28 schools. Four of those schools have been identified by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) as “low-performing” schools. These are schools that have not exceeded growth and have a letter grade of either a D or F. For all schools in North Carolina, the performance grade is calculated using 80% overall proficiency of students and 20% on the growth of students (NCDPI, 2017c). The school chosen for this research is labeled as “low-performing” and received the letter grade of D. The overall proficiency level is 44% and the growth score is 72.8%. The participants were chosen because they are employed as a teacher in a grade level that tests at least one subject in the N.C. Accountability model in one of these low-performing schools.

The names of the participants, the school, and district for which the participants work have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Verbatim quotes from the participants were utilized in order to portray perspectives and the meanings of those perspectives from the participants.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant in order to gain insight and explore the subjective reality of a teacher working in a low-performing school and how this reality influences their self-efficacy and autonomy in the classroom. The stories the participants tell are poignant and remarkable about the unintended consequences of accountability policies in public education.

Emergence of Themes in Data

Three major themes and several sub-themes emerged as the data was coded and analyzed. These themes encompass the perceived realities of the participants in their own voice. The themes and sub-themes that emerged are as follows:

- Planning for Instruction
 - Narrowed curriculum
 - Influence on student learning
 - Perceptions of the student body
- Autonomy
 - Pressure to perform
- Self-Efficacy Beliefs
 - Perception of self as a teacher
 - Perception of self

Throughout this chapter I intentionally insert passages which reveal my positionality and reflexivity as a researcher. The intent being to acknowledge how my own background and experiences influence my interpretation of the participants told stories.

As I drove through town to reach my destination, I couldn't help but to think about what the school was going to be like. I had already developed a perception of the school based on my research, which included reviewing the N.C. School Report Card and the school improvement plan for the school. I automatically assumed that the school was located in a high poverty area and I was right. The school is located in what is deemed as "rural poverty" by many. The two lane highway leading to the county seat is dotted with mobile homes in varying degrees of what I would call "shambles." I immediately begin to recognize

my own privilege and how it is playing out in my head. It's apparent there is no building code or zoning in this part of the county. You see chicken houses in the front yard and broken down cars with tarps thrown across them. I wonder where these people work and can't imagine having to live in some of the conditions that I pass by on my way to the school. The road signs indicate there is a school zone ahead so I know that I am approaching the school. I was pleasantly surprised to see a newer looking school. It was well kept and had a welcoming portico. I park my car and nervously go over my interview questions one more time before entering the school. I am quickly greeted by the school secretary, "Hi, how can I help you?" I respond, "I am here to meet with Greg, he teaches 5th grade." She immediately replies, "You must be that girl doing interviews for research. Have a seat, I'll call him up." I take a seat in the office and am immediately struck by a hand painted canvas hung prominently in the office for everyone to see. It read:

We aim to

Enjoy learning

Lead by example

Care about everyone

Offer to help others

Make a difference

Exceed expectations each day

It was signed "Staff and Students."

I will soon find this sign to be symbolic of an oxymoron that is played out in the hallways and classrooms that are just past the locked entrance doors. (K. Northrop, personal reflection, December 14, 2017)

Planning for Instruction

The pedagogical approaches a teacher utilizes to plan for instruction are of utmost importance as they will create a roadmap for the teacher of where to begin with a student or group of students and where they should end. All are fueled by a defined set of standards by grade level. The first theme to emerge from my data analysis is how the state mandated assessments affect the decisions a teacher must make while planning for instruction. Within this theme, I discovered and will discuss, three sub-themes: a narrowed curriculum, the influence on student learning and perceptions of the student body.

Narrowed curriculum. Greg was the first of four interviews that would be conducted at this particular school. He is a veteran teacher with 19 years of experience in grades 3 through 12 and special education. He currently teaches 5th grade math and science, both of which are assessed on the End of Grade (EOG) test. The grade level blocks for instruction, meaning he is responsible for teaching every student enrolled in 5th grade the math and science curriculum in this school. This is also Greg's first year teaching at this school. He recently moved from another North Carolina county where he taught at an inner city Spanish immersion magnet school which was also identified as "low-performing."

The school uses the North Carolina Check-Ins as part of their yearly assessments. These are assessments that schools can voluntarily give three times per year in order to receive immediate feedback for guiding subsequent instruction (NCDPI, 2016). The assessments are followed up with the EOG assessment. According to the NCDPI Accountability Department (NCDPI, 2016), the North Carolina State Board of Education will use the results of the NC Check-Ins to determine the best course of action for future state assessments. The teachers interviewed were asked to talk about the standardized assessments

associated with the grade level they taught and how these assessments influenced the decisions they made as a teacher. Greg's answers were direct and to the point.

They [the students] are tested three times in ELA and math. They give you what topics they're going to cover so that's pretty much how we plan. We just cover the stuff for the NC Check-Ins. We are allowed to get the test after they are completed and then we go over them with the class...I was going to use them for next week because I need to integrate them into my lesson plans, you know, go over the questions.

Iris is a fourth grade colleague of Greg's. She was unable to tell me how many years she has taught as she has moved several times as the wife of a military soldier. She has experience in Preschool to 8th grade in both private and public school settings. She has earned several degrees which include a bachelor's degree in literature, a master's degree in policy studies and a doctoral degree awaiting a dissertation to be written. She is currently in her third year teaching at this school. When asked how she thought the required assessments affected her decisions as a teacher, Iris' answers were thoughtfully prepared.

In a lot of ways assessment drives instruction. We do pretests to see where our students are, then teach based on those pretests, and of course, the posttest. So in some ways they're great, because they guide me to see if my students need to begin from the very beginning or if they have some knowledge or if I can take them to a project. But in other ways, because again, with it [the test] being multiple choice, it is very easy for students to just guess. It's very easy for me to start somewhere thinking they have the background knowledge and two days later I realize, wait, they're just a really good test taker.

Jennifer is a third grade teacher with four years of experience. All four of these years have been at this school in the third grade. Her student teaching was also in the third grade at a school designated as "low-performing."

The whole year is aimed towards the End of Grade. Then data is talked about constantly as a pressure, especially in third grade, so when we get our parents in third grade it's a constant conversation about testing. Our instruction is very test-driven and the expectation is that they grow. Sometimes the expectation is much higher than the reality. If we get a third grader who's reading on a Kindergarten level they're not going to be proficient by the time they leave third grade. Now, if they leave me and

they're reading on a first grade level, for me, that's quality. Where I fall short is my average children because I tend to teach at a higher level. I think they [the lower kids] maybe find a sense of urgency...because it's either you catch up, or you are going to sit here with that confused look on your face, this sounds terrible, I'm sure. Either you get with me...of course, I cater to them in small group time. During my whole group, I can't leave my instruction based on my children who are two grade levels behind because at the end of the year, no matter what your label is, or where you are, you're taking the EOG. With my low kids it's remediation, remediation, remediation, copy, practice, repeat, repeat, repeat.

Michelle teaches 5th grade English Language Arts. She is a veteran teacher with many years of experience teaching in public and charter schools in Ohio before moving to North Carolina. She has taught for five years at this school. She did have a break in employment when she had an accident while riding a horse. She openly discusses how she suffered from a traumatic brain injury which left her unable to spell words correctly, a problem she discloses to her students and their parents every year. Her interview was hard to follow as she often wandered off topic. In the end, I decided to keep her story as she occupies the position of a 5th grade reading teacher who is held responsible for teaching the English Language Arts curriculum to all enrolled 5th graders at this school. The 5th grade team blocks for instruction, meaning each teacher on the grade level is responsible for teaching all students on that grade level one subject. The following is Michelle's story on how the assessments affect how she plans for instruction:

I have a problem that kids are tested so much...I have a problem when I have a fifth grader who has never had phonics. It's such a complex problem. We don't have a standard curriculum to teach. I don't have a basal reader...In Ohio we had the basal open court system. What it does is give you all the components in a logical order. I can go on to teachers pay teachers and get something and you can get the same thing. But if you are teaching the exact same thing in third grade, I'm supposed to be teaching you something different...when you have brand new teachers, what are they gonna use?

Absent in the participant narratives is planning for instruction based on the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, the learning standards that define what students should

know and be able to do at each grade level. It became clear that the instructional focus of the interviewed teachers was the test, which is what they are accountable for as a teacher in North Carolina. These teachers are using the tests to make important educational decisions in regards to what they should or should not teach. Popham (2016) wrote that when we use the wrong tests to evaluate instructional quality, many strong teachers are regarded as ineffective and directed by administrators to abandon teaching procedures that actually work well. A common theme emerged between the teachers interviewed; teach what is on the test, use the data from the test to plan for small groups and remediate based on this data. There was no talk about standards and planning standards aligned units of instruction even though the school improvement plan indicates that this is one of the school-wide goals. The goal in the school improvement plan indicates that grade levels will plan using a standards based rubric. The use of this rubric for planning purposes was not discussed by any of the participants. The told stories of the participants reveal the use of a narrowed curriculum in order to cover what is on the state mandated tests.

Impact on student learning. The second sub-theme that was discovered in the data was how the planning and preparation of students for the state mandated assessments affected the student learning in the classroom. The participants had differing perspectives on the impact of student learning. Surprisingly most of the concern rested with student well-being in the classroom. Iris talked in particular about how student's identity is directly tied to the results of the assessments.

I think with students who do well on those assessments, they push them to do even better, because they are so proud of themselves and excited. But for students who don't, it's like being hit in the head over and over with a hammer saying you're not smart. Eventually, they become the identity that they receive from the test, so they just feel down. They don't want to learn.

Jennifer, a third grade teacher, emphasizes the non-academic impact of the assessments she must administer throughout the year to evaluate student learning. Multiple tests negatively affect the well-being of the students and the amount of time that is required to take these tests which takes away from the instructional day:

They [the assessments] cause a lot of anxiety. I have several students this year who have mentioned that they're nervous. They come in the room and if I've changed the desks around the immediate thought is 'Do we have a test today?' I'd say the bigger thing is that with Reading 3D assessments I lose nine weeks of instruction because I can only sit in the back of the room with silent students and one child. What can you do that's value added for those students that are sitting there? There are things I can have them do, but is it quality? Because it has to be a silent environment, it has to be distraction-free. All the other third grade teachers are having to do it at the same time, and we have no help with it."

Greg, the teacher of 5th grade math and science, seemed to prepare the students ahead of time by diminishing the importance of the assessments by telling the students "the test really doesn't count against you." He goes on to say:

They know when it's [the End of Grade assessment] coming up, but I don't think they really care. You have to tell them it doesn't really count against you. You have to tell them that this one isn't going to count on their report card, it's not going to count whether you pass or fail the grade or anything.

Greg's response indicates his need to prepare the students for impending failure. It's indicative of a teacher's attempt to protect his students from identifying themselves with their test score. As a result, he downplays the impact of the assessments.

The recurrent theme of student well-being in the face of mandated testing is a theme that represents one of the unspoken realities that challenges the accountability policies in public education. These stories represent the reality of what is happening in our public schools on a daily basis to our students. It is a story that is often not spoken about but is witnessed on a regular basis.

Perceptions of the student body. The third sub-theme discovered in the analysis of data encompasses the expectations that teachers hold for students in the face of the school being designated as “low-performing.” The words of these teachers are a powerful indicator of lowered expectations for academic achievement. The participant narratives exemplify what Gergen (2015) describes as *hierarchies of worth* which create oppressive environments within schools by suggesting that some students, some teachers and some families are inferior or superior based on a limited measure. Gergen (2015) goes on to indicate that this judgement colors the way others treat or view individual cultures, school or school communities.

Michelle, the teacher of 5th grade English Language Arts, talks about how the designation and performance grade assigned to their school influence how she feels about the student body:

I think our scores reflect what our kids are coming to us with. I think it's a reflection of our community. They [the students] don't have the resources at home...so many of our parents are double working parents, or they don't have internet, or the kids don't tell them about homework and by the time they get home, they're too tired to check their book bags. Our frustration is not with the kids, or their poverty, or where they come from. It's just that what we're expected to do in the time that we have is not realistic. Six hours is not enough time to teach a child to read...There's no accountability for them [the students] but there's all kind of accountability for me.

Jennifer, the third grade teacher, echoes the sentiments of Michelle in her narrative:

It's hard to get any involvement with the parents in this community. I don't want to say that the community has a lot to do with the school but unfortunately it does. Education is not a priority in this community. There are parents out there where it is a priority, but for this population and area, we have a lot of uninvolved parents, a lot of uneducated parents. I've even dealt with illiterate parents. It's a cycle. It's just what it is. You can't blame [the poverty] on it, but I think it's important to understand because that's not taken into consideration when we get graded. The school report card went home this week and I got zero response, none, not an e-mail, not a phone call, not even a parent thinking their child was being sent home with a D. If that doesn't say something, then...As a parent I would think that you would see that and go, 'Huh? Hmm, we need to seek some sort of answers.' I wouldn't say the

grade influences how I plan. Knowing that we're a D school has not influenced the way I plan or teach, but the students themselves do...They are very needy. Knowing those kind of things affects my planning because I have to change the activities that I know they are going to be successful with, versus knowing what's going to be putting them at a disadvantage.

Iris, the teacher of fourth grade, expands on her thoughts about the student body and the school to include the stigma associated with the designation and performance grade. A stigma she felt strongly about as her own children attend the school where she teaches.

I genuinely think those labels just classify a school to where people who don't know it are judging it. Automatically, you get this stigma of 'don't move to this area'. 'Don't buy a house here, because your kids won't be at an A school.' You're at a D school. People automatically assume you could not get a job anywhere else. Why would she [myself] want to be here? Why do you want to work with those kids? That's what I think hurts the most because what really is those kids? My personal perception about the kids doesn't change but people outside of the school, you see that it affects their perceptions. I've been asked by neighbors, 'why do you work at a D school?' What do you know about my school? A D doesn't define our school...we grew in our assessments 80% this year...to grow kids this much is a lot.

Gergen (2015) indicates that it is important to realize that measures of student performance are not pictures of the student but cultural constructions. Gergen (2015) further contends that evaluations of students tell us less about the students than they do the standpoint of the evaluator. The evaluator is recognizable as the teacher and the narratives of the participants speak to the social constructionist viewpoint of the teacher based on a subjective assessment of the student body and the community from which they come. The narratives of their story create a picture of lowered expectations for student achievement based on the cultural constructions of the community.

Autonomy

The second major theme to emerge from the data analysis was the association of a lowered level of teacher autonomy in the classroom given the unspoken pressure from

administrators. Within this theme, I will discuss how the pressure to perform on the state mandated assessments affects teacher autonomy in the classroom.

I nervously fumble around my book bag to find my phone, journal and file folder containing the research questions and informed consent for him to sign. I'm struck by his appearance. He's a balding man, with a goatee and orange hair. He is short in stature. His attire consists of blue jeans, a long sleeved t-shirt with a Harley Davidson emblem blazoned across the front and a leather jacket that makes him appear to be ready to jump on his motorcycle and leave promptly after the interview. I'm a little taken back by the unprofessional nature of his clothing. I convince myself that I should not be making judgements of his professional status based on his clothing. However, I find myself perseverating on it and recognize it as my own positionality, my background as a principal influencing my gathering of research. He tells me his wife is the breadwinner in the family and he hates the commute to the school, but it was the first job offered to him when he and his wife relocated to the area. He's convinced that administrators only hire him because he is a man and that most high poverty schools have children that need a male influence. I'm beginning to feel the apathy he brings to the table with him. His words feel like he's just trying to make a living and this school is better than the violent inner city school that he just left. (K. Northrop, personal reflection, December, 14, 2017)

Greg's narrative is brutally honest when he's asked about the pressure he may feel from his administrators to perform well on the state assessments:

Before school started in the summertime they talked about them [the assessments]...but I really don't hear anything from the administration. I know my principal wants her kids to do well, but they don't really seem pressed about it, not yet. Maybe as we get closer to it [the EOG]. I think if they did an observation and they saw that you weren't covering stuff then maybe I would feel more pressure. The

principal told me when I came in it was a lower income school and they were trying to raise the bar. Whatever, I've been in way worse.

Greg's narrative tells a story of an administrator who seems to be disconnected with what is really happening in the classroom. It's a story that is in contrast to what his colleagues are feeling. Iris' passion for her job as a teacher comes through in her told story:

I feel like there is a lot of pressure in terms of with all the new laws coming out. I know that principal pay is dependent on school performance, so I know that it's going to trickle down to teachers. Even without that, we're a D school right now, so at every meeting there's that feeling of 'Hey, you guys are not doing the right thing.' I feel like sometimes if she could be a fly on my wall instead of a 45 minute observation, she would see a lot. I'm super emotional. I honestly feel like we're told to teach to the middle but really, without it being said, to teach to the low kids. That really bothers me because I believe kids will rise to what you hold them to. I genuinely think you have to teach to your high kids and it will push the middle kids and then that will push your low kids. And then you differentiate for your low kids and they will be where they need to be. But if you teach to your low kids, you just missed your middle and high completely. Now they're bored and they have behaviors.

Iris' narrative reveals an unspoken reality that affects her autonomy as a teacher. She speaks of what is said aloud in one breath by her administrators, but the reality is that there is an unspoken expectation to teach to the low kids so as to have a higher impact on test scores.

Jennifer's narrative mimics that of Iris. However, she feels that the autonomy of her colleagues is impacted far greater than hers:

I don't feel like on a daily basis they [the administrators] hound me about a test, but when it comes to getting results, I think that people's feelings tend to get hurt, especially because we have hard working teachers at this school. So, when it [the test scores] come back and the report card is a D, it's somebody's fault. It's always there and I'm sure it's more present with other teachers who maybe aren't performing on EVAAS. It took me three years to realize that what is going on in my classroom isn't necessarily going on in other classrooms. So this year I'm trying to take that thought process and put it to some good. It's difficult though because I'm younger, I'm only 27 and I've only been teaching for four years. A lot of my team is older and has a lot of experience. There have been years where a number has been repeated constantly, like a percentage. It was just like, 'Sense of urgency, people. We need a sense of urgency about moving these children.' I always have a sense of urgency but, like I

said, it took three years to realize that what's going on in my room isn't going on in every room in the school.

These told stories paint a picture of teachers who feel that the pressure to perform on the state mandated tests inhibits their professional discretion as a teacher due to the expectations of their administrators and the designation and performance grade of their school.

I met Iris in the office on the day of our interview. She appears to be young. She asks if I would like to do the interview in her classroom and walks me past the front office toward her classroom. Once you leave the locked doors of the front office, you step into a hallway that is in stark contrast to the front office. It becomes apparent that the school is not a newer school, but a very old school that was given a makeover to its facade. From the road the school paints one picture to the people passing by but inside is another story. It's reflective of the oxymoron that I would find on the hand painted canvas hung on the wall in the office. The walls are lined with tile that is yellow and quite dingy, the grout falling out in spots. Paint is peeling off the classroom cabinets and the doors are sagging almost to the point of falling off the hinge. I am quite dismayed by the condition of the building and can't help but wonder if this would be allowed if the school were located in an affluent community. It's as if the new front was added to mask the reality of the poverty stricken students that attend the school. (K. Northrop, personal reflection, December 12, 2017)

Self-Efficacy

The impact of the state mandated tests on teacher self-efficacy beliefs emerged as the third theme from the data analysis. Ware and Kitsantas (2011) define teacher efficacy as teachers' beliefs in their abilities to organize and execute courses of action needed to bring about desired results. Developing a teacher's perception of efficacy can have a positive

effect on instructional practices according to Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998). The participant narratives depict perceptions of themselves as inadequate, not only in their profession, but for at least one participant, inadequate as a person. Iris' told story of how she feels about herself as a teacher when the test results are released is the most poignant. She became very emotional during the interview, crying and wiping away tears:

It's tough, honestly, because I put my heart into teaching. I love it and I can't imagine doing anything else. I remember my first year here...Sorry, I get really upset...On my first year here, I got my EOG's back and 60% of my class passed the EOG and 40% didn't. I remember being so incredibly upset and then being told that it's a Title I school, this is normal and I should feel pretty good about it. I'm obviously not where I want to be. But 60% is an F. In a way, I feel like I fail my students every year but at the same time I see them grow so much both academically and emotionally. We all know what is coming. We know we're gonna be that we are not good at this. I know our principal tries really hard to be positive, but it still comes off as, 'This is where we are'. There is a feeling of 'we are never good enough' and then we walk around with that, it just sits heavy.

Jennifer's story tells of similar beliefs about herself as a teacher. However, as in previous text, she has a belief that she is doing much better than her colleagues. Possibly a coping strategy to protect her identity as a teacher:

Yes, it's hard when you teach your heart out and you still only have 12 children that are proficient at the end of third grade. That's 12 out of 20. That's barely a third. It is difficult but you have to really go back and look at where these children were when you got them and then where they are when they are leaving you. If you can be proud of yourself for that, then you will survive in this type of environment...There does tend to be those that want to just throw their hands up and there are those that want to blame the community or the teachers before them. I think all of that is a natural human response to an extent but also those people are the people that tend to react that way are also the people that tend to have the lower data. To me, that means that you need to reflect on your own personal instruction. As far as the staff as a whole, it is hard, the children are difficult. Some of them have lived a lifetime of hardship by the time they come to us in third grade and that does wear on you. We tend to get a large amount of new staff every year. That makes it difficult to be consistent with training. New people tend to be new teachers and they are just shuffling around until they find their 'forever school'. Teachers come here, get their feet wet and then move on. Yeah, that definitely affects scores because it's new teachers constantly.

Jennifer's narratives speaks to the larger picture of teacher turnover. This school's teacher turnover rate for the 2016-17 school year as reported on the NC School Report Card is 17.8% which is above the state turnover rate of 12.9%. In a report by NCDPI on teacher turnover rates (NCDPI, 2017b), the effectiveness of teachers who no longer remain employed in NC public schools shows that departing teachers are, on average, are less effective than their counterparts who choose to remain employed in NC public schools as indicated by EVAAS scores.

Greg did not seem to be concerned about how the test scores affect him as a teacher. Just another example of the apathy he brings to work with him. Similar to Jennifer's story, he does deflect some concern for the other teachers employed at the school:

I pretty much see myself the same either way. I know I'm going to do my best. I figure I just got to get their scores as high as possible...I was glad I wasn't at the bottom because I am a new teacher here. There was a new teacher here from the Philippines...I guess if I was a new teacher, I'd be more concerned about how it made me look.

Self-efficacy beliefs have a direct impact on human agency, the ability to make decisions and have control of one's actions (Bandura, 1989). A teacher must have a strong sense of self-efficacy in order to perform well on a task, especially in the face of judgmental failures, such as a "low-performing" designation or a performance grade that is less than stellar. According to Bandura (1998), a teacher's self-doubt about their effectiveness negatively affects their performance, and thus, they quickly settle for mediocrity.

The High Performing Perspective

In an effort to be inclusive of a broader perspective, a teacher from a higher performing school was interviewed. By allowing this perspective I hope to enhance the validity of this study and allow for more generalizable results. Donna, has been teaching for

twenty-two years, seven of which are in her current school. The school where she serves as a third grade teacher is located in a quiet affluent area of the community. She previously worked at a school with high numbers of English Language Learners and was designated as “low-performing”.

In grade 3, our students are already taking their first standardized test within the first ten days of school. Students are given a third grade level test to determine if they are coming to us already knowing grade level standards. Also, an assessment of Text Reading and Comprehension (TRC) assessments are going on simultaneously. Teachers barely get the opportunity to know their students’ first names before they are testing them on how they read. Although TRC is not a normed, standardized test, it is used to determine the teacher effectiveness in grades K-2 much like the End of Grade Tests are used to rate teachers in the upper grades.

When asked if these tests reflect the quality of her instruction, her answers resonated with the same similarity as the participants who work in the “low-performing” school:

I believe these tests reflect the lack of instruction teachers give to students. One quarter of the year is devoted to assessing TRC. Keep in mind, third grade students could potentially miss one full year of instruction if the student was in a NC school since Kindergarten. I feel like everything is centered around “the tests.” Sometimes I feel that by teaching standards in unique ways, I might be missing something that could be “on the test.” I’m constantly thinking about the test. We are not teaching students to think for themselves. I feel like everything in elementary classrooms are test preps. We use mnemonics to help students take their time and read each question carefully. I feel we aren’t teaching for mastery any longer.

Donna’s self-efficacy beliefs were not as highly impacted by her students test results as the teachers interviewed at the “low-performing” school. Although she did speak to feeling defeated when viewing her students test results, her sense of self-worth as a teacher or as a person did not appear to be tied as strongly to her test results.

Once you receive scores, you feel a sense of defeat. You just know that “that kid” could do better. You have the grades and data to support the work in your class. Or that one kid that you know will always be behind still made a Level II, but because she was from Texas the previous year, we do not have a way of showing how much growth she really made...We aren’t low performing, but we only met standard this past year. Although, our administration was satisfied with these scores, because we were still above the district, not by much. Personally, I do not feel this is our

philosophy. We have always, and will continue to strive for excellence. I take it personally when our school isn't rated as high as I think we should be.

The pressure felt by Donna from her principal and district administrators is similar but very different from the teachers at the "low-performing" school. Donna's narrative responses paint a picture of a "one size fits all" mentality. There appears to be a constant need for improvement from administrators and district leaders because being a "good school" is never enough.

Personally, I feel a trickledown effect of sorts. When the district isn't performing, we seem to have to change what we are doing. Our scores have always been above district and state standards. I feel once the district starts harping on making changes, I feel we are pressured to comply, too. It isn't so much the principal that makes the pressure difficult, it is the assistant superintendents that they send to our schools for support. Most of the Assistant Superintendents are trying to guide low-performing schools to make progress, but when visiting our school, he or she tries to make changes that are not necessarily applicable to our school or staff. It makes teachers second guess everything.

Pressure from the community to perform is also reflected in a much different manner and results in a community that is empowered to make changes in their child's education based on the results on the school's report card status:

Our community is somewhat upper-middle class families. Our school has been known for our affluent families. Once our scores start showing that we are below other schools in our community, parents start shopping around. This becomes pressure of not only making the grade, but keeping enough students in the building to justify having the current number of teachers.

Donna did not feel as though staff morale was affected by the school's test results. On the contrary, she indicated that the status almost created a sense of "entitlement" within the school.

One can surmise from Donna's perspective that she feels the pressure to perform and "play the game" by teaching to the test. However, this pressure does not translate into a

lower self-efficacy belief or autonomy within the classroom. The curriculum is narrowed in order to allow for the needed time to administer the quantity of assessments associated with her grade level. The striking difference comes in the form of her subjectivity and agency as a professional. The public acknowledgement of their success as a school contributes to what she calls a “sense of entitlement” among staff. Donna’s narrative is evidence of the *hierarchies of worth* that are created in accountability policies. Gergen (2015) asserts these policies as promoting oppressive environments within schools by suggesting that some students, some teachers, and some families are either inferior or superior based on these limited measures.

The Leader’s Perspective

After conducting the interviews with the participants, a follow-up interview was arranged with the principal of the school in order to gain the leader’s perspective. The principal, Dr. Simmons, has been at the school for four years. The school has become designated as a “low-performing” school under her leadership within the past two years. This is her first experience as a principal. The experience and background are in high school, first as a history teacher and then as a high school assistant principal. Dr. Simmons served as an elementary assistant principal for one year prior to being asked to be the interim principal at her current school. I asked Dr. Simmons what she thought was the reason for the school becoming labeled as “low-performing.” She thoughtfully replied, as if to be careful of what she was saying:

I would say some of it is new staff, but I think the biggest thing is that even with the staff that is here is just trying to make sure that teachers understand standards and are actually teaching standards to the depths of what it is actually asking you to teach. I think that was the biggest thing that I noticed when I first got here. I think with the constant turnover with staff, I have a very high turnover, anywhere between 20-25 % some years because we are a high military school. Not only my students, but also my

staff. I have a very young staff population so I think that contributes to it as well. My most seasoned teachers have been teaching, at best, 10 years. At one point I turned over my entire third grade. At that time I had 9 third grade teachers and turned over the entire third grade. So I had all brand new teachers in third grade and that is when we first went into “low-performance”. I have turned over fourth grade also every year. I’ve hired a new fourth grade teacher in the middle of the year every year that I’ve been here.

It became clear in Dr. Simmons’ narrative that she knew her staff did not teach with the standards in mind. Her concern rested on the fact that she had a high turnover of staff, which is in contrast with the participant’s narrative stories. The participant narrative’s indicated the need to “teach to the test” because, in the end, they are accountable for the student’s test scores. When I asked how the socioeconomic status of the community impacted her school she responded:

We pull from a wide swath of the county. When you have such a wide variety of students you need to really know how to differentiate for students. You have to be on top of your game when you’re working with brand new staff and even working as a teacher...you need to be prepared for students to be here for two or three months, leave for two or three months, and then return to the school. So we have a high turnover also because of socioeconomic [status]...we enroll all the way up to the last week of school. We have a school 10 or 15 minutes away from us and when that school caps, we receive all of the students, any student that is supposed to go to that school would then come to school here. Sometimes this makes our numbers very high in fourth and fifth grade and their numbers may be extremely low in fourth and fifth grade. One year they had fourth and fifth graders sitting in classrooms with 19, 20, 22, 23 kids and I had 32 children sitting in a fifth grade classroom and 27 kids in a fourth grade. There is no cap for fourth and fifth grade.

The neighboring school Dr. Simmons references as “capping” out in enrollment is a K-5 school. High enrollment can be spread between more grade levels at a K-5 school, rather than the 3-5 grade levels at the participant’s school. According to Dr. Simmons, “there is no cap in fourth and fifth grade” so it becomes easier for the county to justify high enrollment at a school with only grades 3-5. The neighboring school is not designated as “low-performing” and has a vastly different community as far as socioeconomic status is

concerned. The county in which this school is located receives Federal Impact Aid which is funding given to the school district for the loss of tax revenue due to federal property being located within the county, (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a). The local school district is still required to provide a quality education to the children living on property owned by the Federal Government while meeting the standards of the Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a).

We have some schools that get like \$1000 in Impact Aid. We have other schools...like I said, this particular elementary school receives over \$100,000 and we're, like I said, just down the street 10 or 15 minutes away and we're looking at about \$30,000. And you know, it's...it just is...I get all of their extra children if they are capped but I don't get any of the Impact Aid money. When I express my concern I get looked at as being petty or...well, no one says it directly to me, but I feel as though it's those unspoken consequences. It seems frowned upon when I make the comment about the fact that I'm getting all of these extra children. The first year I was in school improvement, the year I was deemed low-performing, I had almost 580 children in three grades. The other school that is a K-5 site had 980 children and was capped. Their cap is 980. But I had 580 in three grades, all tested grades. I have one teacher assistant to serve my entire school.

Dr. Simmons expressed her concern about the District's focus on equity. Her narrative speaks to a district that has as its vision to provide equitable funding and practices. However, the reality is that its practices are in contrast to what is happening in the district. This unspoken reality greatly impacts her school and their ability to pull out of "low-performance" status by limiting the available funding to staff the school appropriately.

I feel like I have the resources I need but as a school district sometimes we're so concerned about equity...I think we have to get away from that and say that if a school needs this, then we just need to provide it. But we're so focused on this equity piece and if we can move away from that, I think that we could maybe really move our schools in the way that we'd like.

When asked how she felt about herself as a principal in light of the test results, Dr. Simmons answers mimicked those of her staff. It is a story that tells of a professional educator who associates her self-worth with the numbers and letter grades assigned to her

school. This in turn affects her agency as a professional educator or the belief that she has the power and ability to create change within her school. This is otherwise known as her self-efficacy belief as the leader of the school.

The first year that we were low-performing, when we didn't meet proficiency, that year was very hard on my staff and it was very hard on me. I will be very honest about that because personally I believe there should never be a time where any school should not meet growth. I feel like we are not doing what we're supposed to do for students. We're not serving students in the way that we should. Every year, students should be growing. If we're doing our jobs, then students should be growing. As a principal, I felt like I did not do what I needed to do for my staff. A part of that was...I was constantly hiring teachers. I spent a lot of time in the hiring process. I felt like I spent so much time in the hiring process that I did not spend enough time in the classrooms. You know, mentally, you can't be everywhere at one time. But you still take it on [personally]. I'm not one of these people that I'm going to ask my staff to do anything that I'm not going to do. So I'm not going to tell them, 'You all need to do X, Y and Z' if I'm not going to do it.

The principal's lack of agency in her position is also associated with the marginalization of her and her school by school district leaders in ways that are also unspoken and challenges the reality of accountability policies in public education.

I think some of the pressure that I feel to perform comes from seeing how other principals are treated...by some things that are said and are not always said in the nicest of ways. Sometimes you just...you want to remind folks, 'If you were in my building and if you were in charge of this space, then you would understand some of the things that I go through'. Honestly, I have felt that way...you know I can take almost anything but when my staff notices it and makes comments to me like, 'we feel like the red-headed stepchildren of the school system,' that bothers me. We don't wake up every morning and say, 'Ooh, yay! We're so excited to be low-performing.' We wake up every day, we come in every morning with the attitude of 'what can we do better as a staff and what can we do better for children?' That is the attitude we have every school year, every day.

One of the things I've also noticed with our school district is that even when they're recruiting teachers, they take teachers to very specific schools, and this is not one of them. When you take a brand new teacher to...you know, I hate to drop names but if you take a teacher to a school that is close to [removed for anonymity] or schools that sit near this [nearby] district, then of course they are newer schools. Of course that's where they are going to want to teach. When all of the positions are filled then a teacher is calling and wants to walk around your building. They're like, 'Oh really? This is where I have to work?' The back side of the building is in just terrible

shape...we are not by any means the oldest school in the county, but it is a facade. Unless your child is in fifth grade, you see a facade of our building so it looks pretty, it looks really nice when you walk in the door, and then once you walk past the brand new part of the building, you are hit with reality. I don't think if we were located in a more affluent part of the county this would be allowed to happen.

The pressure to perform by the district is channeled down to the staff through the principal. In one breathe, she indicates in her narrative responses that she doesn't think she puts pressure on the staff to perform, but in another breathe tells another story.

I have one teacher who told me one day, 'Sometimes you can be a little bit of a Debbie Downer, Miss Simmons. We come to you with exciting news and then you always bring the reality because you'll say, 'Well that's amazing, but what about this 10% of the children in your classroom who didn't get it, who didn't learn?' And she's like, 'Could you just be happy for us?' I said, 'I am happy for you, but what about the 10%, you know?'

They get the hard reality from me too, all the time. They understand that that's where my mind always is, is that if we're not at 100%, then we are not where we want to be...and they know that. We always celebrate the small victories, but we always have in the back of our minds, if we are at 75%, then we're missing 25%. So we need to be focused and get back after the 25% while not forgetting the 75% that are getting it by enriching them and really pushing them to greatness.

Dr. Simmons knows how to "play the game." She knows what to say to portray herself as being an accountable leader, but she also knows the reality of what is happening in the classroom. Her reality is one that is subjective and contingent upon time and place. Her narrative is yet another example of the oxymoron playing out in the halls of a school that is highly impacted by poverty, transiency, high teacher turnover and a system of inequitable funding practices.

Conclusion

The teacher participants provided accounts throughout their interviews that depict the subjective reality of a teacher working in a low-performing school and how this reality influences their self-efficacy and autonomy in the classroom. The participant's narrative

stories make vivid the cognitive processes and self-perception of teachers as they approach instruction and assessment in a “low-performing” school by narrowing a curriculum in order to perform better on the state mandated assessments. The stories tell of a profession that has devalued the importance of an all-encompassing education delivered by professional educators. It is a story of the de-professionalization of teachers and the apathy it creates in schools. These stories challenge the unspoken realities of accountability policies and practice in public schools.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.

-Friedrich Nietzsche, Philosopher

An analysis of the data uncovers the unpredicted and contradictory realities of what is happening in public education on a daily basis. The told stories of the participants expose the subjective realities of the teachers working within the cultural and political context of the law and how the law marginalizes students from poverty and perpetuates the de-professionalization of the teaching profession. The told stories presented in this research challenge the very essence of accountability legislation, which is to create positive change in the nation's lowest performing schools by promoting equal opportunities for all students. The importance of this research lies within the "human experience," which cannot be replicated in a quantitative manner. The narrative stories allow for a method of inquiry, which honors the subjectivity of the participants. The reader is able to interpret the narrative to provide for an understanding of and illuminate the life and culture from which it was created.

The purpose of this research is to examine the influence of school performance designations based on the personal experiences of teachers as they approach planning for instruction. My study was based upon these questions:

- What are the perceived realities of teachers working in a low-performing schools?

- What is the impact of legislative mandates on teacher efficacy and subsequent beliefs of autonomy in low-performing schools?
- How do teacher beliefs about autonomy and self-efficacy affect pedagogical approaches to instruction and assessment in low-performing schools?

The told stories of the participants respond to these questions by making vivid the connections between their experience and the meaning associated with their reality.

The Contradiction in the Story

In this chapter I will conclude this research by reflecting back to the hand painted canvas hanging in the office of the school. The sign is symbolic of an oxymoron, a word used to join two contradictory terms. The symbolism of the sign is reflective of the contradiction in the intention of accountability policies and the reality of those policies. The school's performance grade and designation are also symbolic in nature and give meaning to the symbol. Thus, by using the words on the sign as a way to make vivid to the reader the symbolic interactionism represented here, you will be able to see how accountability policies shape the worldview of those that inhabit the school and affect a teacher and student's agency.

The first two lines of the sign state: *We aim to enjoy learning*. The last line states: *Exceeds expectations each day*. However, what became evident in the told stories of the participants was the contradiction of what was expected and what was really taking place within the four walls of the classroom. Lessons were not prepared with the aim to promote enjoyable learning by including student interests in plans nor did lessons exceed expectations. All of the participants tell stories of narrowing a curriculum in order to focus on standards that will help students "pass the test." Being able to help students pass the test

has become somewhat of a game to educators. You either win or lose the game at the end of the year when student test scores are returned to the teacher. In the process of learning how to play the game, you learn how to narrow the curriculum in order to survive in the game. It is a stark reality that parents, students and educators know all about but don't talk about. They just choose an alternative to public school, such as a private or charter school.

The narrowing of curriculum is an unspoken reality of what happens as a result of legislative mandates focused on accountability and challenges what professional teachers are taught as the methodologically right way to teach. One of the consequences of the current reform is that curriculum gets narrowed as school district policies make it clear that what is to be tested is what is to be taught (Eisner, 2013). Tests come to define our priorities which have become the teaching of “core subjects” (Eisner, 2013). Core subjects are related to our assessment practices as the subjects that are to be taught. Eisner (2013) posits that the introduction of core subjects marginalizes any subject that is not a “core subject,” for example, the arts. When we narrow the program so that there is only a limited array of areas in which assessment occurs and performance is honored, youngsters whose aptitudes and interests lie elsewhere are going to be marginalized in our schools. (Eisner, 2013). Equity in education begins when schools provide more and varied curriculum choices that meet the individual learning needs and interests of students. The participant stories reveal a hidden curriculum. This hidden curriculum is what many have come to coin as “teaching to the test” and paints a picture of contradiction in policy and practice.

The fourth line of the sign states: *Care about everyone*. The participants had differing perspectives on the impact of state mandated assessments on student learning. One of the unpredictable realities of the participants' experiences was the concern about the

student's emotional well-being rather than academic well-being. They spoke of students whose self-esteem and identity are directly tied to the results of the assessments. The passion of the participants for their student's well-being cannot be captured with words the way that their facial expressions, tone of voice and body language can. The participant narratives speak of grades that become symbols for *hierarchies of worth* for students, just as the school's performance grade and designation become a symbol of their worth as a teacher. The participant narratives exemplify what Gergen (2015) asserts as *hierarchies of worth* which create oppressive environments within schools by suggesting that some students, some teachers and some families are inferior or superior based on a limited measure. A grade is not just an evaluation of the student but a cultural construction of the views and assumptions of the evaluator. The grade becomes symbolic of a value judgement for which the student measures themselves. This value judgement is also made by the teacher to make assumptions about the student's familial situation.

The fifth line of the sign states: *Offer to help others*. The participant narratives reflect a culture of apathy and helplessness within the school. The inclusion of social cognitive theory in this research allows us to understand the psychological processes that govern behavior. The goal of the theory is to explain how behavior develops, how it is maintained and through what processes it can be modified (Wulfert, 2016). The North Carolina accountability system is based on external rewards and punishments through the use of designations and labels as reported on the N.C. School Report Card. The public announcement of a school's failure or success on these report cards directly impact the internal thoughts, expectations, motivations and beliefs of the teachers and administrators of the school and the school district as evidenced in the participant's narrative stories. The

impact of the socially constructed labels and designations critically inhibit the teacher's self-efficacy and autonomy in the classroom, which is directly tied to teacher agency. The lack of a belief in self and the ability to create change in the classroom creates helplessness and apathy within schools. This learned helplessness perpetuates a cycle of failure from the top down. The participant's narratives portray vivid accounts of marginalization through inequitable practices, oppressive environments, low-expectations and the acceptance of poorly prepared teaching staff. This marginalization of a professional workforce perpetuates the symbolic meaning that designations and labels create for a school. It is a recipe for repeated failure.

According to Bandura (1986, 1997), a person formulates judgements of their self-efficacy through four psychological sources of information: mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experience, and psychological and emotional arousal. Mastery experiences are the strongest of self-efficacy beliefs (Kelleher, 2016; Wang et. al, 2017). A teacher must be able to experience success in order to continue to bring about change in their pedagogical practice and have positive outcomes in student achievement. A school that is staffed with less than prepared teachers does not have exemplary models of effective teaching from which younger, less experienced staff can learn. One of the deeper problems of schooling has to do with teacher isolation and the fact that teachers don't often have access to other people who know what they're doing when they teach and who can help them do it better.

The third line of the sign states: *Lead by example*. The inclusion of the principal's narrative story reveals a larger and broader contradiction in policy and practice. This story tells of a school district that perpetuates a cycle of failure and low-expectations through

inequitable funding, unfair practices of student assignment and staffing. The principal's story also reveals the personal toll that the designation and label have on her emotional state as a leader, which in turn affects her expectations for staff and her agency as a professional educator. Her story reveals a struggle between professional knowledge and the reality of everyday practice. The marginalization of her as a leader by her school district is evidenced by the unspoken words and mistreatment of her in public environments. The situation of the school within a high-poverty community is plagued by a transient population and a less experienced staff. Yet the district leadership allows for the marginalization of the people that inhabit the school because of a less than vocal community.

I introduced this research with a belief that espouses that teacher commitment is directly related to a leader's ability to navigate legislative mandates while at the same time being able to provide for a supportive autonomous school culture where teachers can enact agency in their profession. Verbal persuasion is one of the four psychological sources of information that formulates a person's judgement of their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; 1997). The principal's narrative tells a story of what a staff member called a "Debbie Downer," a principal that focused on the negative rather than the positive in student achievement. The lack of verbal persuasion refers to not receiving encouragement from someone trusted and respected, which in turn decreases one's belief to perform a task (Kelleher, 2016). The channeling of pressure to perform creates anxiety and angst from the top down and leads to perceptions of incompetence. Developing a teacher's perception of efficacy can have a positive effect on instructional practices by allowing for involvement in curriculum development, problem-solving and decision-making (Ware & Kitsantas, 2011). All of which are included in the school's plan for improvement but not evident in the day to

day operation of the school. Encouraging feedback helps one to persevere in the face of setbacks and can have a profound effect on who receives the feedback. Verbal persuasion by the principal would encourage her teachers to perform by giving them the confidence to try new strategies which could in turn produce the desired results in student achievement.

Implications for Practice

The deluge of accountability policies in public education is heavily vested in quantitative data, which produce an easy and convenient way to measure the effectiveness of a school. Missing in this inclination toward measurable data is the human element of schools, the psychological responses and the complexities of the communities in which educators work. Viewing this research through a social constructionist lens helps one to understand the importance of the creation of teacher and student reality within a given phenomenon situated in a specific time and place. The phenomenon at hand are the coexistence of policy and practice in a rapidly changing world where accountability is more present than ever before. Eisner (1993) stated that education is a mind-making process. If this is true, lest we forget, the human mind and spirit which is embodied with emotional and rational states of being.

Employing Sustainable Leadership Practices

The investment in sustainable leadership practices, which has been in vogue for the past decade, intended to promote sustained change and reform in public education. According to Gummerson (2015), sustainable leadership theory is designed to promote long- and short-term planning, an examination of the connectivity of external processes and institutions with the local school as well as strategic thinking. He purports that the traditional and predictable view of schooling often overshadows elements of sustainable leadership

theory by ignoring the importance of decision-making grounded in the context of the day to day realities of principals and teachers (Gummerson, 2015). Utilizing sustainable leadership practices intertwined with complexity theory, a view that schools are a living organism to be understood rather than controlled, can produce schools that are capable of meeting the unique needs of the school and promote decision-making that can adapt to changing circumstances (Gummerson, 2015).

Gummerson (2015) analyzes three views on sustainable leadership practices and has identified five common principles that drive sustainable practices in educational leadership theory:

- Educational leadership has to be grounded in moral practice and purpose
- Decisions have to be made strategically and with long term consideration of the impact of those decisions.
- Professionals within the schools must understand the interconnectedness of the relationships between administrators and teachers with students, parents and community members, as well as, state, federal, and local governments.
- Educational leaders must conserve human and material resources based upon their limitations.
- Educational leaders, in conjunction with stakeholders, must create schools that promote lifelong learners as the product of public education.

Employing sustainable leadership practices in public education only works if reformers and educators understand the complexity of individual schools and communities based upon the contextual factors that affect them. Recognition of the complexity of schools should drive reformers to understand that for any reform to succeed, it must rely solely on the

numbers that too often do not take into account the ill-intended consequences of “one size fits all.”

Capacity Building within Schools

A healthy school community must have a collective sense of efficacy. According to Evans (2009), a school’s success may be viewed as the sum of the individual contributions of the teachers within the school. It is the interdependence and collective sense of well-being within the organization that contributes to individual self-efficacy. Building principal and teacher capacity in schools, by developing a collective sense of efficacy, will promote creative and unique opportunities for reform that meet the needs of disadvantaged, minority and historically underperforming students. The participant narratives in this research, along with the literature review, clearly support that legislative mandates and accountability policies all too frequently promote inequities within schools and school districts by marginalizing professional educators and the students they work with every day. Much of what leaders say and do become part of the teacher’s cognitive processing and psychological state (Evans, 2009). As demonstrated by the voices of the educators in this study, reform based on high-stakes testing, permeates the thinking of administrators and teachers and has done little to promote improvement in student achievement. Empowering those that work in the organization can better help build sustainable and effective organizational capacity for long-term solutions that ultimately improve teacher instruction and student achievement.

Alternative Accountability Measures

Schools are social organizations with many stakeholders, both political and cultural in context and position. The school is representative of the culture, values and beliefs of the community it serves, and thus the accountability measures of the school should align with the

specific and unique needs of the community. Gergen (2015) proposes several creative ways to provide for evaluation of student learning that embrace a social constructionist perspective. These options include the use of student portfolios rather than exams and the inclusion of ungraded courses that report student learning in narrative form (Gergen, 2015). Replacing a number or letter grade with a written narrative depicting the learning experience and understanding of the student would capture the nuances of the human experience in schools. This would move education reform away from the linear measurement of student progress and more toward the holistic measure of student progress. The use of formative assessments would allow for students to be able to demonstrate their progress toward mastery learning. Reliance on formative teacher-created testing rather than standardized testing would better promote instruction driven by the needs of the teacher and student and ultimately promote better gains in student achievement, which after all, is the true goal of all academic reform (Popham, 2016).

The use of an empowerment evaluation is suggested by Gergen (2015) as an alternative to traditional assessments and systems of accountability. An empowerment evaluation would allow for the community to be self-directed in determining activities, setting goals and taking the necessary actions needed to chart their own progress of their local school (Gergen, 2015). Individuals closest to the organization are usually the best at offering solutions to problems. An empowerment evaluation would build capacity within local education agencies by empowering them to make decisions on how best to assess student learning within their organization.

Change Inequitable Funding and Organizational Practices

The participant narratives tell a story of inequitable funding and practices that hinder their ability to positively impact student achievement. Often, this occurs due to school districts vying for federal, state and local dollars tied to political bureaucracies and agendas of legislators. As a result, unintended consequences happen due to a general lack of knowledge of what happens on a day to day basis in schools. Districts should rethink their quest for monies that have strings tied to them in an effort to support unfunded mandates. Research, such as this, hopefully can inform legislative leaders of the unintended consequences of accountability policies in public education and the inequities that marginalize professional educators and students from certain socioeconomic and cultural groups.

Conclusion

Since experience can never be displayed in the form in which it initially appeared, the act of representation is also an act of invention (Eisner, 1993). School performance grades and designations exert power and control within educational institutions by reducing the human element of schools to a numerical value or statistical analysis which defines a school's worth. The human experience is what I hoped to capture in this narrative inquiry. It is also that human experience that is up for interpretation by the researcher and the reader of the participant's narrative stories. I have acknowledged my positionality and subjectivity throughout this research in an effort to disclose how my background and experiences influence the interpretation of the participant's story. The teachers in this research lead storied lives inside and outside of the school environment. All of which contribute to the

success or failure of the school. This research promotes the necessity of including the teacher perspective, voice and professional knowledge in developing accountability policies that directly have an impact on the teaching and learning process. This research also promotes the premise that organizational leaders must predict and recognize the unintended consequences of legislative mandates when the human element is left out of deliberations on policy. Lack of consideration for the human experience creates contradiction in policy and practice. As a community of educators, we must unite to take back public education and continue to fight the marginalization of educational professionals and oppressive learning environments created by political agendas in public education. The stories here are real. The people here are real. The unspoken realities are real.

Epilogue

When I began this research I did not consciously intend for this project to become a practitioner's dissertation. However, that is what it has evolved into. A dissertation that I hope will lead others to build upon this work, while at the same time, serve as a recommendation for practice for other leaders in the education field. As I reflect back on this work, I can't help but to wonder a lot of things:

...I wonder if the middle class values of the teachers aid in the misrepresentation of the value of education to the poverty stricken community for which this school is located.

...I wonder if the stories are racialized in many ways.

...I wonder what could have been if the teachers were just given permission to teach students rather than teach to the test.

...I wonder what the future holds for public education.

These wonderments are left for future research. My reflections bring me back to my own experience as a principal navigating the complexities of working within accountability policies. These reflections provide for a counter practice that hopefully will provide for recommendations for those working in the field.

I stand before my staff in the media center at yet another staff meeting, I see a tired and weary group worn down from the day's events. They have dealt with students who came in hungry, angry or emotional distraught from the previous night's events at home. Maybe their students were out of uniform because they did not have clean clothes or came in without

homework because no one made sure they did it or maybe they did not know how. My presentation on digital literacies in the classroom is the last thing they want to hear at this moment. They are tired and want to be able to go home or go back to their classroom to plan or get their room ready for the next day. I begin my presentation by trying to introduce something fun and exciting, like how to make yourself into an emoji, but I'm the only one excited! I'm excited about the possibilities of these new instructional tools and how they can engage students in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them. I know what they are thinking "when am I going to find time to incorporate this, we don't have time to do this on top of preparing students for the test." I secretly agree with them in my head...I know because I've been in their shoes. The day is just not long enough, and besides, these are children. No child should have to endure the pressure we put on them to perform according to an arbitrary measure. By the time I finish with my presentation and the staff are having fun with the new instructional strategies, it is time to go. But I can't let them leave just yet. I have something else to say. I had to let them know that I give them permission to not teach to the test. I had to empower them. I had to say out loud, "It is ok to have fun in your classroom, it is ok to try something new and engaging." I could feel the heaviness of the day lift from the room. What would ensue took me by surprise. One after another approached me on their way out of the media center thanking me for giving them permission to not teach to the test. If I had only known something this simple would make the biggest difference in the classroom.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine how the low-performing label and performance grade of your school influences your self-efficacy and autonomy as a teacher.

Research Question #1

What are the perceived realities of teachers working in a low-performing schools?

Research Question #2

What is the impact of legislative mandates on teacher efficacy and subsequent beliefs of autonomy in low-performing schools?

Research Question #3

How do teacher beliefs about autonomy and self-efficacy affect pedagogical approaches to instruction and assessment in low-performing schools?

- 1) Talk about the standardized assessments associated with your grade level. (2)
- 2) Do you believe these assessments reflect the quality of your instruction? (2,3)
- 3) In what ways do these assessments influence your decisions as a teacher? (2,3)
- 4) In what ways do these assessments influence student learning in your classroom? (3)
- 5) Do the results of the standardized assessments give you important feedback about how well you are teaching in each curriculum area? Describe the kind of feedback you receive. Can you give me examples of how you use this feedback? (1,3)
- 6) How do you feel about yourself as a teacher when you view your test results? (1,2)
- 7) Do you feel pressure from your administrators to perform well on the required state assessments? If so, describe how the pressure is delivered from your administrator? (1,2,3)
- 8) Do you feel pressure from the parents and or community to perform well on the required state assessments? If so, describe this pressure. (1,2,3)
- 9) Does the low-performing label and the performance grade given to your school impact you at all? How? (1,3)
- 10) Has this label influenced how you feel about your teaching ability? If so, in what way? (1,3)
- 11) Does this label influence your perceptions of the school or the student body? If so, in what way? (1,2,3)
- 12) How has the low-performing label and performance grade influenced your planning for instruction and student learning? (3)
- 13) Has the low-performing label influenced staff morale in your school? (1,2)

The following questions are for demographic purposes:

- 1) Which grade level do you teach?
- 2) How many years experience do you have?
- 3) How many years have you taught at this school?
- 4) Have you taught at other schools that have been designated as low-performing?

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Title: Stories of Contradiction in Policy and Practice: Challenging the Unspoken Realities of Accountability Policies in Public Education

Investigator: Kasey Northrop

Purpose of the Research: You have been invited to participate in interviews conducted by Kasey Northrop as part of a doctoral dissertation through Appalachian State University. The purpose of this study is to establish an understanding of the subjective reality of a teacher working in a low-performing school and how this reality influences their self-efficacy and autonomy in the classroom. This research will also allow for an understanding of the cognitive processes and self-perception of teachers as they approach instruction and assessment in a low-performing school.

Procedures: You have been invited to participate in the study because you teach in a low-performing school. You will be one of 6 participants in this study. As part of the study, I will interview teachers who teach in a grade level that administers required state assessments. During the interview, I will make an audio recording and take field notes of what I see and experience. The interview will last approximately 1 hour. You may be asked for a follow-up interview at a later date.

Benefits and Risks: There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this interview. It is hoped that this study as a whole will help expand our knowledge about how teachers perceive their self-efficacy and autonomy in a school labeled *low-performing* by the North Carolina Department of Education. There are no expected negative effects of participating in this interview.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: You have a right to privacy and you will not be identified by name or other identifying features. Neither the interview field notes nor any transcript excerpts will contain any personal identifiers. Audio files and notes will be securely stored and only I will have access to them. The information gathered during the interview(s) may be combined with information from other interviews designed to explore the experiences of teachers similar to you. This will result in a report of the study findings and will be published as my doctoral dissertation. Results may also be used for future scholarly publications.

Compensation: There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

Freedom to Withdraw: You can choose whether or not to participate in this interview and can withdraw at any time prior to analysis of the data. Even if the interview has already begun, you have the right to withdraw your consent and I will cease the interview. There will be no penalty for withdrawing from the study.

Subject's Responsibilities: Your only responsibility as a participant in this interview is to share your perception and to answer the questions posed. The interview will last approximately 1 hour.

This research project has been approved on 11/3/2017 by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Appalachian State University. This approval will expire on 11/2/2017 unless the IRB renews the approval of this research.

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

Subject signature

Date

Should you have any questions about this research, you may contact: Kasey Northrop, 910-366-3490, shanekn@appstate.edu or my Faculty Advisor: Dr. Barbara Howard, 828-262-7619, Howardbb@appstate.edu. Questions regarding the protection of human subjects may be addressed to the IRB Administrator, Research Protections, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 (828) 262-2692, irb@appstate.edu

Appendix C

Invitation and Demographic Information

Hello,

My name is Kasey Northrop, and I am a doctoral candidate at Appalachian State University. For my dissertation, I am studying the reality of a teacher working in a low-performing school and how this reality influences their self-efficacy and autonomy in the classroom. This research will allow for an understanding of the cognitive processes and self-perception of teachers as they approach instruction and assessment in a low-performing school. This study will consist of a semi-structured interview, during which I will ask participants various questions about their teaching experience while working in a low-performing school. The interview will be approximately one hour in length. You may be asked for a follow-up interview at a later date.

Participants will not be identified in the study. A pseudonym for the participant, the school and school district will be used in order to maintain confidentiality. All information gathered during this process, including contact information, will be held in strict confidence and no identifying information will be shared with anyone. If you agree to participate in the study, you will be one of 6 participants in the study.

If you are interested in participating in this study or if you have questions that you would like to ask me before deciding, feel free to call me at (910) 366-3490 or contact me by email at shanekn@appstate.edu. I will be happy to provide a copy of potential questions for your review. The interview questions could include additional questions for clarification. I will arrange to conduct the interview at an appropriate location near you.

Thank-you for considering taking part of this important study. I look forward to hearing from you soon. If you have any questions concerning this study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

*Thank-you,
Kasey Northrop
(910) 366-3490
shanekn@appstate.edu*

Vita

Kasey Northrop was born in Burns, Oregon, to Leonard and Margaret Northrop. She graduated from Pine Forest Sr. High in June 1986. She entered Methodist University in 1989 and graduated in 1992 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education. She was chosen as a North Carolina Principal Fellow in 1996 and began study toward a Master of School Administration Degree from Fayetteville State University. The M.S.A. degree was awarded to her in May, 1998. She returned to college in 2013 to work on her Education Specialist Degree at Appalachian State University. She was awarded the Ed.S. degree in May, 2015. Ms. Northrop commenced work toward her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership at Appalachian State University. Ms. Northrop is a public school principal in Fayetteville, NC.